

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## Political and Liberation Theology, II Liberation Theology

IN THE FIRST PART of this two-part article, we looked in a preliminary way at the relationship between political and liberation theology, noticing in general that the differences between the two have grown less in recent years. Then we took a closer look at political theology in particular. In this second part, we give more attention to the younger and more controversial sister, the theology of liberation.

In the last year or so, discussion of the theology of liberation has become more difficult, since it almost inevitably focusses upon the points of dispute between this theological approach and the critical standpoint of the Vatican.<sup>1</sup> This, of course, does no justice to the peculiar character of liberation theology, which the Vatican itself expressly favours in at least some of its manifestations.<sup>2</sup> What I shall try to do here cannot avoid some discussion of the vatican attitudes, since they undoubtedly point to issues which others outside the Vatican have raised and which are legitimate questions—as, for example, that of the marxist influence on liberation theology. However, I want to begin by sketching out the uncontroversial character of liberation theology in general. Only against such a background can the criticisms be kept in proportion.

### I

In the discussion of political theology, we noted that one of its peculiarities is its lack of an ecclesial basis. Quite the opposite is true of the theology of liberation. There are, of course, pockets of 'political' Christians in most countries of the world, but no national hierarchy and no national Church have adopted a thoroughly political profile. In the latin american Church in general, and in that of Brazil in particular, where there are about ninety thousand basic christian communities, the theology of liberation is a churchly reality.<sup>3</sup>

The ecclesial vigour of the theology of liberation is due, perhaps above all, to the fact that it really does not start out life as a theology at all. In Gutierrez's famous phrase, 'theology comes after'. This subordination of theology can, of course, be almost equally provocative as the presence of 'marxist ideas', and there are those who believe that it is closer to the real source of the vatican discontent with liberation theology. In itself, however, the claim that theology 'comes after' is uncontroversial. Religion starts and ends in ordinary human life: theology reflects, clarifies, systema-

tizes, offers further insight, but what it reflects upon is that ordinary human life within which religion has its reality.

In the latin american context, churchpeople and theologians came to see that there was a thorough divorce between theology and everyday life. The ordinary life-experience of that region is one of oppression, of institutionalized violence and of sinful social structures. The ordinary Christian, the ordinary human being, is poor, unemployed or ill-employed, uneducated, unhealthy and 'marginalized', that is, rendered peripheral to and powerless to influence the direction of the society in which he or she lives. The theology was that of the european academy and the Roman Church. It did not arise, even at its best, out of reflection on the daily reality of life and religion in Latin America. It could only, therefore, speak to that reality with some measure of inadequacy.

The phenomenon of liberation theology came into existence as two distinct processes of conscientization (consciousness-raising) converged. In the late nineteen-sixties the latin american Church came down from the mountain, as it were, to meet the people on their own level. All over the continent, priests, nuns and even bishops conformed their lives to the directives of the Medellín document, *On the poverty of the Church*,<sup>4</sup> and found themselves living alongside the people, sharing their condition. Their ostensible objective was the formation of basic christian communities, small grass-roots christian groups most often led by laypeople, in which the gospel would be studied, reflection offered on its meaning, and action planned to put the results of that reflection into practice. Through such communities, primary examples of the kind of 'mediating structures' that fatalistically inclined people in undemocratic societies need, the members begin the slow process of taking responsibility for the shape of their own lives, and learn the significance of their religion in giving shape to that life.

If the first kind of conscientization was that of the members of the BCCs, the second was that of the churchpeople who had brought themselves into contact with the lives of the poor and oppressed. They, in their turn, learned to see life as the poor saw it, and to recognize the ideological motivations that would previously, and perhaps quite unintentionally, have influenced their own judgments and their outlook on the world. Thus made aware and purified of their ideological biases, they thought, they could seek to play a genuine part in the christian struggle for a life free from oppression, a life of dignity and devotion. The usual relationship of teacher and taught was reversed.<sup>5</sup>

At this quite basic level, liberation theology is nothing other than the consciously reflective side of the activity of BCCs. There are those, however, who believe this to be both naive and dangerous. In the first place, the central act of the BCC is not sacramental, but scriptural. One of the justifications for the development of BCCs was the severe shortage

of ministers and even religious; consequently, the grass-roots communities focus around a religious act in which an ordained minister is not needed. They are most often led by a layperson with minimal formal theological education, usually called a 'Delegate of the Word' (*Delegado del Verbo*). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the level of sophistication of the analysis of scripture, from a scientific point of view at least, leaves quite a lot to be desired. There is no question, however, but that ordinary people seem to find the gospel speaking to their own situation of oppression, and become convinced that they see and hear God and Jesus in the bible, speaking to and singling out just such as them.<sup>6</sup>

More controversial than this relatively simplistic reading of scripture is the fact that the initiative in religious reflection within the BCCs has passed to the ordinary community member. There have always been those who have thought it dangerous to put the bible in the hands of the laity. They can now see a whole Church of the most populous christian continent working upon the principle that the Spirit of God speaks directly to their situation through their own hearing of and reflection upon the scriptures. To those of an institutional mindset, the spectre of Corinth is raised again, though this time the disorder is identified as the way in which unsophisticated minds can be manipulated through the injection of marxist notions into their analysis of their own social context.

The rationalization and justification of what is occurring at the grass-roots level, and hence its defence against institutional suspicion, is the function of what is more normally called the theology of liberation.<sup>7</sup> It is this, very secondary activity, in which the theological sophistication and methodological innovations of such theology lie. But, as its adherents stress, liberation theology has its justification insofar as it grows out of an actual grassroots commitment, and is *only* a systematization of the religious reflection that occurs there.

The heart of the method of liberation theology in this derived and secondary, but inevitably more public sense is to be found in its attitude towards the phenomenon of ideology.<sup>8</sup> Since this is not only a curious and complex issue in its own right but also the focal point of the attack upon 'some' liberation theologians in the 1984 vatican declaration, we shall make this the point around which our consideration of liberation theology in the remainder of this article will pivot. We need to look first at what liberation theology itself says about ideology and to evaluate that, before turning to the justice or injustice of the vatican accusations.

## II

The problem with the word 'ideology' is that it has almost as many definitions as users. There are, however, two basic senses underlying these many meanings, one negative, and one positive or at least neutral.

In the latter sense, an ideology is a kind of mental map, a principle of the organization of one's view of reality, without which all data would be simply a raw jumble of information that could not be connected up in any coherent fashion. In this sense, everyone develops and needs an ideology; it becomes synonymous with the term 'hermeneutic' or theory of interpretation. Liberation theologians no less than others will make use of such an ideology. On this understanding, liberation theology is itself an ideology. Crucially, however, this kind of ideology is a second stage or 'moment' in the life of the individual; it must be preceded by that of faith. Of course, the notion of faith may seem to have little meaning outside a religious context, but even within the religious world it can be misinterpreted. It does not mean assent to a series of propositions, possession of 'the faith', but rather a fundamental act of commitment. It is close to what moral theologians sometimes refer to as a fundamental option; that is, a basic underlying attitude to life and value.

There is, of course, nothing particularly controversial about the idea of a fundamental option or commitment. The questions begin to arise when the liberation theologian claims that this commitment must be to the poor and marginalized, and that it is 'pre-ideological'. In order to see why this claim is made, indeed why it has to be made, we must look at the second and negative sense of the term 'ideology'.

In its more negative understanding, 'ideology' is still a kind of mental map, but its provisional or relative character has been ignored or denied. Instead of being a device for the processing of data and interpretation of my world, it has become an iron-clad, cast in stone, unshakable worldview. It has become an 'ism'. Like Procrustes's bed, it is the fixed point to which empirical observation is fitted. It is hypothesis become dogma. Moreover, the choice of ideology is dictated, perhaps quite unconsciously, by the individual's self-protective instincts, or those of a particular social class. Monetarism tends to be the favoured economic ideology of those who have some: liberalism, socialism and communism attract those who have something to gain from one or the other.

Liberation theology sees an option for the poor as the only form that the act of faith/commitment can take at the present day, if it is to avoid falling into ideological bias. If this seems an arrogant position to adopt, and such a charge has been levelled at liberation theology, perhaps we should remember the self-serving character of uncritical ideologies. The option for the poor, says liberation theology, is not self-serving. The one who makes it has nothing to gain from it, materially speaking. Moreover, having made this act of commitment, which must be one of practical solidarity (a merely mental act will not suffice), the individual now finds her/himself in a social context in which the corrosive effects of ideology are less likely to be suffered. Where the powerful, the wealthy or the merely comfortable are led by their own positions to espouse a view of

the world which will serve their own self-justification, the poor are too busy with the struggle for survival, for their basic human rights and a dignified life, to become enmeshed in theory. For those who do not start out poor, the 'pre-ideological commitment to the oppressed' through which they will come to struggle for social change, rather than to preserve their own favoured status, is the path towards liberation/salvation. This act of commitment, a clear and genuine example of *metanoia*, is actually the liberation of which liberation theology speaks, and not the idea of some political utopia.

The relationship between the two fundamental senses of ideology should now be clearer. An ideology in the positive sense, a 'good' or at least neutral ideology, is a view of the world subsequent to and perhaps arising out of a fundamental commitment which is not self-serving. The negative ideology has become dogma; it has, in a very real way, *replaced* the act of commitment. The world-view has itself become a fundamental option. The ideology has become master rather than servant of the imagination. Liberation theology is highly and rightly critical of this kind of ideology, whether it results in dogmatic marxism, the ideology of the national security state, or the belief in Christendom rather than gospel as the fundamental religious value.

There is a further level upon which criticism of the liberation theologians might and does occur, that of the character of their social analysis. Just as the members of the grass-roots communities, for the most part, are engaged in a process rather than consciously aware, in a sophisticated manner, of the deeply hermeneutical character of that process, so too they are in the process within a society which they do not themselves analyze in any especially sophisticated way. The technically qualified theologian feels obliged and impelled not only to understand the character of the act of theologizing in the BCC, but also the nature of the society within which that theologizing takes place.

The social analysis of liberation theologians undoubtedly owes much to the ideas of Karl Marx. No one can deny that, nor would they wish to. Similarly, the social analysis of John Paul II's *Laborem exercens*<sup>9</sup> owes a great deal to the ideas of the same thinker. Anyone in the twentieth century who attempted any kind of social analysis and who ignored marxist views would be foolish at best. The sheer fact of *some* indebtedness to Marx's insights cannot of itself be cause for criticism, although there are points in the vatican critique that suggest the opposite. On the whole, however, the problem must arise either from too much use of Marx or too uncritical use. In other words, the issue here is whether or not the liberation theologians' use of marxist ideas is ideological in the dogmatic sense.

Central notions of the social analysis of liberation theology which have about them a marxist ring are ideological suspicion, class struggle, and

truth as praxis. There are at least two questions to ask about them in general and each in particular; are these terms used dogmatically, and are they, indeed, all that 'marxist'? Do they grow out of the pragmatic 'positive' sense of ideology, or the dogmatic negative sense? If they are being used woodenly, there may be a problem whether they are marxist or not. If they are simple borrowings of useful insights which Marx happened to have, there seems to be no cause for alarm. If they constitute the emergence of dogmatic Marxism within the framework of christian theology, then concern may be justified, just as in the case of 'democratic capitalism's' version of the kerygma. To attempt an answer to these questions, we shall now have to turn to the 1984 vatican critique of 'some elements' of liberation theology.

### III

'Ideology critique', 'class struggle', and 'truth as praxis' are all marxist notions. They are all, therefore, included under the reservations expressed by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith about the extent of borrowings from Marxism among theologians of liberation. The general problem that the CDF notes is the peculiar difficulty of adopting one or other insight from Marxism without finding oneself adopting the whole. Indeed, the document is adamant: 'No separation of the parts of this epistemologically unique complex is possible' (VII, 61). The epistemologically unique character is seen by the CDF to derive from the fact that:

the thought of Marx is such a global vision of reality that all data received from observation and analysis are brought together in a philosophical and ideological structure, which predetermines the significance and importance to be attached to them. The ideological principles come prior to the study of the social reality and are presupposed in it (VII, 61).

In other words, *mirabile dictu*, the CDF accuses liberation theology of exactly what it, liberation theology, frequently accuses others, namely, a wooden and dogmatic espousal of an ideology.<sup>10</sup>

Liberation theology defends itself from the accusation of ideological Marxism by arguing the self-evident, commonsensical, empirical character of its claims. This is most evident in the discussion of class struggle. The CDF argues that the marxist notion of class struggle as *the* means by which history will move forward operates within liberation theology in a reductionist manner, leading to 'historicist immanentism'. Liberation theologians, on the other hand, insist that as a matter of fact, and regardless of the fact that Marx invented the term 'class struggle', there is a class struggle going on in Latin America at the present time. In this

class struggle, the Church has to take sides with the poor and oppressed. This commitment has nothing at all to do with Marx, although liberation theologians are indebted to Marx for the language in which to express this insight. Moreover, they are not saying that progress occurs only through the class struggle, but simply that in their concrete social context, the only way forward is through the struggle of the poor and oppressed for social change.

Liberation theology's belief in 'truth as praxis' is also at odds with the position of the CDF. Truth is clearly corroded by the presence of a dogmatic ideology. To liberation theologians, the act of commitment to the cause of the poor in Latin America is the act by which a dogmatic ideology is avoided. That practical commitment to social transformation, that praxis, is thus the way towards truth. We have already addressed the surface problem here, namely, that the CDF believes that liberation theology is itself ideologically captive. The underlying problem is the more crucial: the CDF also thinks that there is such a thing as 'theological truth' which escapes the need for truth to be praxis and, indeed, possesses a privileged status which exempts it from ideology critique. 'In other words', they say, 'the ultimate and decisive criterion for truth can only be a criterion which is itself theological' (VII, 10).

The heart of the dispute between liberation theology and the CDF lies here, in the question of whether or not there is such a thing as 'theological truth' which escapes the need for ideology critique. The reason why the liberation theologians would be inclined to argue that there is no such thing has nothing, however, to do with marxist ideology. No one need be a Marxist to believe that in fact the way in which people see the world is going to influence how they express themselves. The theologian lives within history, and theology is a historically conditioned discipline. Hence, ideological suspicion is simply a part of the apparatus of hermeneutics. In fact, its exercise is the only way of taking account of the impact of historical circumstance upon the theologian or Church, and hence the way in which the truth that resides in that theology is clarified.

The vatican congregation is convinced, however, that there is a privileged position for theology.<sup>11</sup> The theologian, for example, can make instrumental use of philosophy or the human sciences, but must submit them to 'a critical study from a theological perspective' (VII, 10). The CDF is quite right to point out that 'the first condition for any analysis is total openness to the reality to be described' (VII, 13), though its treatment of Marxism and indeed of liberation theology seems sometimes to fall short of such standards. It outlines what it sees to be the results of theological dependence on the notion of class struggle (IX, 31), and dismisses it thus: 'This identification is in opposition to the faith of the Church as it has been reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council'. There is a danger that this kind of reasoning may lead critics of the CDF

document to the judgment that its demands for openness extend to everything but its own position, which is treated as somehow in a privileged state beyond ideological suspicion. Liberation theologians and others would want the theological possibilities of the idea of class struggle to be examined in themselves, not dismissed aprioristically.

#### IV

There is much more to the contemporary phenomenon of liberation theology than its differences with the Vatican, interesting as they are for what they reveal about the workings of different world-views. I should like to conclude this survey of today's liberation theology with some indication of the breadth of its influence on the contemporary religious scene, both as it has spread to different geographical locations, and as it has appealed to those who have found themselves to be in analogous social situations to that of the marginalized of Latin America.

There are two aspects to the proliferation of the influence of liberation theology. The first of these is its extension into societies with a comparable historical and sociocultural complexion to that of Latin America. The key factor seems to be a post-colonial or neo-colonial social situation, with the existence of internal repression running a close second. For example, there is considerable liberation theology done both in South Africa and in the Philippines, and not a little in Sri Lanka.<sup>12</sup> Most 'developing' nations with a christian religious tradition show some interest in this way of approaching theology, for some obvious reasons. It helps make sense of the national experience within the framework of the judeo-christian tradition and it lends the support of the gospel to the struggle for human rights and a dignified life. It is also a form of theology that not only coexists peacefully with most forms of socialism, but that can envisage cooperation even with more explicitly marxist political alternatives. However, because of the very similar social situations within such developing nations, even if they are on opposite sides of the globe, there is a tendency for this liberation theology to repeat the findings of the latin american parent, rather than advance them in any notable way.

The second dimension of liberation theology's spreading influence has to do with the adoption of the liberation *methodology* by groups whose historical experience is not so close to that of the Latin Americans as, say, filipino christian groups. The clearest and most exciting example of this phenomenon is, of course, the growth of feminist thought, especially in the United States. There is no way in which feminists can be described as an oppressed *minority*, but there is every reason to recognize the truth of their self-designation as a marginalized majority. To this extent they compare directly with the latin american poor, though in other respects, especially the socioeconomic status of their major exponents, they differ

dramatically.

Feminist theology, which is now a topic for 'Theological Trends' in its own right, initially learned much from the theology of liberation, in particular finding the analysis of ideology valuable for its own condemnation of patriarchal society and patriarchal religion.<sup>13</sup> More recently, however, there seems to me to have grown up a reciprocal reversal of the direction of influence; feminist theologians have pointed to the dangers of latent sexism even in forms of liberation theology, and the recent focus of some latin american thinkers' attentions upon the oppressive structures within the Church itself owe something to the greater freedom felt by north american women to point the finger at the religious institution.

In addition to feminist theology of liberation, there are other movements, such as black theology (which seems to me not to have lived up to its early promise), chicano and red theology (in the United States), and even forms of liberation thought directed to liberating the oppressors from their oppressive roles.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most promising development is one that is frequently denied, namely, the extension of notions from liberation thought into the teaching of the institutional Church. Some of the writings of the present pope demonstrate some sympathy for at least part of the message of liberation theology, and the CDF declaration which we discussed above contains explicit approval for liberation theology, admittedly within certain restrictive guidelines. Above all, perhaps, the recent work of the United States catholic bishops on the economy and public policy issues, with its treatment of the cultural implications of a 'preferential option for the poor', is the most hopeful sign that the theological insights of liberation thought are taking their rightful place within the self-understanding of the contemporary Church. Time will tell, or in other words, 'If it be of the Spirit, it cannot be withstood'.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the document of the Sacred Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), 'Instruction on certain aspects of the theology of liberation', in *Origins*, vol 14, no 13, September 13, 1984, pp 193-204.

<sup>2</sup> See the final paragraph of the introduction to the CDF document mentioned in footnote 1.

<sup>3</sup> The literature on basic christian communities is growing at a great rate, which is as it should be, since they are probably the heart of the success of liberation theology in Latin America. The two basic books on them are Alvaro Barreiro's *Basic ecclesial communities: the evangelization of the poor* (Orbis Books, 1982) and a collection of papers edited by John Eagleson and Sergio Torres, *The challenge of basic christian communities* (Orbis, 1981). In addition, there are good popular treatments of the BCCs in Richard Shaull's *Heralds of a new reformation: the poor of South and North America* (Orbis, 1984) and in Harvey Cox's recent *Religion in the secular city* (Simon and Schuster, 1984, especially pp 98-158).

<sup>4</sup> The most accessible source for the major documents of the 1969 Medellín conference of the Latin American bishops is *The gospel of peace and justice*, a series of papal, conciliar and episcopal documents edited by Joseph Gremillion (Orbis, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Something of this reversal of roles is apparent in the more recent writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The power of the poor in history* (Orbis, 1983) and *We drink from our own wells* (Orbis, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Elsa Tamez's *Bible of the oppressed* (Orbis, 1982) is useful in this context, but perhaps the best examples of the biblical role in liberation theology are to be found in the four volumes of *The gospel in Solentiname*, edited by Ernesto Cardenal (Orbis, 1976-80).

<sup>7</sup> This, of course, begins with Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A theology of liberation* (SCM, 1974). An interesting recent discussion of relationships between different levels of theologizing in Latin America is to be found in Juan Luis Segundo's article, 'Two theologies of liberation', *The Month*, October 1984, pp 321-327. The full complexity of liberation theology began to become apparent in an earlier work by Segundo, *The liberation of theology* (Gill and Macmillan, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> See Segundo's *The liberation of theology*, pp 97-184.

<sup>9</sup> The text of this 1981 papal encyclical is available in many places, but one of the best is as the final inclusion in a collection of papal documents edited by Michael Walsh and Brian Davies and published by CAFOD in 1984, *Proclaiming justice and peace*, pp 271-311.

<sup>10</sup> A forthcoming work by Juan Luis Segundo, details of which are at the time of writing not available (August, 1985), promises to deal in detail with the charges levelled by the Vatican against liberation theology, seeing them not so much as attacks upon liberation thought alone, but as an attempt to turn back the theological clock beyond the developments of Vatican II.

<sup>11</sup> It seems that this point will constitute the heart of the critique of the Vatican document in Segundo's forthcoming book.

<sup>12</sup> Some representative works here would be: from Asia, Tissa Balasuriya's *The eucharist and human liberation* (Orbis, 1980) and *Planetary theology* (Orbis, 1984), and a collection edited by John C. England, *Living theology in Asia* (Orbis, 1982); from South Africa, Aylward Shorter's *African christian theology: adaptation or incarnation?* (Orbis, 1977) and Albert Nolan's *Jesus before christianity: the gospel of liberation* (DLT, 1977); from other parts of Africa, a number of articles in a collection edited by Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres, *The emergent gospel: theology from the underside of history* (Orbis, 1976) and one article, by Bonganjalo Goba, in another collection from the same editorial team, *Irruption of the third world* (Orbis, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> The key earlier works of feminist theology seem to me to be those of Rosemary Ruether, in particular *Liberation theology: human hope confronts christian history and american power* (Paulist Press, 1972); *New woman, new earth: sexist ideologies and human liberation* (Seabury, 1975) and *Religion and sexism: images of women in jewish and christian tradition* (Simon and Schuster, 1974). More recently, Ruether's two publications from Beacon Press in 1984 should be noted, namely, *Sexism and God-talk: toward a feminist philosophy* and *Womanguides: readings towards a feminist theology*. However, three recent works by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza seem to me to carry feminist thought a stage forward. They are *In memory of her: a feminist reconstruction of christian origins* (Crossroads, 1983); *Bread not stones: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Beacon Press, 1985), and *Claiming the center: a feminist critical theology of liberation* (Winston, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> The best of these is still probably Frederick Herzog's *Justice church* (Orbis, 1980), written from a consciously north American Protestant position. An early British attempt that is worthy of consideration is *Agenda for prophets: towards a political theology for Britain*, edited by Rex Ambler and David Haslam. My own *Free in Christ: the challenge of political theology* (Kevin Mayhew, 1984) may also have something to offer in this regard. Despite its title, it owes more to liberation theology than to political theology in the narrower, German sense of the term.