

LIBERATIONIST SPIRITUALITY IN URBAN BRITAIN?

By MARK CORNER

This article focusses on Tyneside, a large urban area in north-east England, which suffers from multiple economic and social deprivation. In the summer of 1991, just before this article was written, Tyneside was the scene of widespread rioting.

IT IS OFTEN ASSUMED that 'spirituality' is the weak point in the liberation theologian's armour. It is in this area, some would say, that the essential reductionism of the liberation theologian's approach reveals itself. He or she has no room for the 'spiritual', for all those religious forms whose purpose is apparently to open up that which is not of this world to the perception of those who are very much trapped inside it—religious forms such as prayer, worship, meditation and mystical experience.

To consider the real position, we have to examine what is the meaning both of liberation theology and of spirituality. For the critics of the theology of liberation have a point. Many liberation theologians do write and speak as if they are not quite what they say they are—as if they are claiming to adopt a radically different methodology, whilst in reality merely voicing a concern for the poor somewhat more forceful and unrestrained than that of their more traditional colleagues (the dialogue in the 1970s between Jürgen Moltmann and Latin American liberationists brought this out). To be a liberation theologian is surely to do more than centre the concern of theology upon the poor; it is to do what Juan Luis Segundo did so masterfully in his *The liberation of theology*, namely to redefine the nature of the discipline. Such re-definition was bound to involve a re-definition of 'spirituality'.

In the manner of the liberation theologian, we could usefully begin from the situation of the poor, not the poor in the Third World or what use to be called the Second or communist world, but in the so-called 'First World', in Britain itself. There is a marvellous example of the methodological problems of the theology of liberation in the

events of the last few weeks, half tragedy and half farce, which have brought the poor of Tyneside¹ into the news and with them the views of the Churches and their leadership.

In the events of these few weeks lie all the ironies of poverty, power and politics. There is an archbishop and a bishop both of whom are reported as highlighting the links between poverty, deprivation and crime. On the other hand there are the views of those who live and work—ostensibly—among the poor themselves. The Vicar of Elswick, described by the Chairman of the Conservative Party as 'our man on the spot' (and certainly Elswick was at the centre of the recent disturbances), talked in very different terms, terms soaked in what many people would recognize as familiar theological language, of 'wickedness' and 'evil'. In this instance, then, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, whilst not 'liberationist', recognizes the validity of social and economic circumstances to any theological judgement, whilst the local cleric does not. To him, any trespassing outside the language of theology is invalid, a morally dubious exercise which in seeking to find reasons for crime only succeeds in making excuses for it.

Newcastle upon Tyne is a compact city, which possesses areas of relatively fixed social and economic character. Around the huge Town Moor in the centre of the city are a number of districts no bigger than individual council wards, but very different from one another in social mix. It would be obvious to anyone working for the police or social services where the flashpoints for civic unrest would be. The relevance of factors such as high unemployment or poverty would not be in doubt. Yet from some clergy there is an obvious reluctance to abide by such a common-sense approach. Why?

The Vicar of Elswick is no fool, and shows an impatience with recent media interventions in an area he knows well which most of us would share. In come the camera crews and the reporters, who were happy to ignore the problems of Tyneside for several years, years in which all the troubles of early September were evident in sporadic outbreaks of violence and gangsterism. They seem to want to compensate for years in which they ignored or under-played the problems of the area by now engaging in a wealth of exaggeration. Having ignored the way in which Tyneside has been smouldering for years, they now insist upon describing it as 'in flames'.

As a man who has lived 'on the spot' for years, he knows also that there is a minority on any run-down estate who exploit the conditions of the people who live there in a ruthless and unacceptable way. Maybe it is frustration at the failure to recognize this, at the tendency

to introduce the idea of social and economic deprivation as a blanket acquittal of all who participated in or engineered the recent disturbances, that drives him into the arms of archaic jargon like 'wickedness' or 'evil'. In a sense, he is right to find some way of making the simple point that exploitation obviously exists, in some cases on a large scale.

He also has some reason to be sceptical of all those who will write about those events from a perspective infused by sentimental attachment to the concept of the 'noble poor', an idea prevalent among all those artists, writers, commentators and politicians who will happily seek—from their middle-class homes on the other side of the city—to patronize with praise all those who endure conditions of poverty. He has some reason even to suppose that such a tendency would not be altogether absent from the odd episcopal or even archiepiscopal pronouncement.

The trouble is that whilst such reactions are understandable, the socio-economic context remains crucial to any understanding of the situation. It is not a total explanation, but it is an essential part of any explanation that will go anywhere towards analysing what happened.

Throughout the 1980s pundits and politicians have talked about 'inner-city' decline. Newcastle upon Tyne has no inner-city decline. The centre of the city is for the most part busy and thriving. The shops, many of them part of the ever expanding commercial cathedral Eldon Square, largest indoor shopping centre in Europe, remain busy during the recession. As the Christmas rush begins, the tills will fill up with wads of twenty-pound notes, and many a visitor content to remain in this area will be happy to say: 'I thought they were all poor here'. In the evenings the pubs are crammed full, often to overflowing, as punters happily pay the highest prices for refreshment in the region. Proud local politicians, whose last desire is for some Bishop of Durham to come across a child without shoes and make a fuss, join in the deception by introducing fancy street signs, a tourist information office, metal studs in the pavement to mark out a 'city heritage trail', ornate litter bins that you'd hardly dare disfigure with an empty crisp packet, and a ten-million-pound face-lift to the Theatre Royal (activities which, to be fair to the local politicians, are some of the few things which the government is prepared to subsidize). This is a proud city with a strong, beating heart.

Unfortunately, none of the blood ever reaches the limbs, which are in the process of wasting away. On the edges of the city are the areas of true deprivation, of outer city decline, conveniently away from all

but the most prying visitors. In these areas there are few shops—it is not in their commercial interest to be away from the centre. People often rely on mobile vans, selling essential goods (but rarely fresh food) at high prices. They do not often leave the estates (travel costs money), which may contain pockets of unemployment well over fifty per cent. The social atmosphere becomes introverted, and any minor gangsterism tends to be internal, with particular families gathering large quantities of electrical and other goods from their neighbours, to be laundered at a nearby pub. The poor are not Robin Hoods. They prey upon each other.

Essential services are rarely to be found on the estates themselves. A few local shopkeepers, but not necessarily a doctor, a dentist, a chemist or even a bus (operators do not want their windows stoned). The estates acquire a 'name' which means that people do not like to venture in from outside, whilst the people living on them rarely venture outside. Networks become so tight that they imitate a rural village rather than an urban area. In effect they become ghettos.

If this is a fair analysis of what, in many cases, is a problem, there is a great deal of care that has to be taken about any 'solution'. Governments and councils alike have been guilty of thinking that the solution is simply to provide money. They then become upset when the trees they plant are ripped up, the houses they refurbish are vandalized, the fencing they provide is stolen. In such circumstances there is a tendency to say that 'such people don't know how to live in any other way', 'they are their own worst enemies', and so on. It is always easier to say that than to admit that the strategy was inadequate in the first place. In reality, giving money is not enough. The key thing, and the more difficult thing, is to give power.

It is easy for the housing department to move in with a plan to do up the estate. Management is devolved to a local neighbourhood housing office which is set up on the estate like an outpost of the local government empire, a garrison from which to supervise improvements 'for the people'. What is more difficult is to involve the people themselves in the management and improvement of their estates, so that they decide for themselves all the things which civic centre officials have been hitherto deciding for them—what repairs to prioritize, what houses to improve, what designs to adopt. It is difficult not only imaginatively, in that it requires a voluntary renunciation of power, a *kenosis* on the part of the local political establishment. It is also difficult practically, because people will not immediately have the confidence (although they will certainly have

the ability) to manage their own affairs. It will take a lot of effort to achieve, and in the meantime there will be those of the old dispensation who will be eager to exploit any hitch in order to return to the *status quo* of benign paternalism.

Then there is the absolutely crucial area of education. For all the government's emphasis upon reading standards among children, literacy has to be seen very definitely as a problem for all ages. Basic education is as important for adults as for children. The problem of 'poverty' is not a merely financial problem. For every person who doesn't catch a bus because it is too expensive, there is another who cannot read the number or count out the change. For every person who 'can't pay' the poll tax because of financial hardship, there is another who cannot read or understand the bills. These are intelligent people, but without basic education the intelligence receives no encouragement. And as the liberation theologians who write about literacy campaigns in the Third World recognize, without a basic education there is no possibility for political criticism, a fact that is very well known to rulers whose last desire is to have critical subjects.

Linked to education is the prospect of training and employment, which once again is only partly a financial benefit. More important is the dignity of work and the power which involvement in the workings of society conveys. Whatever the value of Marx's observation that work can demean humanity rather than fulfil it, it is also the case—as Marx himself insisted—that fulfilment could only come through work.

The means by which individuals acquire power are slower than the means by which they can be made the recipients of instantaneous handouts. The benefits are much slower to come to fruition. Empowerment is also a process by which people acquire a capacity to criticize those who have set themselves up as their benefactors—something that can be very uncomfortable for the Left in politics. To want to empower means to have none of that insidious paternalism whose social concern is really a desire to earn gratitude. Many a politician, social worker or priest would sit uneasily underneath this particular spotlight.

The estates of Tyneside have many networks of power. There is the power of the gang leader, the status and authority of the local hood. There is the power of fast cars, hijacked from all over the city (after all, aren't cars advertised above all as expressions of power?). There is the power of numbers in the street gang, the power of the male in displays of macho aggression, and lurking in the background

as the most destructive force of all, the power of the 'white race'. All these expressions of power are in reality expressions of the powerless, those who often lack the basic education, skills and opportunities to exercise real power creatively.

The Church, the liberation theologian must argue, is not about giving money to the poor, the 'charitable' approach, but about giving power to the powerless. Money can be given overnight, but power can only be given over time. Money earns the cheap grace of gratitude; the giving of power earns respect over a long period. The giving of power involves renunciation, a *kenosis* in the giver; the giving of money maintains the superior status of the giver intact.

Of course a lack of money is at the heart of things. The removal of benefit from sixteen to eighteen-year-olds, the erosion of benefits overall, the financial straits of those living on the dole and the poor returns of a low-wage economy, all have their place in any explanation. But they are not the fundamental issue. Even with extra resources, people have to be given the power to use them. Without that power, extra resources seem more like a taunt than a help, which is perhaps why the trees and the fences do disappear so quickly.

This is not to say that such things were particularly in the mind of the Vicar of Elswick, when he protested at episcopal links between deprivation and rioting. But at least such protests keep alive the point that no solution that simply fills the pockets of the poor is enough.

Language such as 'wickedness' and 'evil' is archaic and unhelpful. But at least it keeps alive the point that the poor have the dignity of choice as much as the rich do. Some poor people choose to riot and others do not. To seem to deny this choice with expressions of patronizing blather about the way in which conditions 'drive' people to destroy property is an insult to human freedom. It seems to say: 'Of course you couldn't have known any better: you were poor'. It is the ultimate put-down, the final grinding of the faces of the poor in the dust of their own powerlessness.

Theologians have long argued the point about the 'spiritual' as something 'above' the temporal or as something to be located within it. Clearly any view of spirituality which implied that Christians looked away from the world when they prayed or worshipped to something 'outside' or 'above' it is fraught with danger. A God who chose to be revealed, according to the logic of the Incarnation, within the world, would not take kindly to being sought somewhere else. If the world matters enough to be the scene of God's self-revelation, then its flaws are not ultimate. It is perfectible. There seems little

point in praying 'Thy Kingdom come' if we look for the Kingdom somewhere else. There is no value in saying 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', if we don't believe that it can be done on earth at all. The temporal is the context for a proper spirituality, not something that we escape in order to be spiritual through some kind of Gnostic journey away from the traumas of earthly existence. If we preach that the spiritual can be loosened from the temporal, or that it is something with which we are rewarded after having endured the temporal, then we adopt a theology which only confirms us in this world as powerless—waiting for pie in the sky when we die.

But a liberationist spirituality cannot afford to forget the need for a distinctive theological language, without which no powerful route through life can be found. 'Wickedness' and 'evil' at least point out the basic freedom and responsibility of human existence—although many priests who use such language then remove its main value by personifying an 'evil' force which is then said to control human lives as much as the other voices might see them as controlled by their social conditions! To be under the control of Satan is at least as dangerous a piece of nonsense as to be under the control of poverty.

Liberation theology, which has perhaps grown overly cautious since the revolutions of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union removed any lingering temptation to idolize or at least condone their former regimes, needs to centre itself not upon charity but upon empowerment. It must begin by recognizing the reality of human choice and the right of human beings to acquire power. Ironically, it takes an evangelical clergyman whose theology will emphasize a fundamental dependence of sinful humanity upon a God who forgives all those who accept their powerlessness, to remind us that without recognizing the power to do evil we cannot recognize power at all in ourselves.

The logic of creation in Christian theology is of a self-willed distance on the part of God from the world, a distance established in order to give human beings freedom to accept or reject. Such freedom, as the Fall reminds us, is fraught with danger, since free human beings are capable of inflicting pain and suffering upon one another out of all proportion even to the pain which is evident from the natural world. That divine self-renunciation will always seem questionable, impenetrable, to those who are faced with making sense of it. The Incarnation offers a complete identification by God with the process of perfecting the world, not by divine intervention but by human work. The legions of angels were never summoned,

the way of direct divine intervention was finally rejected, and human responsibility carried to its ultimate conclusion where even a destruction wrought by humanity in the heart of God could be contemplated, the Cross. The stakes could hardly be higher, which is why many a Christian would rather deny his or her responsibility and (in Nietzsche's vindictive words) 'fall slobbering before the cross'. It is more attractive to be weak, to be unable to sin heavily because the power has never really been given to us to do so. It is more tempting to adopt (again in Nietzsche's words) the 'slave morality', because that at least enables us to believe that our actions have no ultimate significance, that we have not really got the power to choose heaven or hell which is rightly at the heart of the severe gospel message. The trouble with evangelical Christianity is not that it talks too much about sin and evil; it is that it ultimately under-values them.

Spirituality is not about dependence. It is not about the bosom of Abraham, the power of the Madonna, being controlled by Jesus or waiting upon God. It is about accepting the responsibility and control which God has been trying to give us through the process of creating and then identifying with a world, a responsibility so dangerous that it is constantly negated by its beneficiaries. Spirituality must be about an acceptance of power in a world made by a God who hopes that one day we will grow up—one day we will have learned, in Bonhoeffer's words, 'to do without God'. It is not a denial of God, of prayer or of worship. It is a denial that these must necessarily produce an attitude of subordination in which the human creature flees its responsibility before the omnipotent Creator, and then 'feels better'.

The poor may be the centre of the human gospel, but they can also be a stumbling-block to it. The poor cannot be approached by 'Gods' who dish out 'divine' sustenance to a grateful people who then happily receive the gifts from those upon whom they are ever dependent. This is the theology which supposes that God has the power and our business is to recognize this and admit it in noisy hymns of adoration. The poor can only be approached by a preparedness to share power, the beginning of which lies in an acceptance of the right to power on the part of the poor themselves. 'Wickedness' is a negative concession of this right, but concession it nevertheless is. It acknowledges that people have a power of choice, which is more important than (although severely constrained without) money.

Throughout his short life Jesus acknowledged the power of others. He recognized the power of the disciples, the inner cabinet of his

adherents who eventually misunderstood his message as clearly as his opponents did. He was no Buddha able to establish a school of disciples trained in the vision of their teacher. He also acknowledged the power of his opponents, at first to reject and ultimately to do away with him. If this man was in any sense God, it could only be God who worked by voluntary renunciation of power, who was prepared even to define omnipotence in terms of a relationship that had to be accepted by human beings in order to exist. If traditional theology insists that this man from Nazareth was God, then has it even yet begun to work out the implications of saying that a human being who could get lost in a crowd and nailed to a cross was nevertheless 'divine'? No wonder the Romans mocked. This was a view of power completely at variance with normal political life.

The language of contemporary politics is full of cries for 'freedom' and 'the power of choice'. Yet it is far from clear about how to achieve these aims. The aftermath to Tyneside's troubles will highlight this well. Power and freedom are certainly at the heart of things, but how many politicians will really work to achieve this among those whose powerlessness has long been far more convenient to them? The same can be said for those in the Churches who have long operated a process of gathering adherents by emphasizing the dangers, limitations and troubles of human life much more than its possibilities and triumphs. Some of those who talk about 'wickedness' have long ago lost the capacity to talk about human goodness.

To talk in theological terms about 'Jesus Christ Liberator' among the poor of Elswick is already to have misunderstood the nature of such liberation. The Christian gospel must move forward under its own incarnation, through the practical moves to empowerment that never betray their theological roots—the co-operatives, the clubs, the community associations, the mundane (which means worldly) methods by which a true working for (and therefore with) others expresses itself. Spirituality is not an announcement of difference, a halo on the heads of those who claim a different *raison d'être* to everyone else. If Jesus can be lost in a crowd, then so can his disciples. Spirituality can never be the badge of membership of some Christian élite, the breath of priestliness. For the liberation theologian, spirituality is not something that the poor need but have lost; nor is it something that the poor have and the rich seek to gain by helping them. Spirituality is the form taken by a world in which humanity both accepts and has the means to exercise the power which God has given it—and exercise it, in words not so dissimilar from the views of the Vicar of Elswick, for good.