

LIBERATION THEOLOGY A WORLD AWAY?Rev Roger W. Welch, BA (Hook)

'Contextualisation' is, without doubt, the theological 'trend par excellence' of the decade. "It has to do", according to the WCC's Theological Education Fund, "with how we assess the peculiarity of Third World contexts". It "takes into account the processes of secularity, technology, and struggle for human justice, which characterise the historical movement of nations in the Third World." Each cultural and social context needs its own theology, and of all 'contextualised' theologies, the most prominent today is the 'Liberation Theology' of South America, with its sister black theologies in the USA and southern Africa.

This article will attempt to achieve two goals:

1. To provide, for those who do not possess it, a brief introduction to Liberation Theology, its history and doctrine.
2. To suggest areas in which the principles of this theology are already being applied to the British and European 'context', and to stress our need to respond.

The origins of Liberation Theology

To the casual observer, it appears that the theologians of liberation have exploded onto the theological scene during the 1970s. A closer look however reveals a movement with a source rather further back, growing only slowly until receiving impetus through the sponsorship of the World Council of Churches, supporting ISAL (Church and Society in Latin America), a Protestant group with its roots in 1940s youth movements. To this sponsorship from the WCC (in the early 60s) was added the impetus given by the Second Vatican

Council, which endorsed the exploration of socio-political and economic themes by Roman Catholic theologians. The explosion of the new theology then seemed to occur after the dominance of socio-political themes at the WCC gatherings at Uppsala in 1968, and Bangkok in 1973. By this latter conference 'salvation' was being clearly expressed in terms of political and economic liberation in the world. Meanwhile, Roman Catholic impetus was maintained through the conferences of Latin American bishops at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968, and at Puebla, Mexico, in 1978, the latter being significant for the presence of John Paul II at one session. (His carefully worded address has left conflicting opinions as to the validity of Liberation Theology in the eyes of the Vatican.)

Indigenous or imported?

The exponents of Liberation Theology within South America have always considered their movement to be one of indigenous self-expression, the awakening within the South American consciousness of the limitations of western theology and its influence in preserving the political and economic dependence of the Latin Americans on western capitalism in general and the United States in particular. A glance at the backgrounds of the major writers, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, shows this to be simplistic. Many studied in European Universities in the early 60s, at a time when the Marxist analysis of society and history was clearly influencing both the liberal arts and theology. It was at just this time that two Europeans published books which were to provide the base for much subsequent South American thought, the Protestant Moltmann's 'Theology of Hope' (1965) and the Catholic Metz's 'Theology of the World' (1968). It also appears that many foreign clergy at work in South America in the 60s were responsible for propounding radical political philosophy to the exclusion of biblical truth. Therefore, in assessing the

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South American claim that "*western capitalist theology*" is inappropriate to their context, and indeed itself oppresses the people, we must not minimise the part played by the radical western bourgeois theologians in inducing and supporting that claim.

Praxis and conscientization

Anyone attempting to grasp the fundamentals of Liberation Theology, both in principle and application, must first become familiar with these two words.

A precise definition of 'praxis' is difficult, because it is subject to different interpretations. To know that in Greek it is 'a doing, or a mode of doing' takes us only part of the way. Praxis is the 'mode of doing' adopted by Liberation Theology. It is basically reflection upon action, based upon one's experience of reality, using the tools of the social and political sciences for expression. This produces a dynamic theology which is the result of action, rather than vice versa as in orthodox theology. This praxis uses an unorthodox set of hermeneutical principles as its justification. Using as a base presupposition the fact that God is immersed in history and in the reality of our world, the liberation theologian uses the experience of reality (i.e. his context) to question prevailing ideologies, exegesis, and theological assumptions, to come to a new way of interpreting scripture.

The process of becoming aware of the need for praxis, for liberation from the social and cultural factors which have conditioned theology hitherto, is called 'conscientization'. The greatest need of the present moment, to which many are addressing themselves, is the conscientization of the masses of the oppressed people of South America. The most successful agent in this educative process has proved to be the 'base community', cell groups of

poor people meeting in a home to read, discuss, plan action. Sometimes these groups are clearly evangelical, basing their activities on Bible study and prayer; at other times they are overtly political in content and aim. They display enormous diversity, but they provide almost the only hope for the academics wishing to see their ideas filter to the people who are supposed to be the concern of this theology. For the liberation theologian, conscientization is usually married to an analysis of historical reality which is Marxist in pattern.

The emerging theology

What kind of identifiable doctrine is produced by this 'Marxist Christian' analysis? The claim to possess a dynamic, ever-changing theology contains in itself a criticism of dogmatic creeds and standards, and certainly there is a continuing development of thought among liberation theologians which can make any assertion quickly redundant. However, there are areas of consistent thought and statement that we can comment upon as the foundations of the movement's doctrine.

God and his Kingdom

God has consistently been portrayed as a creator "*immersed in the world*", working redemption by liberating oppressed peoples, therefore always identifying with such peoples. The exodus is the most used biblical example of God's way of redemption. God's kingdom is the world and all who are in it, the church comprising those who are the reflective part of humanity, consciously moving toward liberation. Redemption history and secular history are one in this scheme.

Soteriology

As all men are in Christ, the task of the church is to bring Christ consciously to all men. This is salvation, but it is achieved through a

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humanising process, the awareness of being opened to God and to others. How? Through commitment to the struggle for socio-economic liberation; this is conversion. To define Christianity in terms of individual morality and personal redemption is to seriously distort the faith, in the opinion of the theologian of liberation.

Christology/Pneumatology

There is much work at present being done within Liberation Theology to develop a genuine Christology. As it stands, the interest in Christ is mainly in his life, the Gospels being used to attempt to show his relation to the political world. Christ is an example to follow, a fellow man, a leader, rather than a Divine Master and Saviour. There is significantly as yet no consistent doctrine of the Holy Spirit in Liberation Theology.

Easily dismissed?

It would not be difficult for us as evangelicals to demonstrate the inadequacies, heresies and liberalism of Liberation Theology. It has a faulty philosophical base in the scientific Marxist concept of man in society, a perverted doctrine of salvation, a selective use of Scripture with an hermeneutical system designed to serve its own presuppositions. It appears to be a contemporary 'contextualised' expression of 19th century liberalism, mixed with some 20th century Marxism and a good dose of Social Gospel; an altogether relativist theology, not a biblical theology at all.

If that were all that needed saying, then this article could be replaced with some 'suggestions for reading' that would begin with David Wells' excellent introductory critique in 'The Search for Salvation', chap.5 (IVP 1978). It is quite obvious however that the principles expounded by the theologians of liberation are having an effect upon

current evangelical thinking and writing in such a way that demands our attention. As Alan Gibson pointed out in the last issue of 'Foundations', evangelicals are becoming more concerned with social action; witness periodicals like Third Way, and the space given to it at NEAC and other conferences. To what extent is this social action adopting the presuppositions of Liberation Theology? More than we might think, I suggest. Consider the following areas.

1. At the popular level, Ronald Sider's 'Rich Christians in an age of hunger' (Hodder 1978), apart from challenging us about inequality in the world, and the need to alter our life-styles, also demonstrates an acceptance of some of the presuppositions of the liberation theologians in the area of '*the God of the oppressed*' and the '*sinfulness of structures*'. Should we blandly accept these positions, or make a more critical assessment of them?
2. A developing concern with the plight of the inner-city areas. Where this concern is to see Gospel-preaching churches established, we must commend it and encourage it. But it goes further than that; there are some who will work in such areas simply to identify with 'the oppressed', the racially, culturally, financially deprived. What is the message being brought to these people?
3. A loss of the message of individual redemption within socio-political action groups, whether they be concerned with race and housing problems or (the current favourite in US, due here soon) the anti-nuclear-power groups.
4. Perhaps most significantly, there is a definite shift in emphasis toward social issues among many charismatic groups and leaders, particularly in the Anglican church. Witness David Watson's foreword to Sider's book, implying that the social content of the Gospel needs an emphasis in such a

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way that it will be the 'Reformation' for our age. Also, in the magazine 'Towards Renewal', produced by the influential community at Post Green, a recent article suggested (quoting American 'black' theologian James Cone), "*Luther could not hear God's liberating words for the oppressed because he was not a victim...*" Cone considers that American Christian leaders, and he cites Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards among them, have interpreted the gospel according to the political and cultural interests of white people. Do we accept that reluctantly, or do we question Cone's analysis?

5. Among many evangelicals there is, within the rationale of social involvement, a movement from 'creation ethics' to 'kingdom ethics', removing us from the emphasis to work for the establishment of a just and ordered society as a part of our creation mandate, to the struggle to see the eschatological 'kingdom' established through the restructuring of society on a Christian ethical basis. Whence this emphasis if not from Liberation Theology? What place personal redemption in its scheme? For a balanced treatment of this area see A.N.Triton's 'Salt to the World' (IVP 1978).

I believe these points are enough to demonstrate that we must come to terms with the teaching and influence of Liberation Theology, and have a satisfactory reply.

The way forward holds, I believe, two traps that must be avoided. The first is a thoughtless acceptance of the dishes served up to us by some evangelicals, liberally sprinkled with the method and content of Liberation Theology. The second trap is equally dangerous; it is to identify, expose, and reject all that is being said to us. Dr Edward Norman's 'Reith Lectures', printed by OUP under the title 'Christianity and the World Order', have been warmly accepted and commended by many evangelicals. Why? Certainly he has provided a

penetrating critique of the preoccupation of the church of today with the secular world, and also of Liberation Theology in particular. Is it really that we commend, or is it rather the innate conservatism of the man, which speaks more of traditional Anglo-Catholicism than biblical faith. Dr. Norman, remember, has not actually told us what he means by "*personal redemption*".

Which way forward for us? Many evangelicals in South America have found that a critical appraisal of the teaching of Liberation Theology with an open Bible has been of considerable value to them in seeing just how they ought to be communicating to the people of their countries. We need to follow their lead, I suggest, in these ways:

1. We need careful, honest, thorough, and faithful exegesis of Scripture, in the grammatico-historical framework of hermeneutics.
2. We need contemporary application of the teaching of Scripture, which means more than spiritualising away the social application of some passages.
3. We need to look realistically at the place of the local community of believers demonstrating that it is salt to the world.
4. We must examine our attitudes and life-styles biblically in the light of the points above, to be sure that we are not guilty of being simply incarcerated in a dying-culture that is no more 'Christian' than any new alternative, the defenders of the status quo by all means.
5. We must above all be proclaiming the timelessness of a Gospel which, by reconciling individuals to God can "*turn the world upside down*". Our best answer is not in words but in the power and "*deep conviction*" brought by the Holy Spirit alone.

Some readers may be interested to be acquainted with some prominent Liberation Theology works:

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Gustavo Gutierrez: A Theology of Liberation
SCM Press 1974

Juan Miguez-Bonino: Revolutionary Theology Comes
of Age SPCK 1975

Juan Miguez-Bonino: Doing Theology in a Revolu-
tionary Situation Fortress Press,
Philadelphia 1975

J.L.Segundo: Liberation of Theology Orbis Books,
New York 1976

J.Miranda: Marx and the Bible: a critique of the
Philosophy of Oppression Orbis Books,
New York 1975

To be published before the end of this year:

Andrew Kirk: Liberation Theology, an Evangelical
View from the Third World
Marshall, Morgan and Scott

JONATHAN EDWARDS AND THE 1744 CONCERT FOR PRAYER

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In 1748 Edwards wrote a book, the fruit of a series of sermons delivered to his people at Northampton (N.America), bearing the title "*AN HUMBLE ATTEMPT to promote explicit agreement and visible union of God's people in extraordinary prayer for the revival of religion and the advancement of Christ's Kingdom on earth pursuant to Scripture promises and prophecies concerning the last time*". The sermons were based on Zechariah 8 vs 20-22 and Edwards explains that he was prompted to preach and then write on the subject because of the Scottish Concert for Prayer, 1744.

"In October 1744", he writes, "a number of ministers in Scotland taking into consideration the state of God's Church, and of the world of mankind, judged that the providence of God, at such a day, did loudly call upon such as were concerned