

Did Liberation Theology Collapse with the Berlin Wall?

FREI BETTO

For critics of liberation theology, the fall of the Berlin Wall also meant the end of that theology which had sprung up in Latin America some 25 years earlier. They claim that in using Marxist theory to analyse society – which put socialism on a utopian par with the cause of liberation – that theology ‘ideologised’ itself to such a degree that, when socialism collapsed in Eastern Europe, it lost all credibility as a symbol of hope for the poor – and hence as a legitimate reflection on the divine mystery within Catholic doctrine.

To be quite objective, we must not forget what the essential nature of theological discourse is. Even though the language it uses is characterised by ideological presuppositions – which are proof of its incarnation and hence its evangelising nature – the discourse itself is not confined to the place and time of which it is a product, even though of course it cannot dispense with these elements. In its intrinsic references to the Bible (a source which comes from divine revelation), to Christian tradition (a source which comes from the people of God) and to the *magisterium* of the church (a source which comes from the institutional framework of the church community) it transcends the context which produced it. As a result it brings a prophetic weight to bear on this context. And this makes it possible to differentiate between doctrine and ideological presupposition in papal pronouncements without running the risk of declaring them invalid because, in the course of history, they have occasionally lacked respect for human rights, justified the use of torture, sanctioned colonial enterprise, condemned progress – to give but a few examples. Contemporary critiques of platonism do not detract from the theology of St Augustine any more than the disappearance of monarchies invalidates that of St Thomas Aquinas. So insisting on an intimate connection between liberation theology and stalinist or state socialism means, if nothing else, making an epistemological premise out of cynical rationality.

The distinguishing features of liberation theology are not its critical analysis of capitalist society or the fact that it emphasises certain social achievements in socialist countries as being close to gospel ideals. What distinguishes it is its method: it reflects the faith of the poor and starts from the standpoint of the poor as a historical subject and as the real focus of the gospels. This sets it apart from other theological trends, especially ones which tend to reduce the three sources of theology referred to earlier to two – because they approach tradition strictly along the lines of the ecclesiastical *magisterium*. If such confusion were to become prevalent, it would grow difficult to explain to loyal Catholics, for example, the history of Marian doctrine in which the faith of the people of God preceded the judgment of the *magisterium*.

‘Poor’ is a biblical term which takes in all men and women who are, in one way or another, cut off from the benefits, both material and symbolic, which are vital to human dignity understood as the individual and collective right to seek well-being.

One has only to open the Gospels to see how Jesus put himself in the place of the poor, without for all that falling into the trap of the kind of solidarity which makes poverty something sacred in itself. He did the opposite: he sought to bring the poor from the edge of things into the centre, from being marginalised to winning their rights, from sickness to healing, from hunger to bread, from sadness to joy, from error to pardon, from sin to grace, from death to life. While liberation theology considers the poor also to be the subject of theological production (see Matt. 11:25–27), it is not afraid – in line with the practices of Jesus – to underline the fact that poverty is an evil in the sight of God. So poverty is a manifest sign that the Creator's original scheme was flawed by man's sin. In other words, as Jesus clearly showed when he said that a person who was born blind was not blind through the will of God, as the Pharisees claimed (John 9), poverty has structural causes. This means, strictly speaking, that there are no poor people, only impoverished people (because no one would choose to be poor and those who are would like to live better). The 'impoverished' people have seen their fundamental rights unlawfully removed by social relations of injustice and oppression, as the Church Fathers have said repeatedly. But when liberation theology calls the poor oppressed, cynical rationality cries to heaven, denouncing it as pure political ideology. This all begs the question as to where the writers of the Bible – and Jesus himself – got such expressions as Kingdom, Gospel, minister, church, not to mention titles like Sovereign Pontiff, Christ the King, Queen of Heaven, and so on.

To suppose that liberation theology is simply left-wing theologians being political is, at the very least, to ignore what there is for ideology to do in a situation of oppression where poverty is the principal experience of all. What does it mean to talk about God in that sort of situation? Must one lie by saying that God accepts that situation? Liberation theology was not born behind the closed ecclesiastical doors of seminaries or universities but in church-based communities and in pastoral movements which bring together the faithful among ordinary people. In the face of all the difficulties they meet in life, they ask themselves what God wants. 'God is our refuge and our strength', they echo with the psalmist (Ps. 46:2). In looking for 'signs of the times', they establish links between faith and politics, between the values of the Gospel and the challenges of real life, between liturgy and festival: this is a theological methodology which is taken up and systematised by theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff and Elsa Tamez. But the systematising takes place only if the theologian participates with the people of God in pastoral and popular movements.

The 'Victory' of Market Forces

Liberation theology might be at crisis-point if the social conditions which engendered it were well and truly over. But it has to state its theme again and again without there being any solution: it does not claim that liberation is any simple formula for curing chronic social problems. In liberation theology the liberation process implies, without dualism, 'our bread' and 'our Father'. One has only to look at who has produced spiritual writings in Latin America over the past 15 years. Arturo Paoli, Segundo Galilea, G. Gutiérrez, Pablo Richard, J.-B. Libânio, C. Mesters, R. Vidales, the Boff brothers, Jon Sobrino, Maria Clara Bingemer, R. Muñoz and so many others who have written on prayer, contemplation, religious life, eschatology and the liturgy are all liberation theologians. If liberation theology were a simple exaltation of actual socialism, it might well be at crisis-point like neoliberal European theology which – having lost its reference to the world of the poor – regards modernity from a Nietzschean standpoint and no longer knows to whom it ought to be speaking. All this is an

indication that shortly Eastern European theology will also run into problems: out of a critique of socialism it makes an apology for the liberty available in capitalist countries. The wave of thirst for consumerism, bringing with it the reintroduction of social inequality and permissiveness, is already beginning to frighten those who have always believed the West to be Christian.

If it is true that socialism has collapsed in Eastern Europe, it is also necessary to remember that capitalism has always suffered from a chronic lack of self-sufficiency through its incapacity to respond to social demands. By nature, capitalism is inegalitarian and exclusive and tends to concentrate its resources. Each rich capitalist country is the product of at least 20 poor satellite countries. Only those who ignore how apparently international institutions like the IMF, the World Bank, the OCED or the Club of Paris actually work are still naive enough to believe that there exists such a thing as aid for the development of needy nations which is disinterested or sincerely interested. Nowadays, foreign debt obliges the poor to give their rich creditors even what they do not have. Since the Japanese phenomenon, the exclusive club of the rich has not been prepared to admit new members. The internationalising of the economy means that competition is reduced to the minimum, giving place to the dictatorship of cartels which, by means of multinational enterprises, impose prices and conditions.

The 'victory' of the free market which is so lauded is nothing but a smokescreen which serves to verify utopias, reinforce the hegemony of the capitalist powers and transform into a categorical imperative the liberal criterion which associates liberty and happiness with consumerism. In the past ten years the poor have become even more poor. Today, of some 17 billion dollars of world indebtedness nearly half finds itself in the hands of only seven countries. In the light of faith, it is disturbing to realise that important sectors of the Catholic Church are not opposed to neoliberalism and even accept its politics, which takes for granted that the reinforcing of institutions – including church ones – has priority over the defence of the rights of the poor. When they seek political reform they do not add the need for economic transformation which will ensure the elementary right to biological survival. This shows that these reforms, under the pretext of bringing democracy, have as their sole objective the introduction of the free market; in other words, the total freedom and supremacy of private capital.

Liberation theology has not been buried under the Berlin Wall because it has never allied itself to a specific or partisan project which might have been taken wholly to encapsulate its theme. Nevertheless, it is delighted when it does discover evangelical signs in specific political projects in the sphere of the supremacy of the worker over capital and of life over death. One only has to be familiar with the writings of liberation theologians to ascertain how critical it has been of the deviations which brought Eastern European socialism to failure. What it has always emphasised, as its ethical duty, are the social victories in countries which have succeeded in rooting out pockets of misery and the dead structures which predominate to such a great degree in Christian countries which are integrated into the capitalist system. The Christian utopia expresses itself in human categories – that is to say, political and historical. The central concept of the divine revelation in Jesus and of the evangelising mission of the church – the Kingdom of God – is, as we have already noted, a political concept. But it is not a scheme which realises itself entirely in the political sphere because it is a gift of God which, already present in this world, transcends a reality built by human endeavour. Concern not to revive an ambiguous medieval identification of the Kingdom with one or other model of society has not led liberation theology to the other extreme of spiritualising the content of the Gospel message so that it loses all its prophetic power. The endpoint of this latter process is that the message is transformed

into a simple legitimising of corporate and institutional interests which coexist trouble-free with an unjust and egalitarian social order.

As an expression of the way in which the poor experience and understand the Christian faith, liberation theology insists on the supremacy of the gift of life, above all in a context in which oppression produces so many kinds of death. Liberation theology is also opposed to those who would empty of its content the theological gift of hope as they proclaim 'the end of history', as if the future could be approached as a simple extension of the present. Affirming the Christian faith as good news for the poor is the supreme sign of the faithfulness of the church to Jesus Christ and a sufficient criterion for sorting out who is close to the Gospel message and who is distanced from it.

Pressures from Rome

If certain sectors of liberation theology are retreating back on themselves today, it is not because of the fall of the Berlin Wall, even if this fall does give serious food for thought to people (Christian or not) who are looking for an alternative model of society. The reason for the retreat is pressure coming from the centre of power in the Catholic Church, pressure which actively favours the restoration of institutional hegemony to the detriment of local churches, the advances introduced by the Second Vatican Council and inculturated evangelisation. In the past ten years, besides the warnings formulated by Cardinal Ratzinger in two *Instructions*, certain theologians have received reprimands and censure, without, however, any evidence being adduced from their works of any doctrinal formulations contrary to Roman orthodoxy. This, alas, makes for a curious situation: liberation theology is accused of being ideological and, at the same time, ideological criticisms are levelled against it without consistent doctrinal foundation.

The corpus of theological works in the field of liberation theology – the first volumes of which were published simultaneously in several languages – now finds itself in a tight corner. Certain dioceses have forbidden Catholic editors to allow publication and Rome has tightened up on the criteria for the granting of an '*imprimatur*': new writings are to be judged more stringently than before. These developments point to something more profound: a confrontation between two different conceptions of the church. On the one side we have a hierarchically centralised model, reproduced worldwide, which turns to the poor to help them; on the other, a model based on 'communion and participation' (Puebla), inculturated, immersed in the effort to liberate the poor and, like the primitive church, having the same face as the faithful who integrate it into each nation or ethnic group.

Even if that opposition did not exist and if liberation theology were to remain totally silent, there are questions which weigh heavily on the power of Rome as a result of the new international configuration. The cultural factor in Africa, Asia and Latin America cannot be ignored. The need for a contemporary moral theology is urgent. The progress of biogenetics, the transnationalism of the economy, the misery which affects more than half the population of the planet – all these pose questions. Even the new democratic winds which are blowing cannot but call into question the imperial profile which the Catholic Church has adopted since the fourth century. And for good measure there are certain polemical issues which even the 1990 Synod did not succeed in avoiding: the celibacy of priests and the ordination of women.

In their effort to address cultural values without leaving their structural and historical roots, certain ecclesiastical sectors seem not to wish to step into the present

day. They still cannot get used to the fact that the faithful – poor, lacking education, driven by the wisdom of life and of the spirit – share in the life of the church and in theological debate with a love which is no less critical for being authentic. For the man who lives in a closed institution – which bears resemblance to the former communist parties of Eastern Europe – the light of day is always uncomfortable. It has turned out that the world has become a small village – what happens in Kuwait affects the life of people in Argentina, Canada or Polynesia – where it is no longer possible to put up iron or bamboo curtains which prevent the media getting through. To paraphrase the gospel, one can say that now the house no longer has a roof; the electronic eye captures everything and socialises information – even information from within ecclesiastical spheres. There is also another factor which might escape someone who was looking at the balance of power: the international hegemony of Christianity is tending to weaken in the face of the growth of other religions – except in Latin America where 50 per cent of the total number of Catholics in the world will be living by the year 2000. The great religions like Buddhism and Islam are ceasing to be regional or ethnic and are rapidly becoming inculturated everywhere. In addition to this, two recent trends are emerging: the growth of autonomous religious movements – not linked to historical traditions, easily adaptable to the customs and the culture of new initiates – and the syncretism of the young, who draw from each religious trend one or more strands in order to make up their own model of spiritual life.

The New Challenges

There is no doubt though that besides intra-ecclesial pressures liberation theology today is having to face up to new and difficult challenges.

- 1 Its liberating utopia needs to translate itself into feasible ‘topias’, realisable in the world of the poor as a condition for new roads to social transformation. In reality, nothing indicates that revolutions, understood as the violent destruction of the state, are going to occur with the same frequency as in the past. In this context, it would be better to work through instruments of ‘socio-analytic mediation’, like popular, trade union and political movements. This includes the need for ‘pastoral work in the political sphere’.
- 2 If all liberation processes presuppose a progressive conquest of hegemonical positions, one cannot ignore interaction between different sectors of society which in one way or another influence the political self-expression of ordinary people. Serious thought has therefore to be given to pastoral work among sectors of the middle class, among intellectuals, artists, scientists, formers of public opinion. ‘Basism’ tends to isolate pastoral work among the people and liberation theology.
- 3 Ecological questions are the order of the day. To ignore these questions is simply to fall in with the romantic and fundamentalist manner in which governments, industry and the media tackle them. Uncompromising work for the preservation of the natural world ought not to lead to the type of deification of nature which mobilises multitudes of people to ensure the survival of whales and forests while quite forgetting the millions of human beings whose lives are threatened by famine in the Third World. An ecology which embraces all things – and which does not, therefore, separate man from nature – will have unmistakable liberating consequences.
- 4 The emphasis which liberation theology has placed on social morality should be

extended to personal morality. The question of subjectivity and ethics is central to the analysis of the crisis of socialism. Besides, there is a whole gamut of new situations in sexual morality which theology needs to address squarely. These include homosexuality, abortion, extramarital relations, prostitution and even the theology of marriage.

- 5 In its analytical work, liberation theology must take care not to remain in thrall to the concept of social classes. There are realities like women, children, blacks and indigenous peoples which require a different approach. One can no longer talk of evangelisation without carefully tackling the question of inculturation.
- 6 Increasingly rapid progress at the sharp end of technology and scientific research – from information technology to astrophysics – means new presuppositions and new horizons in the theological debate. There are no longer subjects in the First World which do not have a bearing on the Third World. Interaction, in all fields of learning and practical activity, is increasing all the time, shaping a new epistemology.
- 7 The crisis of socialism presents theology with the ethical duty of saving the hope of the poor. We must delve more deeply into the question of socialism and the search for alternative models, putting the emphasis on the idolatrous presuppositions which govern the laws of the market just as much as they govern the centralised power of the state. The question of democracy should never leave to one side the economic mechanisms which directly affect the quality of life of the population. It is vital to reevaluate the methodology of mass education in impoverished sections of society.
- 8 Finally, theological debate on the church must continue, especially in the present situation where the restoration of Eurocentrism coincides with the experience of a vigorous shared community role in church life on the part of the poor. The theology of the ministry must be brought up to date again. In particular, canon law and the primacy of Peter deserve deeper theological analysis.

(Translated from the French by Anne Walters.)