

DISCUSSION

Instruction on the “Theology of Liberation”: A Comment

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Immediate Reason: Latin America

More than any other, it is, without doubt, Latin American theological thought that was the immediate reason for the issuance of the “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’ ”, released on September 3, 1984, by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). For one thing, Latin America and its Theology of Liberation are specifically referred to a number of times in the document. But, perhaps more telling, is the fact that it is Latin American theologians of liberation who have recently come under scrutiny by church authorities. In a letter to the Brazilian Franciscan, Fr Leonardo Boff, for example, the Prefect of the CDF, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, some months prior to the release of the Instruction, invited him to Rome for “a conversation” together. The colloquy took place on September 7, with Cardinals Paulo Evaristo Arns and Aloisio Lorscheider of the Brazilian Episcopal Commission for the Doctrine of Faith in attendance in support of Fr Boff. The CDF had reservations about the theology of Fr Boff’s book *Church: Charism and Power*. Similarly, earlier in the year, the Peruvian bishops voted to establish a seven-bishop commission to begin a formal study of the writings of Peruvian Fr Gustavo Gutierrez, who is widely acknowledged as the “father” of Liberation Theology on account of his pioneering work in this area, *A Theology of Liberation*. Reportedly, on a recent extraordinary *ad limina* visit to Rome, September/October this year, the Peruvian bishops, led by Cardinal Juan Landazuri Ricketts of Lima, rejected a CDF draft-document condemning certain “erroneous opinions” of Fr Gutierrez’s theology. Instead, another document, more general and pastoral in tone, was adopted.

Nonetheless, the questions and concerns raised by the Instruction cannot be relegated to the Latin American theological scene alone. Clearly, the CDF's document has, as was intended, wider import than that. It makes it quite clear that the Theology of Liberation is not limited to Latin America, where it was born, but that it has spread to other areas of the Third World, and is espoused by some in the industrialised nations as well (III, p. 2). Moreover, towards the end of August, Pope John Paul II sent a message to the bishops of southern Africa meeting in Harare, August 22-28, reaffirming the solidarity of the church with the poor and oppressed. But he dissociated the church from any form of social analysis "based on class distinctions and class struggle". The Pope obviously had Liberation Theology in mind here. He was voicing and applying the same concerns, later elaborated by the Instruction, to Africa.

The Instruction: Basically Positive

Many reviews of the Instruction agree that it is a positive document, overall. Far from repudiating the Theology of Liberation *in toto*, as was hoped in some quarters, the Instruction endorses it. It spells out its purpose as not being a condemnation of those who speak and act on behalf of the poor, nor an endorsement of those who are indifferent to the plight of the oppressed (Introduction Section). Further, it is not meant as an approval of people or organisations which create poverty and/or benefit from it (XI, p. 1). On the contrary, the Instruction notes that the liberation theme is fundamentally biblical, and theologically valid: it has to do with the freedom of the people of God, and its practical realisation in society (II, p. 4). As such, the Instruction stresses in several places that liberation is a fundamental task of the church.

Prefaced on this central understanding, the document is intended as simply a warning against "deviations, and risks of deviation" in certain kinds of liberation theology. These dangers consist, according to the Instruction, in using "in an insufficiently critical manner, concepts borrowed from various currents of Marxist thought" (Introductory). Among these concepts, the Instruction is particularly

concerned about the understanding of personal sin, the use of Marxist social analysis, and the concept of class struggle in doing theology.

In the following lines, I would like to relate these concerns briefly to the African situation, specifically, the African Catholic theology of liberation.

Personal and Social Sin: Inseparable Reality

The Instruction points out the danger of being so preoccupied with social and structural sin as to virtually ignore the presence of personal sin. This is a critical mistake, the document notes, because personal sin in the heart of man is the cause, basis, and reason for socio-economic and politico-cultural alienation. For a humane order to exist in the actual structural-institutional spheres, which govern social life, it is the human heart that must be transformed (Introductory). To reverse this order, is to annihilate the transcendence of man as the basis of ethical value (IV, p. 15).

It is, indeed, reductionist, to ignore, relegate to the background, or deny the significance of personal sin in the process of conversion towards the full acceptance of salvation offered by Jesus Christ. The scriptures, and the various traditions of the church, are unequivocal in that respect. Yet, just as reductionist, would be to de-emphasise the significance of social sin, prioritisation between the two is theologically dangerous. In traditional Africa, as an instance, sin – whether it is an unconscious infringement of an interdict (or taboo), or a deliberate transgression of a clearly-defined ethical demand – has its manifestation and effects on society. Personal cleansing alone seldom suffices to regularise the relationship between God and man, without cleansing the whole society, which has been affected. And to be effective, the cleansing of society must ultimately include all members of that society. The scriptures seem to paint a similar picture: in true repentance, there must always be social evidence of personal reform.

The relationship is consequently integral: personal sin is as much a cause of social sin as social sin is of personal sin. It is hardly a question of which is prior or more fundamental here. The two are so

intrinsically related in actual life – “the condition of the world” – that it would be mechanistic to say that the one can effect authentic liberation without the other. To be sure, the transformation of social structures alone cannot bring about personal spiritual *metanoia*, but neither can personal transformation of the heart, in itself, bring about the transformation of sinful social structures. The biblical Exodus theme, so central to Liberation Theology, is properly not limited to either personal spiritual freedom alone, nor solely to freedom from social enslavement. It incorporates both into one authentic liberation. As the Instruction points out, one leads into the other, in a united progressive manner.

In Africa, for instance, where some important social institutions – in the economic and political spheres – have not yet solidified into a sort of “religion”, Catholic Liberation Theology could show the link between them and morality, in order to avoid the mistake so prevalent in other areas. There, it is asserted, that there is no relationship whatever between economics, for example, and ethics; that the political institutions, and economic conduct of individuals and nations are irrelevant or extraneous to salvation. To do this effectively, theology must give equal emphasis both to personal and social transformation.

Social Analysis: According to Karl Who?

Social transformation, which influences personal transformation, requires an understanding of the functioning of social structures and institutions, and how to change them. This understanding is provided by the science of what is now known as “social analysis”. The Instruction’s main warning in this area is that Marxist social analysis is so inimical to the faith and religion that it may in no way be used at the service of Catholic theology (Introductory). Further, since Marxist ideology is indivisible, “no separation of the parts of this epistemologically unique complex is possible. If one tries to take only one part, say the analysis, one ends up having to accept the entire ideology” (VII, p. 6). And the varieties of the ideology make little difference. Insofar as they are truly Marxist, they all end up in denying justice, freedom, and human dignity, through a policy of collectivisation (VII, p. 7).

For the theology of liberation in Africa, the problem here is extremely practical, and demands an unequivocal stance. The fact is that many African states, while refusing to accept wholesale Marxist ideology, have yet accepted the Marxist analysis of society on national and international levels. They see in this analysis, many contributions towards an awareness of the functioning of unjust structures. They recognise that social analysis does not create classes, status differentiation between people, racism, or sexism; it simply points out the existence of these realities. But, if Marxist theology is indivisible, and the use of one of its elements, such as its method of social analysis, inevitably leads to the embracing of the entire fateful system, then theology in Africa must be sincere, and speak out against such analysis on the basis that socio-political institutions and orientations have a lot to do with the Christian understanding of salvation.

But what is the real situation on the African scene? Apart from a few avowedly Marxist states, many African states profess and espouse a social philosophy generally known as African Socialism. Social analysis of the Marxist kind is a feature of many forms of African socialism. Yet, all things considered, neither Karl Marx, nor the communist system, matters very much to them, apart from this one element of analysis. In fact, most couldn't care less about the entire philosophical system of Marx, particularly as regards its crude atheism. What is important to them is the truth about their societies, and their struggle, from a position of weakness, for justice in a structurally-unjust world. They feel no obligation at all to Marx or his communist system.

There is an opportunity in Africa for theology to make use of social analysis without panic. Facing Africa are two great evil dragons waiting to swallow it, and social analysis may provide for theology a method of understanding and repelling them. These dragons are communism and liberalism. Communism is atheistic; liberalism not formally so. But the worship of money (mammon) that characterises liberalism, and excludes the supernatural, is no less atheistic. In the end, philosophical propaganda of party commissars is just as inimical to the church and religion as the practical atheism of the money-centred

“spirit of free enterprise” is to the faith. The threat in the former must not dull theological vigilance against the poison in the latter.

Class Struggle: A Reality to be Regulated

As has been mentioned, social analysis, even Marxist social analysis, does not create classes; it simply points out their existence. Nor does it create class struggle. It may not always be in the extreme form of blind violence, which (the Instruction is right) is one of the main faults of the Marxist system, because it encourages it (VIII, p. 6). But, even non-violent ways towards social justice (XI), are clearly indicative of class struggle, where “class” can mean unjust distribution of social, economic, cultural, or political power, resulting in one group of people dehumanising the other. Justice requires that the “battle (for it) be fought in ways consistent with human dignity” (XI, p. 7). But the battle must be *fought*. It requires techniques, tried plans, strategies, and political options to realise structural transformation towards justice. As D. C. Maguire notes in his “The Primacy of Justice in Moral Theology”, mere moralising is not enough:

In the social order, . . . talk of love and friendship can be a prescription for disaster. Justice is incipient love, and, in the political order, it is the only form that love takes. Privatistic talk of love is at that level unavailing, naïve, and ultra-conservative in effect. Ironically, love-talk in the social-political sphere provides an ideological veil for injustice, and inures one to the needs of the poor, for whom justice is life blood.

The recognition of the reality of “class” struggle in theology must not necessarily lead to the acceptance of “blind” violence as a means towards justice. On the contrary, such recognition may help to prevent violence by deliberately conducting the struggle for justice in more human and humane channels of “dialogue and persuasion”, wherever possible. To deny the reality of class struggle does not mean that it does not exist in situations of gross socio-economic differentiation. It would be good for theology in Africa not to ignore this fact.

Conclusion: the Instruction as a Service to Theology

For Liberation Theology in Africa, therefore, the Instruction is of profound value. It raises important questions of immediate practical consequence to the situation in the Continent that theology must consider. It makes necessary a study and clarification of certain elements of theological thought that might have been taken for granted hitherto. For these and other reasons, the Instruction is indeed a document of great service to doing theology in Africa today.