

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Missiology, II: Liberation Theology

WRITERS ON theology show a tendency nowadays to set out theories as 'models'. Thus we have had models of the Church, models of revelation, models of mission, models of Jesus. The advantage of this method is that it allows one to indicate tendencies without saying that White holds A whilst Black holds Z. Rather one can suggest that White's position lies somewhere along a continuous spectrum but rather more towards the A-end of the spectrum. Moreover, the author does not have to commit himself to any one of the models alone. And indeed, we can rarely adopt or reject all the characteristics of one of these models. Dulles indicated that to reject institutionalism, or to state that one was not happy with that model in its totality, did not imply that one rejected the belief that the Church is an institution.

David Bosch has offered one basic division of understanding of mission that seems helpful.¹ He has suggested that underneath the various understandings of mission there lies a tendency towards one or other end of a spectrum. It is unlikely that anybody would cling exclusively to either end of this spectrum but they would display tendencies. One way of stating the question at issue is to ask what is the relationship between evangelism and compassionate service, but, as we shall see, this is to assume what is in question: are they different? Are they separable?

Explicitly warning against any interpretation of his division as a black and white separation, Bosch suggests that there are two underlying models of mission as evangelism and as ecumenism. This is not a protestant-catholic division. It crosses ecclesiastical boundaries. There are protestant writers who would be ecumenical in Bosch's sense of the word, and catholic writers who tend towards the evangelical understanding of mission.

Those favouring evangelism would take as their basis for mission the Great Commission of Matthew 28,19-20 (biblical references tend to get fired around at conferences like gun-shots). They will quote Jn 3,16 'that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life'; 1 Tim 2,5 'there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus', and Rom 10,9 'if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved'. Add to this Rom 10,14 'How are men to believe in him of whom they have never heard, and how are they to hear without a preacher?' and those who favour an evangelical understanding of mission will hold that mission involves proclaiming the Lord Jesus. Stop. If we do not

engage in this then there will be those who will perish eternally. If we do engage, and they hear and accept, then there will be those who will be saved and will enter eternal glory.

The gospel is seen, within this model, more as a subject for belief than as a way of life. It is a message which, if believed in, guarantees entrance to the kingdom which is itself interpreted as of another world. Salvation is seen within the perspective of this other world. It is a spiritual matter that concerns individuals. Each individual is called to accept Jesus within his heart as his personal saviour. Each individual is called to conversion from his own personal sins. The world is evil and Christians look to be saved from this world for heaven. The emphasis is on the coming kingdom. The goal is a world evangelization that will bring back the king. The goal is not a Christ-like world.

The vast majority of those who would tend towards an evangelical understanding of mission would also see themselves as called to engage in good works. They do not deny that Christians are called to be good samaritans. Missionaries have always built hospitals and schools, dug wells and engaged in agricultural and technical works. But, they would hold, this is not mission as such. It is the fruit of conversion. First must come faith and then charitable works will follow. If we convert more people to Christianity then the social problems of the world will lessen. In passing, it needs to be noted that there is a theoretical difference between being converted to Christ and being converted to Christianity, but the difference is not relevant to this area of discussion. It does matter when we come to consider the inter-faith dialogue.

Arthur Johnston holds that the mission of the Church is evangelism. Hoekstra claims that the World Council of Churches has apostasized in dethroning evangelism. Many are upset at what they see as an increasing politicization of mission. *Evangelii nuntiandi* is, of course, a document of evangelization. Like many other writings it more or less identifies mission with evangelization. But its view of evangelization is not so unobtrusive as the one we have presented so far. Certainly, for Paul VI, summing up the 1974 synod, evangelization 'is first of all to bear witness, in a simple and direct way, to God revealed by Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit' (n 26). At the centre of the message is salvation in Jesus Christ. And, for the pope, this salvation is not an immanent salvation, but is essentially a transcendent and eschatological salvation. But there are other elements in evangelization. The essential message is Christ, but accepting Christ will ordinarily imply joining the Church, so that in its totality, evangelization includes the implanting of the Church (n 28).

Moreover this salvation is not totally and exclusively to do with the next world; it 'has its beginning in this world but is fulfilled in eternity' (n 27). Evangelization involves a message of liberation. The pope refers to the first half of the 1974 synod which consisted of the sharing of

experience. The bishops spoke of the struggle to overcome whatever condemns people to live on the margin of life: famine, poverty, illiteracy, injustices especially in commercial exchanges, situations of economic and cultural neo-colonialism and so on. All of this political, social and economic liberation 'is not foreign to evangelization, between evangelization and human advancement—development and liberation—there are in fact profound links' (n 31). In other words, evangelization must include problems connected with justice, liberation, development and peace. Evangelization includes love of neighbour.

Hence, the pope clearly extends the total concept of evangelization so that it is wider than that understood by those at the evangelical end of our spectrum. He sees a relationship between evangelism and social involvement. But it is clearly a relationship that sees evangelism, the preaching of Jesus as Lord, as primary. First of all the mission cannot be reduced to a merely temporal project and secondly he insists on 'the specifically religious finality of evangelization'. Human liberation is linked to the preaching of the kingdom, but is always separate from it. 'In order that God's kingdom should come it is not enough to establish liberation and to create well-being and development' (n 34).

Quite possibly the evangelical would be willing to accept such a position. He might merely say something like—'well, it's only a matter of where you draw the line between evangelism and development. So long as you assert the absolute primacy of preaching the Lordship of Jesus'. This is the position adopted by the participants in the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne in 1974 where they stressed that to evangelize meant to spread the good news that Christ died for our sins and now offers the forgiveness of sins and the freedom of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. There was a declaration put out in Frankfurt in 1971 by a group of evangelical theologians. The declaration is quoted with considerable approval by Fr Grasso² and it, like Lausanne, holds that the aim of the mission is to make Jesus Christ known to all. There is an essential difference in nature between the Church and the world.

At the other end of Bosch's spectrum, there is a different model, the ecumenical model of mission. Mission would be seen here as a movement towards the world, an openness to the world. The aim of mission is to humanize society, 'I am come that they may have life more fully' (Jn 10,14). Such a model attempts to overcome the dualism between eternal and temporal, between body and soul, individual and society, religion and culture, salvation and liberation, religious and secular, Church and world. In this model, salvation is seen as having to do with personal and social salvation from all that oppresses. The aim of mission is to make life more fully human in every respect, and this will, of course, include the transcendental as well as the immanent. The missionary then becomes

God's co-worker *in* the world, entering into partnership with God in history. Burgess Carr sees the task of evangelization as harnessing the marginal for the re-structuring of society, and the World Students' Christian Federation called for the abandonment of all terms like 'mission', 'evangelism', 'witness'; anything that implied the calling of people away from their natural communities into a christian grouping, anything that implied preoccupation with the soul at the expense of the whole of life.

Either one holds that true mission is evangelism and nothing else, or one can hold that evangelism is indeed bringing about faith in Christ, but this will imply, secondarily, that one will also be involved in social development, or, finally, one can claim that the two are integrally interwoven. It is this last position that is closest to the position of the latin american liberation theologians. It is not enough to say that they are involved in concern for social justice. Those who hold the second of the three positions we have listed above would be concerned for social justice. Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II are certainly concerned for social justice, but not using the same theological basis as the liberation theologians. The tridentine 'penny' catechism taught that among the four sins crying to heaven for vengeance were included the sins of 'oppression of the poor, and depriving labourers of their wages'. The standard latin moral text-books of the first half of this century all recognized the right in justice of the poor to take what they needed for living, providing all other means had failed. But liberation theologians are engaged in far more than the continuation of a moral theology of social justice.

The key biblical texts for those who see mission as liberation are Lk 4, 18 'He has anointed me to proclaim the good news to the poor'; Mt 25,31-46 'as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me', and the texts which see Christ as 'the cosmic Christ', the Lord of the whole universe, such as Col 1, 20. There is a school of mission, begun by Donald McGavran, the Church-growth school, which holds that the one aim of mission is to increase Church membership. They hold that the Great Commission indicates a two-fold task, the first is 'discipling' (McGavran invented this word to give a flavour of the greek verb used in Matthew), that is, leading people to a first commitment to Jesus, and secondly, 'perfecting', that is, teaching them, once they are already committed to Christ as Lord, to observe the commands. Mission then, for McGavran, is evangelism alone. The liberation theologians point out that to be a disciple of Jesus is one and the same as being disciplined into the kingdom; it is far more than merely a first commitment which can be followed later (or not followed later) by a further, secondary-level decision. To be disciplined into the kingdom, to be committed to Christ, requires of its very nature, commitment to doing the will of God and that means commitment to justice-love.³ The entire teaching of Jesus

can be summed up as The Way. Early Christians were followers of The Way of justice-love. Schillebeeckx called his book *Gerechtigheid en Liefde*, 'Justice and love'. This is the book which is called, in English, *Christ, the christian experience in the modern world*. To experience Christ is to follow The Way.

It is still necessary, however, to draw attention to the difference between two positions. The present pope, in his recent visit to Canada,⁴ spoke frequently of the priority of the needs of the poor. In this he reflects Medellín's 'option for the poor'. He consistently stressed the social, economic and political implications of the gospel, the link between the gospel and culture, between faith and practice. 'What kind of faith is it which would not seek to incarnate itself in daily conduct?' But, at the same time, for the pope, however important social and cultural problems are, they 'are subordinated to the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ'. The second position, that of the liberation theologians of Latin America such as Gutiérrez and Segundo, would deny this subordination. For them, salvation is the concrete communion of people with God and among themselves, a task embracing the whole world, transforming it and bringing it to its fullness. Mission is the proclamation of justice-love in Christ. It is the bringing into effect of this salvation socially. Jesus Christ is what God means by man. *Koinonia*, fellowship and community, must be proclaimed and brought into effect wherever the Church claims to be present. Salvation refers to this world, to the whole human being, body and soul, individual and social, person and cosmos. The kingdom is already and not yet. This is an essentially different approach from that implied in the above papal statements in Canada. There is a different understanding of hermeneutics underlying this approach and that of the recent statement on liberation theology issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.⁵ The Latin Americans have repeatedly said they are engaged in a new way of doing theology.

As a result of their experiences during World War II, many french priests became convinced there was a disastrous gap between the clergy, which more or less stood for the official Church, and the french working man. Out of this experience came a new missionary movement that sought to bring together human realities and the gospel. Henri Godin's *France pagan?* published in 1943, did not concern itself with overseas mission. Rather it showed the necessity of evangelizing in milieus that had become socially alien to the christian gospel. The new missionary movement to which Godin's book bore witness saw the mission as aiming at the integral salvation of humanity. Out of this came the french worker-priests.

In 1959 in Brazil, Paulo Freire wrote his doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of education. Later, working in the north east of Brazil and developing literacy campaigns, Freire introduced the idea of conscientiz-

ation. The immediate effect of his enormous success among landless peasants of the area was that he was jailed immediately after the military coup in 1964.

Malcolm Crick points out that knowledge is a resource.⁶ Everyday knowledge keeps certain people in power and keeps others in the dark. Symbols can be constructed to mystify people and this mystification can be a source of power in that it brings about a false awareness. Then the power structures in society rely, at least partly, on the fact that those kept in ignorance cannot see the social reality for what it really is. For instance, those in ignorance might believe that God wills the social structures. Conscientization has as its aim the bringing about among people of their own awareness of social, economic and political contradictions. Once they become aware of reality, then they have the power to begin to take action against oppressive structures. Those concerned to hang on to their power will see this sort of knowledge as threatening.

Vatican II made Catholics aware of the need to re-think the position of the Church in the world, and also aware of the role of the layperson in the Church. In 1968, the second general conference of Latin America bishops, held at Medellín, in Colombia, declared the fundamental task of the Church to be its option for the poor. From all of this came Gustavo Gutierrez's seminal *Theology of liberation*, and Juan-Luis Segundo's research team in Montevideo, both of them attempting to work out a theology for Latin America within its present cultural and social situation, a gospel for Latin America now. Faced with a situation of widespread injustice and corruption, they found themselves dissatisfied with the approaches they had inherited. The missionaries of the last four hundred years had interpreted evangelization as something separate from social justice: dogmatic theology was distinct from moral theology. True, they had concerned themselves with development, but Gutierrez now questioned the very concept of development.

He asked who was it that was deciding what was developed and what was undeveloped, and concluded that the concept of development, as determined by Europe and North America, was another form of colonialism. South America was being required to bring itself into line with a social pattern being specified from outside. At the economic level it was being used by foreign multi-national companies to satisfy their needs. At the religious level it was being required to conform to an Iberian Catholicism. Moreover, the concept of development was not a biblical one. He opted for liberation.

We are here again encountering a hermeneutic process. The gospel is being required to speak meaningfully to Latin American culture. In Tracy's terms, to which we referred in our first article, the Christian tradition encounters the Latin American way-of-being-in-the-world and a new Latin American Christian meaning is brought about. For the Latin American

theologian who seeks to understand this process there is required an analysis of the latin american socio-culture that is one of the two sources of this meaning. And here we come to one of the principal sources of concern for the Church's central authority. Many of the liberation theologians say that the only valid analytic tool for understanding their social structures is the marxist analysis. They claim that they can use this tool without thereby being committed to the whole of marxist beliefs. Others claim that this cannot be done, to use one part is to accept the whole. The statement of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (we will call this the Instruction) on 'certain aspects of the theology of liberation', is not consistent on this point. In its introduction it says that it is 'difficult and perhaps impossible' to purify borrowed concepts from their ideologically unacceptable background. Later in section VII n 6 it maintains 'if one tries to take only one part, say, the analysis, one ends up having to accept the entire ideology'.

Whether or not one can validly use the marxist analysis, it remains that the liberation theologians see themselves as engaged in an attempt to do theology in an utterly different way from Europeans. Theirs is a theology of praxis. They start, not from some abstract principles but from their insight into actual behaviour and practice. They seek to integrate the human sciences into their theology as constitutive elements, not merely as throwing light upon the result, and in the process to *make* theology. They seek to investigate the mechanisms (unconscious at their deepest levels) by which we think about God, the gospel and the Church.

One result of this has been the contention of many of the liberation theologians that one cannot be a Christian and a capitalist. It is important here to stress that they are not concerned with the socio-economic system of North America or that of Russia. By capitalism, Segundo means 'that political regime in which ownership of the goods of production is open to economic competition'. In the socialist political regime the ownership of the means of production is taken from individuals and handed to some higher institution whose concern is the common good. Some would reply that it is not up to theology to make political choices, but Segundo answers that it is the task of theology in its search for understanding of its own faith to orientate the historical praxis. Dogmatic and moral theology cannot be studied apart from one another. It is the task of theology to investigate the social impact of dogma on praxis. There is a fundamental disagreement as to the way to do theology. Edward Norman in his 1978 Reith Lectures attacked the liberation theologians for attaching the christian gospel to ephemeral political ideologies. For Norman, the gospel originates outside of historical circumstances and evokes timelessness. The ultimate purposes of God, said Norman, cannot be identified with the shifting values of contemporary society. Segundo holds quite the opposite. There cannot be any abstract gospel. The sabbath was made

for man, not man for the sabbath. Human life in society liberated as far as possible from alienations constitutes the absolute value, whilst religious institutions, dogmas, sacraments, have functional value. The Church is there only as a means to serve the kingdom. It is not an end in itself. And the kingdom of God is to be constructed from within history now. Where else can we possibly start?

Since theology is to begin at grass roots, it will take as its starting point the experience of the conscientized poor. Hence the great importance attached to the basic ecclesial communities. Note the marxist terminology 'basic community', to which 'ecclesial' is added to distinguish them from marxist groups. It is clear that these are seen as quite different from the basic ecclesial communities of East Africa. In East Africa, the bishops see these groups as a technique, a means for getting the gospel message from the hierarchy down to the people. In Latin America, these groups are precisely the doers of theology, and, as Boff realized in 1975, they involve theologians in the quest for a new ecclesiology. Are they Church? What exactly is their relationship to the hierarchy, to other groups/Churches in other countries? Boff himself saw a need for a link in order to preserve the universality of Christianity. A merely local temporal group can hardly be said to be in the christian tradition. But the basic ecclesial communities are not an alternative for the institutional church. They are an initiative of the Spirit.

It seems to us that, for the most part, the Instruction on the theology of liberation has failed to grasp what these latin american theologians are attempting, what they claim to be doing. The Instruction attempts to criticize their theology using the techniques of a european approach, and using a traditional scholastic philosophical approach with its essentialistic undertones. The theology of liberation does not merely mean a 'special concern for the poor'. It recognizes that european moral theology can claim to share this concern. Liberation theology is not concerned with one sector of theology, that dealing with social justice. It is a whole theology. The authentic privileged standpoint for the right understanding of the christian revelation is indicated by the gospels. It is that of the poor and oppressed.

The Instruction maintains that the New Testament does not require some change in the political or social condition as a prerequisite for entrance into the freedom of Christ. The liberation theologians would see this as a quite false dualism. For them there is simply no possible notion of freedom in any way separate from the way-of-being-in-the-world, and therefore distinct from the political and social condition. Throughout, the Instruction preserves a dualistic approach, to theology, to ethics, to sin (as individualistic with social consequences), to the person, to the natural and the supernatural, which is quite alien to the theology of liberation.

It is argued whether this approach of the Latin Americans reduces Christianity to a thing merely of this world, reduces salvation to a merely historical, social, economic process, and sin merely to social structures. Karl Rahner, before he died, wrote to the peruvian hierarchy in defence of Gutierrez. Rahner would have seen the essential integration of the divine with the natural within the incarnation as grounds for justifying the approach of the theology of liberation.

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NOTES

The classic text is Gustavo Gutierrez's *Teología de la liberación*, 1971, published in English as *A theology of liberation* (New York, Orbis, 1973).

¹ Bosch, David: *Witness to the world* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London 1980), ch 4.

² Grasso, D.: 'The Frankfort Declaration', in *Christ to the World*, 16 (1971), pp 72-78.

³ Bosch, David: 'The scope of mission', in *International Review of Mission*, 73 (1984) pp 289, 17-32.

⁴ 'The pope as teacher', in *The Tablet*, 29 Sept. 1984, p 943.

⁵ Instruction on certain aspects of the 'Theology of liberation', Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 6 August, 1984.

⁶ Crick, Malcolm: 'Anthropology of knowledge', in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1982, 11, pp 287-313.

⁷ Segundo, Juan-Luis: 'Capitalism-socialism: a theological crux' in *Concilium*, 6 (1974) pp 10, 105-123.