

BOOK REVIEWS

The Silencing of Leonardo Boff, by Harvey Cox, Oak Park IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988, US\$9.95.

Harvey Cox will probably score another major success with *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff*. As, in his famous work of the 1960s, *The Secular City*, Cox writes fluently, and never asks his readers to accept an unusual point of view, or an unfashionable opinion. He describes the events of 1986 (when the Brazilian Franciscan, Fr Leonardo Boff, was asked by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to undertake a period of silence), with an attempt at fairness, but it is obvious where his sympathies lie. He gives us a good old-fashioned story, with a hero, and a villain. Boff is the hero, valiantly struggling for the right of the local churches to develop their own theologies, and incarnate the gospel in their own culture. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger is the villain, busy seeking to retain Rome's control over the church, and over all forms of theological expression.

A careful reader of Cox's own text, might wonder whether the issue is really so simple. It is notable that the proponents of liberation theology seek recognition beyond the bounds of South America. We are told, for example, that Boff praised the Vatican's second statement on liberation theology as "giving a universal significance to values that were those only of the Third World" (page 7).

Boff shows good judgment in seeking recognition beyond the confines of his own religion. My own experience at the Lambeth Conference, and elsewhere, has been that Western liberals are always ready to invoke "pluralism", when they do not want to have to assimilate insights from other parts of the world. However, if liberation theology has a message for the universal church (and I believe it has), then its advocates will have to be ready for critical scrutiny from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and elsewhere as well.

Actually, Cardinal Ratzinger make a good point when he asks how far liberation theology really is a product of Latin America, and how far it is a European import. He is able to show that Boff, himself, relies a good deal

on European theologians, and then there is a figure of Karl Marx, whose influence on liberation theology cannot be denied, even if it is sometimes exaggerated. For Cox to reply to all this, by saying that Ratzinger quotes Hans Kung, is no answer to the criticism. After all, Ratzinger does this, because he is conducting a debate with a major theological figure in his own culture.

Reading Cox's book, made me wonder how he, and other Western liberals, can also be blind to the contradictions in their own position. He claims to be on the side of what he sees as genuine Catholicity and cultural pluralism in the church, but what happens when people from a non-Western culture challenge the dearly held tenets of the liberal creed? Take the question of women in the church, for example. For Cox, and those who think like him, there can be no two opinions about this. Role differentiation means inequality. It cannot be tolerated. The current liberal North American view of what constitutes a desirable relationship between the sexes must be imposed on the rest of humanity, with as much fervour as once led missionaries to clothe women in Mother Hubbards, or to try to wipe out polygamy. So we are told that "men still subject women to an under-caste in most parts of the world, by appealing to traditional definition of womanhood, many of them sanctioned by religion". Here is the modern inquisitor ready to get to work, and detect the sexist heresy, wherever it be lurking!

I read Dr Cox's book while on patrol, visiting Anglican congregations in the mountains of Madang Province. As I turned the pages, I marvelled at the facility of his style, but wondered how far he, himself, is really ready to pass over into a different culture. He certainly helps us to focus on what is, perhaps, the key question for the church in our time: how far can the gospel be incarnated in different worldviews, and still retain a universal cohesion? For what it is worth, my assessment would be that Cardinal Ratzinger has a more-profound grasp of the issues at stake than either Fr Boff or Dr Cox.

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