

Liberation Theology: Fossil or Force?

A Review Article

by Dr. Howard Summers*

Introduction

Is liberation theology alive and well or has its death-knell sounded? Judging from the attitudes of some first-world theologians, the answer would seemingly be that liberation theology was but a passing fad. Judging, however, from the number of books on liberation theology emanating from both the third and first-worlds this hardly seems to be the case and, if the demise of liberation theology is at hand, someone has forgotten to tell the numerous writers who continue to publish prolifically on the subject.¹ Somehow only those who have experienced life in such places as the *favellas* of Latin America or the violence-plagued townships of South Africa appear to have any idea of what liberation theology is all about. Certainly those liberation theologians living in poor communities continue their work with no apparent waning of commitment.

Still in its infancy, liberation theology may have taken wrong directions in both methodology and content which need to be corrected but, while it is still too early to calculate its influence (How long did it take before the Reformation got that label?) it has undoubtedly contributed to political change in certain countries.²

Although both the HOW and WHAT of liberation theology may have to be carefully re-thought if genuine liberation (in all its dimensions) is to be achieved, liberation theology remains a challenge to every sincere Christian. Poverty, hunger, oppression, disease and death continue to haunt our world. What is the Christian response to be? Is the church to contribute toward the establishment of a new world order bringing liberation to all humankind? Are there people (hopefully Christians among them) who, in the words of Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, "still have a spark of humanity left for considering the problems of the millions and millions of poor persons, of international justice, of the future for the wretched of the earth"?³ Committed Christians have a choice: either to stand in solidarity with the poor and to

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work with them for their liberation or to forget them completely, denying their existence. Liberation theology, warts and all, remains the greatest challenge to churches in the first-world. It is far from "fossilized" and remains a potent force for genuine democratic change.

The following review of eight books (selected at random) may help readers to clarify their stance towards liberation theology. The sequence followed will, hopefully, guide those readers totally unfamiliar with the concerns of liberation theology to gain a general understanding of the topic before some of the more specialised areas are dealt with.⁴ The books also provide good examples of the diverse forms that liberation theology takes and they also illustrate the point that liberation theology is not solely a Latin America phenomenon.

South Africa is presently a testing ground for both liberation and liberation theology. With a combination of first, second and third-world interests vying for power in the country, the final outcome is more than of passing academic interest to all South Africans.⁵ Being a South African, the reviewer has assessed these books against this background - although this is not stated explicitly in the reviews.

C. Rowland and M. Corner
Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of
Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies.
Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press
1989, 205 pp.

This book is worthy of careful study, and is strongly recommended as an introduction to liberation theology. As the title implies, the book, comprising five chapters, analyses the impact of liberation theology on (western) Biblical Studies.

1) "Sampling liberation exegesis." Using a selection of Jesus' parables, Rowland and Corner give practical examples of the way liberation theologians interpret the Bible and they penetrate quickly to the core of liberation hermeneutics. The authors show how liberation theologians accept the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation but take it further, stressing not only the context of the original writers but also the context of the modern-day reader. Towards the end of the chapter the real concern of the

book is introduced, viz, an attempt to find a liberation theology for the first world, more particularly Britain.

2) "The foundation and form of liberation exegesis." This chapter provides a theoretical outline of the methods used by liberation theologians to interpret the Bible. Liberation theology is, according to its founding father, Gustavo Gutiérrez, a "new way to do theology".⁶ It is new in that the "poor" become the hermeneutical key and, consequently, they become the "focal point of theology" as the authors point out (p44). A quotation from the text summarises this point of departure:

At the heart of the theology of liberation is the twofold belief that in the experience of oppression, poverty, hunger and death, God is speaking to all people today and that God's presence among the millions unknown and unloved by humanity but blessed in the eyes of God is confirmed by the witness of the Christian tradition, particularly the Scriptures themselves. (p43)

The importance of the Christian Base Communities in Latin American in providing this hermeneutical key is explained. These small groups which meet to study the Bible under specific socio-political conditions have largely been responsible for the emergence of liberation theology. It is from these groups, where a "listening to the poor" takes place that most academic liberation theologians draw their inspiration.

A closer scrutiny of the methods employed by liberation theologians follows in the second part of this chapter. Clodovis Boff's work is selected as an example of a liberation hermeneutic. Boff's differentiation between "correspondence of terms" and the more acceptable "correspondence of relationships" is analyzed. The former applies when the biblical narratives are used analogously as the events and characters of first-century Palestine are considered to have a direct modern-day application. The latter refers to the intention of the original writers and outlines how this intention has been interpreted traditionally by the church. Despite what critics say about this hermeneutical method, Boff maintains that this approach is similar to that used by the biblical writers themselves (p64) and is not a case of manipulating the text--something of which liberation theologians are often accused.

3) "Exploring the implications of liberation exegesis in a first world

context. 1: The Political Gospel." In the first part of this chapter the idea that Jesus was a political revolutionary is investigated and from there the authors move on to a (excellent) summary of the materialist analysis of the book of Mark as provided by Ferdinand Belo. What is lacking at this point, however, is a clear link between the first two chapters where predominantly Latin American liberation theology is dealt with to a study where these self-same writers are hardly mentioned. Although the authors are analyzing "liberation theology's" emphasis on the historical Jesus as well as the significance of the Book of Revelation, they do not adequately show the connection between Latin American liberation theology and Belo's materialist analysis. No mention is made of which liberation theologians use a materialist analysis, nor is a clear indication given as to how materialist analysis affects liberation theology. Suddenly, however, a return is made to "liberation theology" (presumably Latin American) when Rowland and Corner begin to speak generally about what "liberation theology" does or believes. No distinction is made between the different types of liberation theology (for there are many) which supposedly support these generalizations.

The last part of this chapter investigates the relationship between History and Eschatology (as a prelude to the next chapter where the book of Revelation is dealt with). The writings of Cardinal Ratzinger (considered by many to be enemy number one of liberation theology) are briefly considered and some of his criticisms of liberation theology, particularly those relating to the how and where of building God's kingdom, are analyzed. The chapter ends with an examination of the themes of chiliasm and eschatological reservation.

4) "Exploring the implications of liberation exegesis in a first world context. 2: The Challenge of the Book of Revelation." The emphasis in this chapter is on the way the book of Revelation is used by oppressed groups. A link is made between the book of Revelation and the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Habermas) characteristic of the work of liberation theologians. The way the Apocalypse evokes the "subversive memory" and the "power of the past to disturb" (Adorno) is pointed out and the relevance of these concepts for liberation theology outlined.

5) "Liberation theology in a first world context." The focal point of the book is reached when, in this last chapter, an attempt is made to point out the need for a first-world liberation theology with Christians being challenged to work for the removal of world poverty. The issue of first-world guilt for

third-world poverty is discussed, for example, "Britain's involvement in the oppression of the Brazilian poor" (p158). The point is also made that Christian charity and aid will never solve the problems of third-world debt because far more money flows into the coffers of first-world nations by way of debt repayments made by countries of the third-world than is paid out by first-world countries in aid. The challenge is also extended to the Church of England for failing to take a stand against deteriorating social conditions in Britain. The authors maintain that there is an absence of a thorough social analysis of Britain as was undertaken in South Africa with the publication of The Kairos Document.⁷

When evaluating this book credit has to be given to the authors for looking at the problems of world poverty and stating the need for the establishment of a new world economic order. While most people are aware, however, that the present state of (economic) affairs is unsatisfactory, finding alternatives is not so easy and, while one admires the Christian concern expressed by the authors, the solutions provided tend to be unrealistic and naive. One is forced, therefore, to question many statements made in this chapter. For example:

i) Superficially one can sympathize with the issue of Britain's oppressive role in Brazil's economy but the problem of poverty is far more complex than the authors suggest. If Britain is responsible for Brazil's debt is she also responsible for the situation in Somalia or Bosnia? No analysis is made of WHY the poor are poor. While it is easy to blame the West, Thatcher, Apartheid, etc. what about corruption, over-population, the "patron" syndrome, maladministration, cultural factors, etc.? Although the authors want a social analysis to be done they, themselves, do not undertake such an analysis and, consequently, their arguments are unconvincing. No evaluation is made of Marxist economic policy and nothing said about the economic miracles achieved by countries in the East or (more on the topic) the economic turnabout accomplished by Mexico, Chile and Argentina. As stated earlier, so much depends on HOW liberation should be achieved.

ii) Although liberation theologians maintain that poverty is not glamorized in their writings but, on the contrary, is seen as something evil (p47) it is hard to escape the feeling that this is the case with some liberationists--as well as with Rowland and Corner. Serious thought must, however, be given to this "hermeneutical key" for the illogicality of this stance is obvious. If God is to be found (only?) among the poor, the aim of

each and every Christian should then be to dispense with all material possessions and live as the poor. For, if there is no poverty, where is God? Why liberate the poor if this is where God is to be found? A serious examination must be undertaken of the effect this "hermeneutical key" has on the methodology employed by liberation theologians.

iii) The authors will have to make a far stronger case for the necessity of establishing a first-world liberation theology. Why is liberation theology needed in the first-world when these societies are the ones to which most of the third-world aspire, as is evidenced by the influx of third-world immigrants to first-world countries? As stated above, it is simplistic to state that the first-world grew rich at the expense of the third-world without providing a thorough substantiation as to why this is so.

iv) A status is conferred on The Kairos Document which not even the writers of that document grant to it. Was it really a grassroots creation? Rowland and Corner uncritically accept it without even questioning how some of the signatories regard the document today or what effect it has had on the liberation process in South Africa.

Despite these criticisms the book is well worth reading as it launches the reader into the heart of liberation theology. The authors achieve what they set out to do for one is left with the clear impression that a clinical, detached study of the Bible will never again be acceptable. Rowland and Corner have shown how the concern of liberation theologians with "the poor" has virtually ensured that not only is there a "new" way to do theology but there is also now a "new" way to do Biblical Studies!

R. S. Sugirtharaja, ed.
Voices From the Margin:
Interpreting the Bible in the Third World
Maryknoll, Orbis
1991, 444 pp.

This is a book of contextual theology with contributors coming from such diverse places as Korea, Israel and Pakistan--proof that liberation theology is not confined to Latin America but that it's concerns are universal. As the title implies, this book is comprised of a selection of writings from the "third-world", a term which refers not only to countries of the third-world but

any "people who face harassment and exploitation wherever they are" (p3). Consequently writers from minority groups (Afro-Americans, Native-Americans, women, et al.) found in the first-world are also included. The editor states:

The essays assembled here are representative examples of the hermeneutical trek of a people attempting to make sense of their faith and their scriptural text in the light of their context...What these essays demonstrate is that all biblical interpretations are contextual and arise out of life experience...(p434)

While some of the writers are well-known liberation theologians, others are not and the editor's aim in giving these third-world writers the opportunity to express themselves is twofold. Firstly, he wants to draw attention to those on the periphery of society and secondly he wants to give third-world theologians the chance to have their say as this is often denied them because they are not taken seriously by western academics (pp1-2).

This book also deals with the question of hermeneutics--how the Bible is to be interpreted in situations of poverty and oppression. According to the editor, Euro-Americans do not have all the answers regarding biblical interpretation yet, for those willing to listen to the voices of the marginalised, a wealth of new insights and ideas are waiting. The book is divided into five parts:

Part one entitled: "Use of the Bible: Methods, Principles and Issues" challenges the starting point of western theology. Third-world writers explain how the Bible is interpreted in their particular contexts. Much of this chapter is similar to the first part of Rowland and Corner and, in fact, Clodovis Boff's article relating to "correspondence of terms" and "correspondence of relationships" forms the opening chapter.

Part two entitled, "Re-use of the Bible: Examples of Hermeneutical Explorations" continues the theme but more insight is provided into the particularity of contextual interpretation. For example, Itumeleng Mosala, the South African black theologian, provides a materialist reading of the book of Micah (note the discussion on Ferdinand Belo in Rowland and Corner) which he sees leading to an authentic black theology of liberation. Mosala has another chapter in the first part of the book and when the two are read in

conjunction, one discovers Mosala's rejection of much of "orthodox" black theology and his insistence that: "Black Theology for its part will have to discover black working-class and poor peasant culture in order to find for itself a materialist hermeneutical starting point" (p59).

Part three examines one of the major biblical themes appropriated by liberation theology, viz. the Exodus.⁸ Entitled, "The Exodus: One Theme, Many Perspectives" the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery is seen as a model for third-world liberation today. A weak, oppressed people who cried out to God for deliverance was liberated from the chains of oppression. Two dissenting voices are raised against this model, however. The one by a Palestinian living in Israel, the other by a Native-American. In their present contexts both would see themselves as victims of "biblical conquest". The former writes, "...the Bible appears to offer to the Palestinians slavery rather than freedom, injustice rather than justice, and death to their national and political life..." (p281) while the latter states: "I read the Exodus stories with Canaanite eyes" (p289).

Part four, "One Reality, Many Texts: Examples of Multi-faith Hermeneutics" deals with problems encountered in those countries where Christians are a minority. The two major issues are economic poverty and religious pluralism. The approach to liberation in situations where Christianity is not the dominant religion requires entering into dialogue with other religions and discovering where Christian and non-Christian views on liberation coincide.⁹

Part five, although a very short section, is extremely important. Entitled, "People as Exegetes" it is the actual texts of discussions held by various Christian communities in the third-world. Here, readers who have never had the opportunity of meeting, for example, with members of a Christian Base Community are able to gain insight into the workings of these groups.

A handy resource, this book should be on the shelves of every theological library. A word of warning, however! Reading the short excerpts provided by the different writers sends one off in haste to read the original (and lengthier) works from which the contributions are taken.

R. Munoz

The God of Christians

Maryknoll: Orbis

1990, 192 pp.

Translated from the Spanish by Paul Burns.

This book is a superb introduction to theology done in terms of an "option for the poor". A Chilean theologian, Munoz spells out in Section I what a "new" way of doing theology means to people living in a context of poverty and political oppression when he penetrates to the heart of liberation theology by wrestling with the "new" concept of God--one who sides with the poor and oppressed. Munoz's commitment to the poor and his concern for their liberation come out forcibly in his writings for he writes from a situation of solidarity with the third-world poor who are getting poorer and, consequently, are close to despair.

One ray of hope in this depressing scenario, according to Munoz, is that more and more poor people are finding hope in the church, in this case the Roman Catholic Church. It is in the Christian Base Communities, however, rather than the mainline church where this hope is to be found. The importance of these communities is stressed for this is where the "collective memory" of the people is found. Poor Christians (and sometimes non-Christians) study the Bible IN COMMUNITY and learn of a God who is FOR the poor and oppressed, and AGAINST the practices of the rich and powerful. But this creates a dilemma: Which is the true God? The one revealed in Jesus Christ who is with the poor in their daily struggles or the "god" who is used by military dictators and the powerful of this world to legitimize their oppression and exploitation. One of these is the true God and one an idol. Careful study of the Bible IN COMMUNITY reveals a concept of a God who sides with the poor and oppressed and who is with them in their struggle, willing the end of poverty and the liberation of the oppressed. Consequently, God is seen as working through these Christian Base Communities which, like the biblical community, are on a journey of faith. God is seen as the liberator working through the oppressed themselves for a just and righteous society.

In Section II, Munoz attempts to relate this new concept of God to the present experience of the poor and the changing circumstances of life in which people now find themselves. This is a serious attempt to discover how Christian faith, seen in terms of a God who sides with the poor, is relevant to

the lives of poor people, particularly the young. Munoz sees the challenge being how to, "bridge these gaps between our image of God, the Bible, and our lives" (p80).

Section III is an attempt to re-read both Old and New Testaments in the light of this "new" understanding of the concept of God who exercises an "option for the poor." This section is more academic in that it relies to a greater degree on scholarly works than the previous two sections but whether this section is necessary for the overall message of the book is debatable. The first two sections contain a richness which is lacking in this last section where the scholarly contribution is somewhat dated. This should not, however, detract from a book which deserves serious study. It is indispensable for someone wanting to understand what doing theology in a "new" way means.

R. Shaull

The Reformation and Liberation Theology

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press

1991, 136 pp.

Writing in his usual lucid style, Shaull challenges first-world Christians to find ways not only of transforming their churches but society as well. He considers present-day, first-world protestant churches (hereafter referred to as the church) in a state of decay. Locked into "privilege and power" they have become zones of comfort and security and are, consequently, unable to respond to the enormous challenges facing them and, therefore, unable to help transform society. (pp22,89).

The church has lost its way in a secular world and forgotten the rich heritage of its "reformation" origins which led to such effective renewal of the church at the time. Just as church was "reinvented" in the sixteenth century so it must be "reinvented" today, not simply for the sake of the church but in order to transform society. How is this to be done? The answer, according to Shaull, is to be found in turning back to the theological resources provided by the Reformation and to discover how the Reformation can provide the church with the tools needed to renew it today. In other words, a "New" Reformation has to be sought!

Signs of this "New Reformation" are already present in the liberation theology emanating from the Christian Base Communities of Latin America.

According to Shaull, these communities are considered models for church renewal, models which will enable the church to be reinvented, thereby facilitating its task of helping to transform society (pp68,95). Shaull envisages the Reformation heritage being able to provide theological guidelines for the Christian Base Communities. The aim of the book, therefore, is an attempt:

"...at a dialogue with the Reformation from the perspective of liberation theology in order to propose an approach and a project which I believe should be taken up not only by scholars but also by communities of faith, especially those closely identified with the struggle of marginal and oppressed people" (p18).

In attempting to show the relevance of the Reformation for the "New" Reformation, Shaull draws on the teachings of Luther, Calvin and the Anabaptists. The four themes which are relevant to church renewal today are: i) Luther's doctrine of justification by faith. ii) Access to the Bible for everyone. iii) The church always being open to self-reform as well as being able to transform society on account of the "protestant principle" i.e. "the desacralization of all human achievements, institutions and structures" (p78). iv) The Anabaptist teaching on the separation of church and state.

In Shaull's view there is a similarity between the conditions which brought about the Reformation and those existing today in the third-world which have led to the emergence of liberation theology. Both eras are characterized by the insecurity of life and a dominating and oppressive church. The Reformation was thus a liberating experience. Although Shaull admits that it was not a political but a spiritual liberation, the Reformation, nevertheless, became a movement for social transformation because the reformers relativised all secular authority on the basis of "the protestant principle".

Shaull outlines the contribution made by the Anabaptists to the Reformation and its relevance for church renewal today. For the Anabaptists a study of the Bible IN COMMUNITY (predominantly a poor one) lead to radical discipleship. The same holds true for the Christian Base Communities and, consequently, radical discipleship must characterise any attempt at church renewal today. The Scriptures must be re-read by the church of the

rich without "ideological blinkers" (p77) and these churches must learn how to listen to the Word IN COMMUNITY and not impose a first-world interpretation on the Bible--if they are to be renewed.

Christians in the first-world are, therefore, challenged to become involved in the struggle for justice (p100). The church has to hold fast to the vision of a transformed society (p103) and operate in a similar way to the Christian Base Communities of Latin America (p101) by siding with the poor and oppressed and working for justice and an egalitarian society. The book is more of a challenge to Christians to work out ways of transforming society than a blueprint as to how this should be done. Shaull stresses the need for a balance between social commitment and spirituality for only in this way can the church be reinvented!

Although Shaull appears to uncritically accept much of liberation theology, his challenge is well taken and the book deserves careful reading. Although some knowledge of liberation theology would be required for a proper understanding of the book, it is written in a way that any lay person could follow.

J. and S. Ronsvalle

The Poor Have Faces:

Loving Your Neighbour in the 21st Century

Grand Rapids: Baker Book House

1993, 156 pp.

This book, too, is a challenge to first-world Christians, particularly those domiciled in the USA. While both "spiritual" good news and "social" good news are envisaged, the book is concerned mainly with the latter for the Ronsvalles claim to have found a way to solve the problem of world poverty. Their theory is that on account of the incredible amount of technology available as well as the excessive wealth of a great number of Christians in first-world countries, it should be a matter of ease to solve the problem of poverty in the third-world if Christians would increase their giving, however slightly.

The authors suggest that the USA be divided into regions with each region being responsible for a different segment of the third-world. This entails "yoking"--first- and third- worlds being "yoked" together. First-world

Christians would, consequently, be given a greater sense of involvement with one particular area of the third-world rather than being "overwhelmed" by the incomprehensiveness of world poverty. Involvement in one small area would also prevent the duplication of resources which is often the case at present.

The authors, who by choice live amongst the poor, stress the fact that it is not only money which is necessary but the idea of partnership is important. "Yoking" entails entering into a "co-operative partnership" with the underprivileged whether they be Brazilians, Chinese or poorer members of one's own society. Thus "the poor" are not seen as statistics but become people who "have faces".

Partnership, however, involves servanthood. Consequently, the authors are aware of the danger of imposing ideas on the poor and the need for indigenous people themselves to suggest where help can be given. So, for example, the Chinese church needs to be a Chinese phenomenon. Stress must be placed on the need for long-term development and a guarding at all times against dependency and the patron mentality (p51).

Despite the authors being aware of this need for long-term solutions, however, the message of the book seems to be "charity" for the book oversimplifies the problem of poverty. Too much time is spent on describing conditions and the way of life in China and no in-depth social analysis made of the reasons for world poverty and long-term solutions to the problem. Questions such as: Why is America a rich country? Why is there poverty in the world? Why do people not want to improve their quality of life? Why is there a "lack of political will" to remove poverty (the authors are aware of this)? Most importantly: What guarantees can be given that conditions will continue to improve once first-world expertise and cash are no longer available? It is essential that answers to these questions be carefully thought through for it is not enough to accept that indigenous people will know how to solve their own problems.

Liberation theology provides a much greater awareness of third-world problems and seeks to get people to take responsibility for their own lives and in so doing to change the structures on which an unjust society is built. While it may be necessary to have charity as a short-term solution, liberation theology seeks to remove those structures which makes charity necessary in the first place.

However admirable the intention of the authors, the book cannot realistically be seen as an attempt to solve the problems of third-world

poverty. A scheme of this kind may well strengthen the discipleship of American Christians but it is exactly the kind of "Christian charity" attacked by Rowland and Comer--and with good reason! If individual Christians wish to contribute effectively to the long-term solutions of the problem of poverty and truly wish to "love their neighbours" the answers provided by the Ronsvalles will not be much help.

D. Cohn-Sherbok, ed.
World Religions and Human Liberation
Maryknoll: Orbis
1992, 143 pp.

This book examines the extent to which non-Christian religions have established a "liberation theology". According to the editor, Cohn-Sherbok, "...liberation theology has evoked little formal response from the world religions".

After an outline of liberation theology and the challenge it poses to the world religions written by Deane Ferme, the book has chapters on Judaism (Cohn-Sherbok), Islam (Muhammed Mashuq ibn Ally), Hinduism (Sebastian Painadath), Buddhism (Sulak Sivaraksa), African Traditional Religion and African Theology (Josiah U. Young III). Jon Sobrino contributes a chapter on "Eastern Religions and Liberation" with the final chapter by William Burrows, entitled "Commensurability and Ambiguity." Owing to constraints of space, only the chapters by Ferme, Cohn-Sherbok and Painadath will be discussed.

Dean Ferme, in the chapter entitled "Third-World Liberation Theology", is concerned to show that liberation theology is found throughout the third-world and is not simply a Latin-American phenomenon. It is also not a "monolithic movement" but contains many different strands all, nevertheless, going under the name of liberation theology.

Ferme provides an overview of liberation theology under the following headings: 1) A preferential option for the poor. 2) Basic Christian (human) Communities. 3) The challenge of indigenization. 4) A new methodology. 5) Sin and evil as both personal and systemic. 6) God as liberator. 7) Christ as liberator of the human condition. 8) Justice and spirituality.

In explaining each of these points, Ferme draws from a wide range of liberation theologians from Asia, Africa, and, of course, Latin America. Feminist theology is entirely ignored, however.

Ferme sees liberation theology as a challenge, not only to Christianity, but to other religions as well. "Are these religions willing to show a 'a preferential option for the poor'?" he asks (p19). Another question posed by Ferme (but not answered) is one that, nevertheless, deserves serious attention: "Can the struggle for justice and belief in God come to mean one and the same thing?" (p19).

Cohn-Sherbok, in the chapter entitled "Judaism and Liberation Theology" sees scope for co-operation between the two. Although Jews cannot accept either the messianic claims of Jesus or the basic Christian belief that Jesus was God incarnate, nevertheless, the issue here is Jewish-Christian *praxis* rather than the usual Jewish-Christian dialogue. Although Cohn-Sherbok sees liberation theologians as orthodox Christian believers, nevertheless, it is liberation's theology's emphasis on "orthopraxis" rather than "orthodoxy" which opens the way for liberation theology and Judaism to co-operate. He says:

Deeds of goodness rather than dogma take precedence; in this, Jews and Christian liberation theologians are united in their quest for the total elimination of human wickedness (p33).

Cohn-Sherbok forwards three reasons why "orthopraxis" can be accepted by Jews.

1) Liberation theology's rejection of abstract theorising about Christ and its insistence that the "historical Jesus should be the starting point for Christological reflection" (p24). Leaving aside the Christ of faith and seeing Jesus in the context of his Jewish background allows Jews to see the closeness of Jesus' preaching to the teaching of the Old Testament and to see Jesus standing in the prophetic tradition.

2) Jews can also relate to liberation theology's concept of the Kingdom of God where the Kingdom is not "spiritualised" into an ideal hereafter but where human effort (most notably the seeking for justice) contributes to the Kingdom. Judaism can relate to this for "...Jews have steadfastly adhered to the belief that God is a supreme ruler who calls people

to join him in bringing about the Kingdom of God on earth" (p27).

3) The Exodus. For liberation theologians, the Exodus is not just an event in the life of Israel but the "liberation" paradigm *par excellence*. Cohn-Sherbok points out the on-going importance of the Passover for Judaism emphasising how, in modern Judaism, the Passover festival, for example, is spoken about in terms of "liberty, redemption, and freedom" (p31).

The areas where Jewish-Christian orthopraxis can be implemented are listed by Cohn-Sherbok as the following: i) The construction of a more egalitarian society. ii) The "poor" being the starting point for theological reflection. The poor are those of the third-world and the enclaves of poverty (mostly inner-city) found in the first-world. iii) Unemployment. iv) The plight of women. v) Ecology.

On account of the progress made elsewhere in Jewish-Christian dialogue, this chapter is probably the most important one in the book for the majority of Christians but it does have some drawbacks. For example, Cohn-Sherbok doesn't make it clear whether Judaism will ever establish its own brand of liberation theology; or whether Judaism will simply continue to cooperate with Christian aims and projects. Then, too, Cohn-Sherbok makes two points which are highly contentious: 1) He considers the aim of liberation theology as: "...the adoption of socialist principles and policies" (p33). Admittedly, liberation theology is anti-capitalistic but one has to tread warily before tying it to either socialist (or Marxist) programmes, especially when these terms are not defined. Ferme, already refuted this notion by stating: "...But the condemnation of the excesses of capitalism does not put liberation theologians necessarily on the socialist bandwagon" (p11). 2) Similarly, Cohn-Sherbok hints at liberation theologians desiring violent revolution to change society. This, too, is answered by Ferme when he states, "...this writer knows of no liberation theologians who at the present time advocate physical violence" (p13).

Hinduism is often conceived as a religion with a one-sided concentration on individual salvation. In the chapter entitled, "Mukti, the Hindu notion of liberation", Painadath, the writer, agrees with this view to a certain extent but claims that during the last two hundred years the latent social teachings contained in the Hindu scriptures have been uncovered and presently, "Hindu leaders have been paying special attention to revitalising the social dimension of the process of liberation" (p75).

Painadath points out that Mukti, defined as, "both the experience of

partial liberation on this earth and the state of ultimate liberation in the Divine life" (p64), is not simply political liberation but is liberation which is total and holistic (p74). As such Mukti comprises three elements: i) Jnana - meditation which leads to a holistic perception of reality. ii) Bhakti - loving surrender to the divine. iii) Karma - transformative action in the world. (pp66-68)

These elements of classic Indian spirituality are brought together in the Gita under the concept of "dharma" which the writer links with the process of liberation. Dharma ("the state of being held together") has personal and social dimensions. At individual level it means, "bodily health, psychic balance, and spiritual realisation", while at societal level it means, "justice, love, and harmony" (p70). Dharma, then, "is that which makes for social coherence" (p71). Personal liberation and social liberation are, therefore, inextricably linked for only a liberated individual can help to liberate society and, conversely, only as a society is liberated will individuals find true liberation.

While historically Hinduism may have been a religion which concentrated solely on individual salvation, in an age where the welfare of people is assuming greater importance, Hinduism has, the author claims, the resources to help millions of people achieve genuine liberation.

B. Bujo

African Theology in its Social Context

Maryknoll: Orbis

1992, 143 pp.

Trans. from the German by John O'Donahue

This is one of the best books to emerge on African Theology in recent years. A professor of philosophy at Fribourg and a Roman Catholic priest, Bujo is a gifted academic who is in the unique position of being thoroughly familiar with both European and African cultures.

One of the most positive aspects of this book is that Bujo does not "romanticise" the present situation in Africa. He is critical of the Roman Catholic Church (including some of its missionaries) as well as corrupt African politicians. But Bujo is equally willing to praise. Priests who side with the poor and oppressed, missionaries who are not patronising in their attitude, and African politicians who promote the welfare of Africa above

their own interests are commended.

According to Bujo, most things "African", including culture and traditional religion have generally been despised (pp9, 49). Africans have had to change cultures in order to be accepted as Christians (p11) while in colonial times European churches combined with the state to wreck African society (p43). African religion was attacked, especially the aspects of ancestor veneration and polygamy (p41) and potential Christian converts were required to turn their backs on their society (p45). Consequently, Christianity in Africa remains an "imported" religion which has never been fully integrated into African belief systems. It is clear from what Bujo says that Christianity has not taken root in Africa despite appearances to the contrary and he admits that many Africans still find solace more in traditional values than in Christianity (p31).

Finding an authentic African Christian theology is a reaction to this state of affairs. Although attempts at establishing an African theology have been made for about the last thirty-five years nothing much has been accomplished (p73). Anyone wishing to develop a modern African theology must produce one which is truly African and truly modern. A deeply committed Christian, Bujo outlines the direction he thinks an authentic African theology should take. He has no thought about rejecting Christianity but, on the contrary, sees it having an important role to play in Africa (pp10,69).

According to Bujo theologians have to decide what it means to be a Christian in Africa and how Jesus can be seen as an African among the Africans (pp12-13). A "truly African church" with a "truly African flavour" must be established to reach the people of Africa (pp69-70). This does not only mean taking into account an attempt at "inculturation" (Bujo prefers to speak about Christ being "incarnated" in Africa) but Christianity has to be related to the modern African context. This means that an authentic African theology has to deal with the social ills of the continent.

For Bujo, being a Christian and an African need not mean rejecting one's roots (p15). Despite what colonisers and missionaries, too, attempted to do with African culture and religion, Bujo sees many similarities between African Traditional Religion and Christianity and, while admitting that Christianity is a corrective to many aspects of traditional religion (pp37,48, 88,90) he believes that traditional religion should be the basis on which an authentic African Christian theology can be built.

Underlying all the beliefs of traditional Africans is a fundamental

affirmation of life. Life itself, living, is all important and the liberating aspects which Bujo sees in traditional customs can be traced directly to this philosophy. African religion perceives no dichotomy between body and soul as life is holistic. Consequently, this life-affirming aspect has religious connotations as religion promotes life. In destroying traditional religion this liberating dimension was lost (p73). An authentic African theology must build on this foundation in order to retain the life-affirming and liberating aspects found in traditional religion (p75).

It is important to note that Bujo is not intending a simplistic synthesis of African and Christian beliefs as is found in many of the "indigenous" churches of Africa. He is first and foremost a Christian but, he maintains, the fundamental beliefs of African religion (belief in God, ancestor veneration, the unity of life, ethics) must be interpreted "in the light of the Bible and the Fathers" (p68).

Bujo believes the clue to African theology lies in developing a christology and ecclesiology based on a theology of the ancestors. He developed these themes as follows: i) Christology - Jesus must be regarded as the PROTO-ANCESTOR. This is not a denigration of Christ's divinity but because Jesus, "...manifested precisely all those qualities and virtues which Africans like to attribute to their ancestors" (p80). However, he is not just any ancestor but the proto-ancestor for Jesus "... did not only realise the authentic ideal of the God-fearing African ancestors, but also infinitely transcended that ideal and brought it to new completion" (p80). In true orthodox Christian fashion, Bujo sees the death and resurrection of Jesus as proving his (Jesus') uniqueness. ii) Ecclesiology - As with christology, ecclesiology is also grounded in the concept of Jesus as proto-ancestor for Jesus was the founder of a new community (p92). Once again the affirmation of life comes to the fore and it becomes the basis of an ecclesiology which will be meaningful for Africans, viz. the New Testament concept of Jesus as life-giver who is present in the church through the Eucharist - "seen as the very life of the Church and the source of its growth" (p93). The Eucharist assumes a position of importance for it is the proto-ancestral meal. The life Jesus brings is not only life for survival but authentic life, life in "abundance" (p94).

Bujo uses this christological-eucharistic theology as a "prophetic" departure point for criticism of both the church and society in Africa. Bujo criticises the church for failing to be a "grassroots" movement and for not

taking the concerns of the poor seriously (p71). An authentic African theology can't just be academic but has to get to grips with structural injustice (pp70-73). Few clerical institutions escape his invective. He criticises church leaders who do not side with the poor and oppressed (p99), the wealthy life style of ordinands (p104), and examines Rome's attitude toward Africa. Bujo calls for a new spirituality and outlines how the church must tackle the social evils prevalent in Africa (e.g. the refugee problem) and promote freedom and liberation. In doing this Bujo is trying to restore the liberatory aspect of African religion which, he claims, was destroyed in the colonial period. This brings Bujo very close to liberation theology but he is at pains to point out that he is not speaking only about a narrow political liberation but about total liberation (pp10,73,131).

In the final part of the book Bujo takes a practical look at the traditional beliefs surrounding marriage and death in African society and analyses how the African christology and ecclesiology established thus far can impact on these issues. He attempts to create an African spirituality which will not be "otherworldly" but will be the basis for ethical action. Jesus' life and example play a major role for, while much of traditional African ethics would be affirmed by Jesus, he would also act as the corrective to many of its past and present practices (p90).

Marriage is a particularly thorny issue for Christians in Africa as childbearing (emphasis on life) is essential and barrenness a disgrace. While the church cannot condone trial marriages to test fertility (the custom in some parts of Africa) Christianity can act as a corrective so that love between the couple becomes paramount NOT the disgrace of being childless. In this way the Christian gospel brings liberation to an otherwise oppressive situation.

Similarly, Christian and African ways of dying IN COMMUNITY as well as care for the terminally ill are very close. These practices must be safeguarded in the face of the onslaught of Western medicine and the possibility of dying a lonely death.

As stated earlier, this is an excellent book and essential reading for those with an interest in Africa. Bujo must be commended for having attempted to establish guidelines for an authentic African theology (which includes aspects of liberation theology) and for opening western eyes to the problems of Christianity in Africa.

Bujo can, however, be taken to task on two counts: Firstly, he appears to see liberation theology as having only a political aspect. While he

is not alone in this, it is a misunderstanding of liberation theology.¹⁰ This is not the point under discussion though, but rather the possibility should be considered that a thorough application of that very political aspect of liberation theology, including a comprehensive social analysis, is exactly what is needed to help liberate Africa. Reforming the church is essential but how will it contribute to the liberation of the continent?

Secondly, was African Traditional Religion as liberating as Bujo claims? While this point can be debated at length, any student of Africa will be aware of the frightening role played by witchcraft and the oppressing effects of this practice on both individuals and societies. One has to ask why, even if Christianity was not appropriated in its entirety, Africans were quick to convert to Christianity (or Islam). Although the answer is complex, one has to ask: If traditional religion was so liberating, why change?

J. L. Segundo

The Liberation of Dogma:

Faith, Revelation and Dogmatic Teaching Authority

Maryknoll: Orbis

1992, 307 pp.

Trans. from the Spanish by Philip Berryman

Although written by one of the founders of liberation theology this is not a book on liberation theology *per se*. It is, however, a brilliant example of theology being done from a liberation perspective.

A word of warning at the outset. This is not casual bedtime reading. While Segundo summarises his findings at various intervals, the book is primarily for professional theologians. Segundo is a prolific writer but his style is heavy and ponderous and one has to read and re-read the text to understand fully the point being made. Having said this, it is worth taking time to read the book as it contains a wealth of new insights.

Segundo, tackles a problem which to many Christians today is perceived as a rather embarrassing one, viz. the status of dogma. It is embarrassing on account of its pejorative connotation relating to "dogmatic," of having to believe things which cannot be rationally explained or understood and which simply have to be believed on the authority (and infallibility) of the church. Segundo, a Roman Catholic priest, acknowledging the sensitivity of the subject, attempts to "liberate" dogma from these negative

connotations and he does so in response to the questions posed by the members of the Christian Base Communities with whom he works. Thus Segundo wants not only to liberate dogma but people as well.

Questions arise, readers are told, when there is a clash between dogmas which have to be believed, and everyday human experience. Segundo attempts to answer questions such as: What is dogma? Why do dogmas arise? How are they to be interpreted? What do they mean in the life of individual Christians? Can the interpretation of dogma aid human liberation?

The first section of the book deals with dogma in the Old Testament while the second part traces the development of dogma throughout the Christian era and outlines the way dogma has been interpreted in various historical situations. Segundo maintains that the present understanding of dogma as "a doctrine that is obligatory on all christendom" only came into existence in the fourth century (p19).

The book is highly technical and space does not allow a detailed exposition of all Segundo's thoughts. Only a few pointers will be given as to the direction Segundo takes: 1) Dogma, emanating from revelation, like all theology has to be interpreted. This brings readers up against the usual hermeneutical problem, viz. how to relate what was written centuries ago to the present situation, how to "recover the emotion that prompted it, by interpreting it as the author himself wanted it to be interpreted" (p108). 2) Dogma was never meant to act as a constraint to thinking and become a hindrance to belief although it is often understood in this way today. One has to realise that dogmas change during the course of time, they "become insufficient" often appearing as contradictory (p11). According to Segundo dogma should be

...the quasigenetic platform,...from which the learning of new dimensions of meaning in human life ought to be launched in each generation (p234).

3) The above quotation provides the clue to the way Segundo interprets dogma, viz. it has to be placed in the realm of pedagogy. Dogma is, therefore, not blind belief but a way of "learning how to learn" (p245) - what Vatican II referred to as "divine pedagogy" (p75). This is true even of the Old Testament because although revelation was only partial, the dogmas proclaimed were part of a process leading to truth which was guided by God

(pp106,109). Segundo sums this up as follows:

The Absolute whom we follow does not impose on us blind obedience to unintelligible mysteries, but rather guides us as free and creative beings, toward a truth that is ever-deeper and more enriching (p80).

Segundo also deals with the problems relating to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and how one can understand that the canon of the Old Testament was "divinely inspired" (chap 4). 4) Dogma is always related to the existential condition. Nothing is revealed which does not teach about God AND people simultaneously. Dogmas are not given for the sake of blind belief, they are not "information" but "experience" (p254). 5) Thus dogma must have a "humanising character" (p262) for it is a way of helping people to find meaning in life and thereby to become more human. 6) Segundo links his concept of dogma with the "orthopraxis" concept of liberation theology by declaring that dogma must make a difference! It is no use God communicating with people unless this makes a difference to the human situation (p241). 7) Segundo is aware of the difficulty in deciding what God's will is for people. How is revelation discerned today? The answers do not come easily, they have to be sought but "revelation" occurs "when we are discovered to have a historical sensitivity that converges with God's own intentions" (p249).

The book ends with Segundo offering a vision of hope for the re-evangelisation of the Christian world. This task is linked with the Christian Base Communities for this is where God's revelation is taking place and where we can discern his will for today as people are liberated from bondage.

Conclusion

This brief and incomplete survey of some recent books published on liberation theology hardly does justice to the wealth of insights contained in the material. Hopefully readers of this review will be encouraged to read the original works.

The many books appearing on liberation theology are proof that the subject is far from dead and that God is calling his church to be concerned with the "wretched of the earth" (Fanon). Only time will tell whether liberation theology will become the only way of doing theology or whether it

will disappear as just another theological fad. Possibly history will judge it to be the start of the New Reformation! (Acts 5 v 38-39). As things stand, though, it is certainly not fossilised!

ENDNOTES

¹For a critique of liberation theology, what the authors refer to as the "old" liberation theology, see H. Belli and R. Nash, Beyond Liberation Theology, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992. This book was reviewed in ATJ 1991.

Many bookshops in the first-world no longer reserve a separate section for materials on liberation theology but, apparently owing to lack of interest, place these books in the general theological section.

²South Africa is one example, Brazil and Haiti are others.

³L. & C. Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, London: Burns & Oates, 1987, p. 86.

⁴For readers totally unfamiliar with the concerns of liberation theology the chapter by Deane Ferm in D. Cohn-Sherbok (ed.), World Religions and Human Liberation, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992 (reviewed later) is a good place to start. Alternatively, read the book by L. & C. Boff listed under f/n 3.

⁵Will South Africa become another Cuba, Nicaragua, Brazil or Taiwan? These are possible scenarios for a future South Africa.

⁶G. Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1971, p. 15.

⁷The Kairos Document. "Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa". Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986.

⁸Deane Ferm also deals with the theme of the Exodus in the chapter in Cohn-Sherbok. See f/n 3 above and the relevant section in the text.

⁹One disappointing aspect is that this section does not deal with Islamic fundamentalism, nor is the subject mentioned in Cohn-Sherbok. See f/n 4 above.

¹⁰For example, at the celebration held at the Maryknoll School of Theology to mark the twentieth anniversary of liberation theology, Gutierrez, in a press interview "scoffed notions that liberation theology had ever reduced Christianity to politics or had ever embraced doctrinaire Marxism." Gutierrez claimed, too, that "from the first he wrote about liberation from personal sin as well as social oppression". Report in The Star, Johannesburg, 6 August 1988.

