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BRADFORD

CHRISTIAN URBAN RESOURCES UNIT

EVANGELICALS AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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OCCASIONAL/DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES No.1

EVANGELICALS AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

WHAT ARE LIBERATION THEOLOGIES?

Liberation theologies originate in the Two Thirds world, mainly among Roman Catholic communities in Latin America. They are diverse in backgrounds and emphases and it is a gross, (if necessary for this paper) simplification to speak of them as one, or to impose a label on them. But there are some common themes of which three stand out.

First, liberation theologies are theologies rooted in the realities of life. The best theologies are not to be found in the books written by theologians, but in the life stories of ordinary Christians. They are relevant living theologies which make a difference to the way that people live and act, and which make an impact on the political and social realities of the time and place in which people live.

Secondly, liberation theologies stress the preferential option for the poor. God is seen as a just and compassionate person who not only comforts, but acts on behalf of those who are the victims of oppression.

Thirdly, liberation theologies are rooted in the Biblical tradition. The Scriptures are seen as the living word of God and are read corporately "from the underside" in counterpoint with the social realities of the day. Thus they become a guide not only for understanding the world, but for action towards its transformation.

WHY EVANGELICALS MUST TAKE NOTICE

Why then should British Christians and evangelicals in particular need to come to terms with ways of thinking which emerge from a tradition so different from their own? I believe there are three key reasons why liberation theologies need to be studied, adopted and applied rather than ignored.

1. In the first place the heartland and dynamism of Christianity has shifted from the North Atlantic basin to the continents of Africa, Latin America and Asia. Churches in the Two Thirds world are growing numerically and in maturity, to the extent that they are now sending missionaries to Europe. Western academic theology

seems increasingly sterile and hope for renewal and relevance is coming from the South.

2. British society and politics have been revolutionised in the Thatcher decade. The gap between the haves and have nots has increased, as civil liberties and checks and balances on government power have been eroded, as previously held notions such as the common good, social justice and the welfare of the community have been attacked and almost abolished. In this new context both church and nation need new philosophies and models of social action rooted in Biblical Christian values. Increasingly, theology which germinated in the context of oppressive national security regimes appears to have lessons for Britain in the 1990s.

3. God himself (some would want to say "herself") is speaking afresh in the scriptures as interpreted by the base Christian communities of such countries as Brazil, Nicaragua and the Philippines. God the Holy Spirit is at work in the evangelisation of individuals and people groups in the poorest urban and rural settings throughout the world. As Christians and others get involved in working for the transformation of society there are signs of God's Kingdom breaking in all around. Evangelical Christians in Britain have a desperate need to listen to what God is saying and to be open to what He is doing if they are to experience the fulness of salvation today.

REACTIONS TO LIBERATION THEOLOGY FROM BRITISH EVANGELICALS

It is my impression that there are three reactions to liberation theology among British evangelicals:

1. APATHY

The majority of evangelicals in the U.K. are white, middle class and suburban. Their natural reaction is to apathetically ignore religious ideas which emerge from anywhere other than their own sub-culture. Priorities are still centred on worship, church attendance, personal devotional life, and the avoidance of sexual sin. Yet slowly notions of Biblical justice and Kingdom agendas are spreading.

Major gatherings such as Spring Harvest expose ordinary church members, especially the young, to a wide range of speakers and ideas, including people from overseas who have faced situations of oppression. TEAR Fund has highlighted the

questions of poverty and justice on the world scale and social involvement is now seen as legitimate at home.

Even the Billy Graham Mission 89 organisation was aware enough to take up a collection for work among homeless people in London, some of which actually went to consciousness raising rather than mere "soup" kitchen ministries, while the evangelist himself has changed his views so much that he can now speak approvingly of a person in China who became a Christian and remained a communist party member. While there is still a great gulf between most evangelicals and much liberation theology, the times are changing and so are attitudes.

2. OPPOSITION

Another small but influential group of evangelicals reacts to liberation theology by outright rejection. There are significant links between this group and various sections of the organised political right, ranging from the mainstream of the Tory Party to the National Association for Freedom. Indeed it has been alleged that some are involved with the Fascist fringes. There are several features of this rejection which are worthy of more detailed examination.

In the first place there is a prejudice against liberation theology because of its Catholic and Third World origins. For many conservative evangelicals, of the type who hold strongly to dogmatic truth, it is hard to believe that God can speak except by the mouths of Protestant, "Bible believing" ministers. Often this theological conservatism is coupled to a western ethnocentric world view which sees the British Empire as the high point of Christian civilisation. An example of the two coming together is in the negative reaction of some evangelical churches and groups in Birmingham to the ministry of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the spring of 1989. This, incidentally, was heightened by deliberate counter propaganda sponsored by the South African government and its friends.

Prejudice against liberation theology is sometimes based on ignorance and simplistic labelling. This results in deliberate misrepresentation of the positions taken by Christians who (although left of centre) would never claim to be theologians of liberation. Articles have appeared in Evangelical papers with such titles as "Does Scripture Union Support Liberation Theology?" With a clear, but false, impression that it does. A favourite tactic is to play on the fear of violent revolution, whether in attacking the World Council of Churches' programme to combat racism, the British

Council of Churches' grant to the Liverpool 8 Defence Committee or against the Bishop of Durham's tentative support for the miners' strike.

Of course, well known non-evangelicals such as David Jenkins are a doubly useful target, especially when they seem to hesitate over the fundamental orthodoxies of the faith. As in Latin America, Marxism is associated with atheism, and guilt is assumed on the basis of association rather than of fact. Thus the clearly non-Marxist analysis of the 'Faith in the City' report was 'rubbished' as "naive Marxism" by a government supposedly ruling according to Christian values. Naive the report may have been in places, but Marxist it certainly was not.

Another feature of evangelical opposition to liberation theology is the ideological and social position of its opponents. Usually, whether aware of it or not, they are economically comfortable and have everything to gain by the preservation of the status quo. There is always a temptation to read the Scriptures as a record of God's bountiful blessings to his people, and to identify this with their personal material and spiritual experience. The idolatrous and false theology known as "prosperity religion" is readily available to add legitimacy, especially in groups which are open to the influence of certain forms of North American fundamentalism.

Finally, there are some aspects of the right wing evangelicals' critique of liberation theology which cannot be so easily dismissed, as they lie at the very heart of evangelical doctrine. The first is the primacy of evangelism in Christian mission. Evangelicals have always stressed the New Testament teaching that unless a person is born again, s/he cannot see the Kingdom of God. Sinful human beings need personal regeneration before society can be changed. In contrast, the early twentieth century "social gospel" teaching produced a church which had lost its nerve if not its faith, and which remains in evident numerical decline. These trends are often cited as an argument against collective political action by Christians and against the intervention of church leaders in politics.

But it can be argued that this position is too narrow in both Biblical and empirical terms. For the exclusive stress on individual salvation results from a peculiar Western reading of Scripture based on Greek philosophy which tends to spiritualise everything. Dividing the flesh and spirit in this way was as foreign to the ancient Hebrew mind as it is to the modern Latin American or African. A true Biblical emphasis would produce a church of active disciples who are both

individually and corporately committed, and whose lively faith would make a real difference to the way they are incarnated in the life of the world.

Empirically, of course, the claim that changed hearts lead to changed societies does not stand up. We only need to look at the high proportion of born again Christians in South Africa, Northern Ireland, Guatemala or the Southern U.S.A. to realise (as did James in the New Testament) that faith on its own is useless.

3. SYMPATHY

The third reaction to liberation theology among evangelicals is one of openness and interest. This is represented in the writings of such people as Andrew Kirk, Roger Dowley and Colin Marchant, and in the conferences and journals of organisations such as ECUM, Frontier Youth Trust and Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice. It is significant that most of those who take this position are from urban, black, feminist, or radical anabaptist and pacifist backgrounds, or have significant overseas mission experience. We shall go on to examine the attractions of liberation theology to such people as well as the dilemmas and cautions which are necessary in order to be faithful to their evangelical heritage.

The first attraction of liberation theology is that it is Biblically rooted. In Latin America the renewal of the Catholic church since Vatican II has been notable for the way in which the Word of God has been made available and digested by the people. In some countries it is said that the Protestant missionaries still run the Christian bookshops, but it is Catholic believers who buy their Bibles, while evangelical Christians buy only music tapes, car stickers and other trinkets. An attitude to Scripture which encourages ordinary people to read and interpret with minimal ideological control from the priests was exactly the point of the European Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Taking the Bible seriously, even if sometimes too literally and fancifully, can only be affirmed by evangelicals.

The content of liberation theology's Biblical reflection is also important to sympathetic evangelicals. Evangelicals traditionally hold to the Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible, yet in practice filter out only what they want to hear. Their Word processing activities are actually far more effective than the scissors and paste of the modernist higher criticism that they so furiously criticise. Liberation theology, with its emphasis on ideological suspicion in hermeneutics, has provided a method which faces up to this difficulty. As a result it has opened up parts of the Scriptures which have been long neglected but which are highly relevant to

living in the real world. Themes of exodus and jubilee, shalom and justice, Kingdom and koinonia are music to the ears of the poor and to Christians who have chosen to walk alongside them in their pilgrimage towards a better city, whose builder and maker is God.

Liberation theology also appeals to evangelicals who are aware of their own historical roots. The great Victorian evangelical social reformers such as Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and Elizabeth Fry have long been honoured, though rarely imitated. However, they represent a top down, rather patronising approach to social action, which is far removed from the practice of liberation theology. Yet when we look at the less well known parts of evangelical history we find many more radical approaches. Chris Rowland (in 'Radical Christianity' published by Polity Press in 1988) has researched the theology of the Montanists, Franciscans, Anabaptists and Diggers and their relationship with modern Latin American Christians. Similar work is needed on the relationship of Primitive Methodism with Chartism and trade unions in Britain, the Mennonites and the pacifist stream of Anabaptism, and the early history of black led churches in North America and the Caribbean, through to the black led Pentecostals and independent African churches of this century. At the very least there is a strong minority evangelical tradition, in which radical social action is in no way in contradiction to personal salvation, piety and holiness, based on justification by grace through faith.

Liberation theology is one voice of the world church at the end of the twentieth century. Since the first Lausanne congress of 1974, evangelicals in the west, however reluctantly, have begun to listen to the stories and reflections of their brothers and sisters in the Two Thirds world. Even in the U.K., church growth overseas has not gone unnoticed, and evangelical leaders such as Vinay Samuel from India, Samuel Escobar from Peru and Rene Padilla from Argentina have visited Britain to talk of the issues they have faced and the theological resources they have needed. While none of these leaders would use the label "Liberation Theology" for their own work they are all dealing with similar issues using the same Bible, and have found the reflections of Latin American Catholics full of useful insights. Among evangelicals in the U.K. there has been a positive response, at least among those involved in urban mission, in evangelism among the poor, and in the black and Asian led churches.

For Christians working in urban areas our experience and developing social analysis of the U.K. inevitably drives us towards liberation theology themes. In

many neighbourhoods suffering from multiple deprivation the churches are the only institution whose professionals actually live amongst the people. It is Christian workers who are approached by poor and homeless people in crisis on a day to day basis, and especially after the D.S.S. and Social Services offices have closed for the day. The stories we hear within our congregations and local community make it clear that an underside theology is needed.

In recent years there has been a greater willingness to use social science in understanding the community in which our mission takes place. Such analysis may begin from a church growth agenda, or take the form of a parish audit, or be informed by a more thorough theoretical sociology which takes Marxism seriously. In every case it soon becomes clear that social and political structures make things the way they are. When Christian values and the Biblical concept of justice are added we are forced to conclude that charity is not enough. There is clearly a need for Christians to become active citizens, working together with others in action for social and political change. However, the radical changes brought about by the present Tory government mean that in practice today the struggles are more often guerrilla skirmishes of resistance; for example, in defending the rights of council tenants, of refugees and immigrants, of social benefits claimants or of patients in the N.H.S.

Many urban evangelicals have looked to liberation theology with hope, as they see new possibilities of evangelising inner city communities. The base ecclesial communities of Brazil and Nicaragua are a constant source of hope and encouragement for church planting in the U.K. Although there are dangers in romanticising over the Latin American experience, and in attempting to parachute in models which do not fit the reality of the British urban situation, there is much to learn and apply.

Evangelicals have always been concerned with bringing people to faith and into responsible church membership. However, it has long been realised that in urban areas and among working class people the combined efforts of every evangelist has had minimal results. The message of personal repentance and spiritual salvation, backed up by a few imitations of the Good Samaritan has manifestly failed to deliver in terms of bums on pews. In urban communities people are seeking tangible reality, not mere words. They are longing for group solidarity and community, not just individual self realisation. There is a surprisingly high level of implicit religious consciousness, even if it is not reflected in churchgoing. In this context there is a real opening for the growth of new forms of Christian organisation

at the grass roots. There are signs in the emergence of new house churches and ethnic congregations, which are mostly charismatic or Pentecostal in emphasis, that new ways of being the church are already with us.

Where such communities are coming into being the educational method developed in Latin America by Paolo Freire is ringing bells. Adult education for discipleship in urban churches is a process which involves learning without books, group learning, and the development and encouragement of practical skills. The method is best illustrated in the U.K. by the work of EUTP (the Evangelical Urban Training Project). There are obvious links with the practice of community development. Numerous urban churches (including evangelical ones) are beginning to paddle in these waters. It will take many years before evangelical churches are confident enough to use the experience of ordinary people as the first text, alongside the Biblical record as the "second text". The fully developed process of political education leading to effective action, which Freire calls "conscientisation", is yet to be seen in British churches and communities of the poor. However, there are signs of a growing interest in this process, in the writing and conversation of urban Christian leaders.

CAUTIONS AND DILEMMAS

Finally, we need to look at some of the problems which even the most sympathetic evangelicals find with the teachings and practice of liberation theology in Britain.

The first issue is that of pluralism and revealed truth. Evangelicals believe quite strongly that God has spoken in the Scriptures and that the Bible is the final authority in all matters of faith and doctrine. While they have encouraged each person to read and interpret the Scripture according to their own conscience and guided by the Holy Spirit, evangelicalism has assumed that the Scripture speaks with only one voice. In practice, evangelicals have looked to a select band of "sound" Biblical teachers to interpret the Bible. The inevitable disagreements between them have tended to result in repeated schism.

In recent years the charismatic movement has softened the emphasis on orthodox Biblical teaching, some would say disastrously. Now liberation theology (or rather theologies) have come on the scene, and despite, at one level, using fundamentalist readings of the Bible, they are advocating plural approaches which

vary according to the social context and political commitments of the reader. For the evangelical, both belief and action are to be submitted to the critical judgement of a Bible which speaks as God's eternal word from outside every situation. How far then can evangelicals trust the Holy Spirit, speaking through unlearned ordinary believers, to lead them into all truth?

This dilemma is increased by the great shortage of underside Christians in the British situation. Without them it is difficult to do liberation theology. In urban areas it is difficult to find groups of ordinary people who have the time, energy and interest to reflect upon the Bible and their local social reality. Even when you can find a group of Christians who live their lives at the grass roots it is common for the leader to become frustrated at the "false consciousness" to be found. In the first place, committed Christians tend to be upwardly mobile and often want to deny their own backgrounds and blame the poor for failing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. The ideological dominance of the right in the popular media, especially the tabloid press, plays on these feelings. Worst of all is the problem of deprogramming long-standing Christians from traditional evangelical ideologies, which aimed to prevent any serious engagement with the sinful world outside the church. Even when preaching and the Bible breaks out of the taboos, the traditional forms of piety are still enshrined in the hymns, choruses, liturgical language and hidden curriculum of the church.

On the other hand, there is a real issue to be faced over conformity to the spirit of the age. Those of us who are sympathetic to liberation theology and involved in radical and left wing political causes will find ourselves bombarded with calls for justice and liberation from many sides. Yet loyalty to Scripture means that we cannot support them all. Our non Christian allies will be bewildered by some of our stances. For example, while Christian C.N.D. will be welcomed for its evidently pro-Life stand, anyone who suggests that every unborn child has some claim to protection from abortion will probably be regarded as a patriarchal fascist. When Christians giving sanctuary to a Bangladeshi Muslim family facing deportation dare to suggest that Jesus Christ is the unique way to be reconciled to God, all hell will break loose. When evangelicals caring for AIDS patients let it be known that in good conscience they can find no way to get round the Biblical prohibition on homosexual practice, they will have a long debate on their agenda. We can be sure that those forces opposed to the liberation of the oppressed in the U.K. will take great joy in using such issues to divide and destroy any broad based movements for justice which do emerge.

A further dilemma surrounds the relationship of liberation to evangelisation. In Latin America, evangelisation takes place in the context of society which is religiously aware, and where there is some degree of Christian consensus. In the U.K., society is more secularised, at least in the sense that religious discourse has little place in public life. Christian belief and practice has vestigial remains but not much else. In urban areas other faith communities are often stronger than Christianity. For evangelicals an important question is how to maintain the faith and spread the gospel in this post Christendom world. Even if we can see the need for liberation for all people, and are willing to work in broad alliances for the common good, there remains the fact that the gospel of the cross, which alone can bring full liberation, is a stumbling block to many. Even though these convictions may seem, and in fact ultimately are, sectarian, there are times for most evangelicals when the proclamation of that gospel must take priority over social action.

Another painful issue raised by liberation theology is that of fellowship with rich Christians, who implicitly or explicitly are on the side of the oppressor. Evangelicals have a strong doctrine of the unity of the body of Christ, unity in the Spirit, based on shared experience and doctrine. This, of course, has never stopped them (from Paul and Barnabas onwards) from falling out quite bitterly over theology, personality, or church politics. We can predict that as society and the church continue to be polarised over economic and social justice, evangelicals will increasingly divide on these issues too. Radicals will find allies among Catholics and modernists, as no doubt will political conservatives. We will probably hear evangelicals praying for the conversion of other evangelicals to the cause of the poor, and in return receiving prayer for deliverance from the evil spirit of Marxism!

Whatever the outcome of these conflicts in the evangelical world, the fact remains that liberation theology has arrived upon our agenda. In the present social and political climate in the U.K., evangelical Christians can no longer afford to ignore it. May they remain faithful to Christ, and open to the Holy Spirit as they seek to walk with God in the praxis of the Kingdom.

Greg Smith 1991

READING LIST OF BOOKS MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

and of key works by evangelical authors on liberation and related themes.

- ACUPA (1985) *Faith in the City*, Church Information Office
(A popular version summarising the report is published by Christian Action at £1.00)
- Conlan S. & Hobbs S. (1983) *New Humanity*, Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice
- Cook W. (1985) *The Expectation of the Poor*, Orbis
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- Kreider A. (1986) *Journey Towards Holiness*, Marshalls
- Marchant C. (1988) *Towards the Recovery of a Lost Bequest*, ECUM
- Paget Wilkes M. (1981) *Poverty Resolution and the Church*, Paternoster
- Rowland C. (1988) *Radical Christianity*, Polity Press
- Sainsbury R. (1985) *Justice on the Agenda*, Marshalls
- Samuel V. & Sugden C. (1982) *Evangelism and the Poor*, Partnership in Mission Asia
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- Sugden C. & Samuel V. (1983) *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*, Partnership in Mission Asia

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ISBN 1-85143-058-X

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