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THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

As the oldest contributor to this symposium, I may perhaps be forgiven for starting on a nostalgically personal note. It is forty years since I joined the first-year intake at Spurgeon's - the 1949 Amies batch. Prin Evans and the staff, as was the custom, entertained us for lunch. I still remember his Edwardian-style courtesy, ushering us into a world that now seems light-years away. It is partly an emotional thing, this sense of something that happened before the flood. At the time, I was in love with a Bart's nurse, and when my course and her SRN training were completed, we married. Fifteen years later, in mountainous country between Sao Paulo and Curitiba, our VW combi casually skidded off the road and tumbled down an embankment. Four of us emerged virtually unscathed, but Beryl died. Before and after the flood.

The other main factor to account for this sense of distance is the sea-change in my understanding of mission. I applied to Spurgeon's in response to a sense of call to mission overseas. National service in Germany in the years just after the war had convinced me of the chaos humankind creates when God is left out of the reckoning. But the connection between the apocalyptic vision of German cities bombed to bits and the call to be a missionary in Brazil seems, in retrospect, more tenuous than it did at the time. If each of us can move the world by half-an-inch, it might have made more sense to hang about and apply my half-inch worth to what we have learnt to call 'The North', rather than fly off to the Third (Two-Thirds?) World. As Ed de la Torre puts it, 'You'll only add to the congestion'. But maybe without all that exploring I could never have arrived where I started and known the place for the first time.¹

My senior colleague in Brazil was another Spurgeon's man, Arthur Elder. In 1970 we both returned to the UK, Arthur to a tutor's job at Selly Oak while I lectured in Religious Studies at a College of Education. One of the B.Ed. courses I taught was called 'Christianity in the Modern World', which included a section on Christian-Marxist dialogue. One day in 1973 Arthur pressed into my hands a copy of Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation*², which I read avidly as a Latin American perspective on the dialogue. I did not realise at the time that liberation theology would give me a perspective on a good deal more besides.

At this point it may be well to deal with a question implicit in the title of an article that appeared some years ago: 'Whatever happened to liberation theology?'. The thesis was that this theology was just another passing fashion; it had had its day, and had been consigned to the dustbin of theological history. But like the death of God, the report of the death of liberation theology was greatly exaggerated. The Uruguayan theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, once remarked that in the struggle for liberation the danger is not the death of God but the death of the theologian.³ And while liberation theologians continue to die violent deaths, it follows that the theology they do is is very much alive: otherwise, who would bother? Ignacio Ellacuria and his five Jesuit colleagues at the University of Central America, were not killed as the exponents of an out-moded theological fashion. They are the latest witnesses (martyrs) both to the scale of oppression suffered by the poor - the majority of people in Latin America - and the power of the Gospel to give these people faith and hope against all the odds of destitution and powerlessness: the very essence of liberation theology.

Jon Sobrino, who would certainly have shared the fate of his six colleagues, had he not been out of El Salvador on 16th November 1989, wrote a moving tribute to his Jesuit friends. In the course of it he observed: 'Oppression is not a fashion. The cries of the oppressed continue to rise to heaven with increasing urgency. And God continues to hear these cries, continues to condemn oppression, and continues to inspire the quest for liberation. Whoever fails to see this doesn't understand a word of liberation theology. I ask myself what theology is about if it ignores this

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fundamental fact of God's creation as it exists today; I ask how theology can call itself Christian if it skates over the crucifixion of entire peoples and their need of resurrection, even if its books continue to discuss a crucifixion and resurrection that happened twenty centuries ago. So if those who do liberation theology don't do it well, then let others do it and do it better. But someone has to do it. And for the love of God, let no-one call it a fashion.⁴

It is all a far cry from those dear departed days of the London external B.D. that I sweated over for three years, or, for that matter, the New Testament section of the Cambridge Theology Tripos (Part III) that George Beasley-Murray (bless him) encouraged me to take as a sequel, where the examiners set the burning questions that they wished they knew the answers to themselves, like who really wrote the Letter to the Ephesians?. Wet behind the ears, it took a long time before it dawned on me that five years of theology pursued as the acquisition and discussion of a corpus of knowledge was not the best preparation for mission either in Brazil or in Britain. Such questions as - Who does theology? What is it about? On whose behalf is it done? What is the social location of the theologian? - just did not occur. In fact, as late as 1981 a group of activists organised a conference on 'A Theology for Britain in the 80s', and chose as a venue a grassy campus in Roehampton. Ironically, that very weekend, the balloon went up in Brixton.

There is an even greater gap between the smart apartment blocks of Copacabana (complete with military-style security systems) and the *favelas* that struggle up the hillside of Rio de Janeiro; but it is these latter, like the shanties of Sao Paulo, the *barrios* of Lima, the *poblaciones* of Santiago and the villages of El Salvador, that provide the place of 'epistemological privilege' for doing theology. In such locations, Basic Christian Communities⁵ read their lives, their struggles, their terrors and their hopes in the light of the Bible; and the fruit of their discussion, prayer and worship is found in some community action for change. They discover in the prophets a God with a passion for justice; they find him in Mary's song as the one who fills the hungry with good things; and they recognise him most of all in Jesus who came to preach good news to the poor and bring liberation to the captives. But as they read the gospels they see how that good news actually changed things: it was translated into good reality. It gives them hope that good news can still become good reality. If 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof', it cannot be right that land is concentrated into fewer and fewer greedy and powerful hands, leaving landless peasants nowhere to grow crops to feed their families. So the Gospel imperative is to campaign for land reform. If Jesus is the 'Water of Life', this spiritual truth can only take on meaning among people deprived of a clean, safe water supply as they work together in their community to provide it. In these communities the voiceless at last find their voice; they begin to have a say in running their lives; and the privileged and powerful discover that they are dealing not with sheep, but men and women who, because they know they are made in the image of God, refuse any longer to put up with inhuman living conditions: the lack of basic housing, health care, schools and jobs that others take for granted. This is where theology of liberation is done, and these are the people who do it. Boff, Sobrino and the others are simply the resource people who help them articulate it and stand with them in their struggle.⁶

The reaction of this irruption of the poor into the history of Latin America is predictable. The privileged oligarchies, in situations where sensitivities to world opinion are growing, attempt to camouflage their retention of the levers of power under a cloak of democracy. Where they think they can get away with it, naked repression is still a weapon. Either way, the poor can still be defined as those who are nearer to death, whether (as is more common now in Brazil) slow death from

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malnutrition and lack of health care or (as still happens with appalling frequency in El Salvador) a more or less quick death at the hands of the death squads.

The name for this situation is sin. Sin is identified as that which brought death to the Son of God; the sin which still brings death to the daughters and sons of God⁷ - 70,000 in El Salvador alone over the past decade, the majority of them victims of the death squads, the majority of them nameless (to us) students, union leaders, peasants, community workers, members of local congregations. We happen to know the name of Oscar Romero; he was an archbishop. We happen to know the names of Elba and Celina; they were the housekeeper and her 15 year-old daughter, murdered in cold blood along with the Jesuits, too dangerous to be left alive as witnesses to the killings. These people, the famous and the nameless, are the crucified people of El Salvador. It is not surprising that for Ellacuria and Sobrino, the only Biblical figure adequate to symbolise the sufferings of their people is that of the Servant of the Lord (Isaiah 52/53)⁸, bearing in himself the sin of the world; but it is the sin of *our* world, the North more than the South, that they bear. We shall return to this later.

Another Biblical image that comes to life in this situation of sin is that of the idols of death. We thought Moloch was a nightmare of pre-Christian history; we discover that he lives in his modern counterpart mammon, the rampant capitalism and obscene wealth defended by the doctrine of National Security and cloaked with the civic religion of 'Western Christian Civilisation'. To touch this idol, to finger him even, invites immediate retribution; the idol can only be placated by human sacrifice. The prophets waged war on the idols of death in the name of the God of life; Jesus takes up the same challenge as a task central to his ministry and message⁹ ('Is it lawful to do good or evil on the Sabbath? to save or to kill?'). His proclamation of the God of life led to continuing conflict with those who oppressed his people, distorting the image of the living God into an idol that brought death - even, in the end, his own death.

What of faith in this situation so dominated by sin that it seems the very antithesis of the Kingdom of God? Faith means following Jesus, whatever such discipleship may cost. In his *Freedom made Flesh*, Ellacuria observes - with tragic insight - 'If the Church identifies itself with the struggle of the oppressed, it will run head-on into the oppressors who hold power'.¹⁰ That must not divert the Church from witnessing to the Kingdom, and working for a society of justice, peace and love that will embody the Kingdom at least a bit more than the hell of present conditions. Liberation theologians never fool themselves that the Kingdom of God in all its fullness can ever be an earthly reality. But, as Sobrino puts it: 'As it stands now in most Latin American countries, asserting that the fullness of the Kingdom has not yet arrived here is not the problem; that is all too obvious. What we must now do is assert that our situation is the formal negation of the fullness of the Kingdom, that we must therefore work to create something that resembles it at least a little'.¹¹ And just as faith, for Jesus, did not mean possession of God and his Kingdom, but rather an on-going search for them¹², so for the disciple, faith is commitment to a quest rather than a possession; and our own contact with Jesus will come 'not primarily through cultic acclamation or adoration, but through following Jesus in the service of God's Kingdom'.¹³

What does all this imply for our mission to the world? Maybe it is a bit clearer by now what it implies for Christians in Latin America, seen from the perspective of liberation theology. But what about 'our' mission to Latin America? Can we properly speak of such a mission? Or does it make more sense to speak of their mission to us? What does their understanding of theology imply for the way we do theology, for our ministerial training programmes, for the life and work of our congregations? And if there is any sense in which we can still make a contribution

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to their work and witness, can it be in any other terms than Christian solidarity? And will this not imply being missionaries to our own people, indeed, to ourselves? In his letter of invitation to write this essay, the editor spoke about befriending 'those who know not the Saviour'. According to Matthew 25, such people may be found in unexpected places.

In April 1989, a sprinkling of Baptist Churches in Britain were privileged to have a visit from Tomas Tellez, the Secretary of the Nicaraguan Baptist Convention. He spoke movingly of his people's struggle for self-determination and a more decent way of life. He described the involvement of Baptist young people in education and health care in the areas of his country ravaged by the war against the Contras, and how some of them had been abducted and others killed by this army led by former officers in the deposed dictator Somoza's National Guard. He made no bones about the fact that this army, although fighting a war condemned by the International Court of Justice at the Hague, was sponsored and funded by the government of the USA. But that is not all. During the period in the 1980s when Congress withheld funds from the Contras, supplies were kept going nicely by private subscription of millions of dollars, much of the money channelled through the Christian Broadcasting Network. The man who masterminded this was Pat Robertson,¹⁴ a leading TV evangelist, and a presidential candidate who enjoyed massive support from Christians in the race that finally put George Bush in the White House. Robertson is one tip of a massive iceberg of a brand of right-wing Christianity waging an anti-communist crusade in the Third World, notably in Central America, Southern Africa and South-East Asia. Christians in these regions whose faith leads them to take sides with the poor find themselves the targets of this crusade and the victims of persecution. Tomas's friends were killed by the Contras; Ellacuria and his colleagues by the death squads. But behind those who pull the trigger stand those 'Christian' sponsors who give them ideological and financial backing. They are part of a movement, strongest in the USA, which is spreading to Britain and other European countries. And at last, Third World Christians have spoken out. Thousands of them (Tomas among them) have signed a document declaring that Christians who side with those who oppress and exploit people are siding with idolators who worship money, power, privilege and pleasure. They affirm that the persecution of Christians who side with the oppressed is the abandonment of the Gospel. And they share the hope that 'those who collaborate with the idols of death and those who persecute us today will be converted to the God of life'.¹⁵ Hence the title of the document (which should be required reading for every pastor and congregation in Britain): *The Road to Damascus: Kairos and Conversion*.

Well, that rang a bell with me. I still possess a dog-eared copy of a specimen sermon I sent to Spurgeon's in 1948 to support my application. The text is Acts 26, 12-19. I had a good time with the theme of opening eyes and turning 'them' from darkness to light. But what if we ourselves are still as blind as bats? If we are the ones who by the criteria of Matthew 25 'know not the Saviour'? If we are the people who (even by silent complicity or default) live by oppression while our fellow-Christians die by it?

In 1992, Baptist Missionary Society will be celebrating two hundred years since William Carey and his colleagues founded the BMS. Well, good, there is much to celebrate. But by one of those odd quirks of history, 1992 marks another momentous anniversary: five hundred years since Columbus 'discovered' America. Latin Americans date the beginning of modern history from then; but the indigenous peoples, who predated Columbus by more than a millenium, and their descendants have good cause to question the celebration. Discovery and conquest brought in their wake wholesale slaughter of innocent people, the uprooting and enslavement of

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millions, and the plunder of their land and resources. These days the Spanish soldiers and Portuguese traders have been largely replaced by American military advisers, British bankers and European transnational executives; but the effects are roughly the same. On this twin anniversary, British Baptists could do worse than dedicate our half-inch worth, even at the expense of transferring resources from Brazil and El Salvador, to a programme of political advocacy in the UK on behalf of Latin America. God knows, that is a big enough missionary task to be going on with.

NOTES

1. T. S. Elliot, *Four Quartets: Little Gidding*, line 240, Faber and Faber 1944.
2. G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Orbis 1973, SCM 1974.
3. J. L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, Orbis 1976, p.26.
4. J. Sobrino, *Companions of Jesus: The Murder and Martyrdom of the Salvadorean Jesuits*, CIIR Cafod Sciaf and Trocaire, 1990 (author's translation of previously unpublished text in Spanish).
5. An extended discussion of Basic Christian Communities can be found in S. Torres and J. Eagleson, *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, Orbis 1984. For a brief description, see D. Winter, *Communities of Freedom*, Christian Aid 1989.
6. See C. Rowland and M. Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*, SPCK 1990, p.35f.
7. Archbishop Romero, quoted in P. Galdamez, *Faith of a People: The Life of a Basic Christian Community in El Salvador*, Orbis Dove and CIIR 1986, p.46.
8. J. Sobrino, *op.cit.*
9. J. Sobrino, 'The Epiphany of the God of Life in Jesus of Nazareth', in *The Idols of Death and the God of Life*, Orbis 1983, p.70f.
10. I. Ellacuria, *Freedom Made Flesh: the Mission of Christ and his Church*, Orbis 1976, p.115.
11. J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, SCM 1978, p.xviii.
12. J. Sobrino, *ibid.*, p.95.
13. J. Sobrino, *ibid.*, p.50.
14. S. Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right*, Pluto 1989, p.16.
15. *The Road to Damascus: Kairos and Conversion*, CIIR Christian Aid and Center of Concern, 1989, p.27.

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