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Introduction: the challenge of liberation theology

Since 1968, when Latin America's Catholic Church began to question the miserable conditions in which two thirds of the people live, over 850 priests, nuns, and bishops have been arrested, tortured, murdered, or expelled, and thousands of the Catholic laity have been jailed and killed. 'Nowadays it is dangerous . . . and practically illegal to be an authentic Christian in Latin America', said Salvadorean Jesuit Rutilio Grande a month before he was shot dead by right-wing assassins in El Salvador. Two months later, in May 1977, a second Salvadorean priest, Alfonso Navarro Oviedo, was murdered in his home by a right-wing vigilante group that threatened to massacre all the Jesuits in the country. But, unlike the Catholic churches in Franco's Spain and Hitler's Germany, Latin America's bishops and priests will not be cowed. 'We will eat dirt before we betray our people', said Paraguay's Bishop Anibal Maricevich.¹

The witness of some parts of the church against poverty, oppression and totalitarianism in Latin America over the last thirty years has been deeply impressive. In a continent marked by extremes of poverty and wealth (the latter to be found in the pockets of a tiny minority), Christian religious and lay people have added their own blood and suffering to that of the poor and oppressed. The church, particularly the Catholic Church, is experiencing ongoing martyrdom for the sake of the liberation of the people.²

¹ Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, p. 13.

² 'Over the past twenty years the victims of oppression have grown astronomically in Latin America, in the face of staggering inflation, cutbacks in public programs,

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The theology of liberation (or liberation theology, as it is more commonly known) which has accompanied the church's costly contribution to social justice is equally impressive. It is committed to concrete involvement in the process of social and political liberation in Latin America (many liberation theologians live and work amongst the poor and only write and lecture as a part-time secondary activity). It is practical, contextual, and action-guiding, not remote, theoretical, and academic. It is often closely related to the life and work of the community of faith. It is intellectually innovative and rigorous in terms both of method and content. It is comprehensive, systematic, and lively, continuing to evolve and develop despite physical threats against its proponents' lives, and ecclesiastical threats of censorship to their intellects.³

Liberation theology is now enormously influential as a well-spring of theologies throughout the world and shows no signs of depletion or diminution after 30 years. It is here to stay:

Liberation theologies can no longer be disregarded as minor religious movements. On the contrary, they are becoming the point of reference for all other discourse about God and religion. This is because liberation theologians are posing everywhere, in many languages and modes of expression, that eternal question which we believe is *the* biblical question: What are we doing for the children of God who are left in our care, those among our sisters and brothers who are suffering unjustly and dying before their time?⁴

capital flight, environmental destruction, and the effects of runaway debt. There are beneficiaries of these conditions – the international banking system, multinational corporations, and the most competitive sectors of the national business communities. But in the meantime, the number of children irreversibly damaged by malnutrition – or simply killed – are [*sic*] on the rise. Too many people are “dying before their time” (Otto Maduro, ‘Introduction’ in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, eds., *The Future of Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989, p. xvi).

³ Compare Richard's judgement on traditional European-originated theology: ‘Traditional theology is a theology that becomes more repetitive every day. It is empty, feeble, lacking in significance and – why not say so? – boring. It is a science cultivated in closed elitist academies. The world is not interested in this theology, and neither is this theology interested in the world. The cause of its sterility is that *the dominant theology has no spirituality, no God, and does not communicate God's word*. It is a theology confused by idolatry. Often it is a theology of death’ (Pablo Richard, ‘Liberation theology: a difficult but possible future’ in Ellis and Maduro, eds., *Future of Liberation Theology*, p. 503. Emphasis original.).

⁴ Otto Maduro, ‘Introduction’ in Ellis and Maduro, eds., *Future of Liberation Theology*, p. xvi. For more on different types of liberation and Third World Theologies see, for example, further essays in this volume and Alistair Kee, ed., *A Reader in Political*

Liberation theology as a literary genre is popular in Western capitalist democracies like Britain and the USA. Many hundreds of works have now been translated and continue to be published in English.⁵ Clearly, liberation theology strikes a chord in the hearts and minds of Christians living in very different circumstances from those in which it originated.

Having said this, however, the adoption and development of positive responses to this theology has been subdued in Europe and North America. While a number of theologians, particularly in late 1970s and early 1980s, engaged in a constructive dialogue with liberation theology and it has attracted some critical attention, for the most part liberation theology has not flowered amongst Christians in the Northern hemisphere.^{6,7} There have been some notable attempts to apply aspects of liberation theology such as the Methodist Mission Alongside the Poor. It is arguable, too, that its existence may have broadened the horizons of church responses on issues such as the inner city and unemployment as well as informing aspects of Christian women's struggle for liberation.⁸ However, liberation theology has remained somewhat esoteric and book-fast.

Despite a decade in which the gap between rich and poor in

Theology. London: SCM Press, 1974; *The Scope of Political Theology*. London: SCM Press, 1978.

⁵ The main publishers of liberation theology in English translation are Orbis books in the USA and SCM Press in the UK. A new series of books by prominent liberation theologians, 'Liberation and Theology', has been inaugurated by Burns and Oates (1987–). Only relatively few of the most fundamental foundational works of liberation theology will be alluded to in depth here, such is the scope of liberation theology now.

⁶ For positive responses in the Northern hemisphere to liberation theology see, for example, Rex Ambler and David Haslam, eds., *Agenda for Prophets*. London: Bowerdean, 1980; Duncan Forrester, *Theology and Politics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988; Laurie Green, *Power to the Powerless*. Basingstoke: Marshall Pickering, 1987; *Let's Do Theology*. London: Mowbray, 1990; Michael Paget-Wilkes, *Poverty, Revolution and the Church*. Exeter: Paternoster, 1981; Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis*. London: SPCK, 1990; David Sheppard, *Bias to the Poor*. Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983; Dorothee Sölle, *Choosing Life*. London: SCM Press, 1981; John J. Vincent, *Starting All Over Again*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981.

⁷ For critical material on liberation theology see, for example, Alistair Kee, *Domination or Liberation?* London: SCM Press, 1986; *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*. London: SCM Press, 1990; Brian Mahan and L. Dale Rechesin, eds., *The Challenge of Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981; Edward Norman, *Christianity and the World Order*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

⁸ Cf. *Faith in the City*. London: Church House Publishing, 1985.

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British and North American society has actually grown under right-wing governments, liberation theology is not widely perceived to have very much to offer Christians in advanced capitalist societies, either in theory or in practice.⁹ It is revered for its provenance and scholarly voluminosity, suspected for its supposed tutelage to Marxism, and ultimately dismissed as a marginal curiosity. It now faces the final emasculation of being academically studied and examined amidst other contemporary theologies at expensive and elitist Western universities. A strange fate for a theology which one of its main originators asserts is 'rooted in revolutionary militancy'¹⁰

Liberation theology can be inspected and admired from afar as a fine, alien, and curious literary edifice, or it can be put to work. The latter is the intention here. Liberation theology has not been adequately attended to in the affluent countries of the Northern hemisphere, although it has substantial relevance here as well as in Latin America. That relevance needs to be exposed and explored – it is not simply apparent. An uncritical application of liberation theology without regard to difference of context would not be either relevant or faithful to this deeply contextualised theology. One place in which it can be explored in a fruitful way is in the practice and theory of pastoral care. Moreover, pastoral care in the Northern hemisphere is not only an activity in which it is appropriate to explore the relevance of liberation theology: it also badly needs the challenge of some of the insights and methods of liberation theology.

It is appropriate to examine the relevance of liberation theology to pastoral care for two main reasons. First, both pastoral care and liberation theology share a common concern for people's well being and flourishing. Secondly, both are broadly focussed on the actual practice of increasing human flourishing. One can therefore minimally assume that there

⁹ Britain has an increasingly economically unjust, unequal society. 1988 saw the greatest rise in the gap between rich and poor for any single year in the last 200 years according to the leading authority on poverty, Peter Townsend. See further Carey Oppenheim, *Poverty: The Facts*. London: Child Poverty Action Group, 1990.

¹⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*. London: SCM Press, 1983, p. 205.

are, or should be, areas of common concern which will profit from intensive critical dialogue and examination. But more than this, pastoral care actually needs the method and critique which liberation theology provides.

There are four main reasons for attempting to challenge pastoral care from the perspective of the insights and methods of liberation theology. First, while pastoral care is concerned with the totality of human well being, it mostly ignores social and political aspects which impinge on this area. The focus of modern pastoral care theory and practice has been arbitrarily and narrowly on the individual. Arguably, social injustice and inequality must be central themes in any discussion of general human welfare. They have received scant attention in contemporary pastoral care.¹¹ Practically, this means that, at best, pastoral care is myopic. At worst, it colludes with forces of sin, sorrow, and injustice which prevent people realising their human potential. Liberation theology challenges pastoral care to become aware of its arbitrary limitations and its involvement in the structures of injustice, in the interests of pursuing wider social and political practice in the cause of human flourishing and liberation.

Secondly, such theories and techniques which have informed contemporary pastoral care have tended to be drawn from one major domain, that of humanistic psychology.¹² While pastoral care has been committed to setting people free from the chains which bind them, these chains have been seen as essentially psychological, and so individual. The theoretical domains of sociology, politics, and social policy have not informed pastoral practice to any great extent. Again, this has had a narrowing, distorting, and possibly harmful effect in the quest for human well being. Liberation theology challenges pastoral care to broaden its scope and vision drawing on new domains of knowledge and theory.

Thirdly, pastoral care has found it difficult to develop

¹¹ For more detailed discussion of this see Stephen Pattison, *A Critique of Pastoral Care*. London: SCM Press, 1988, chs 1, 2, and 5. Peter Selby, *Liberating God*. London: SPCK, 1983 is still the main work on this aspect of pastoral care published in the UK.

¹² See Pattison, *Critique*, chs. 2 and 5, for critical discussion of this.

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critical theories of action. Theological education still tends towards the narrowly academic; connections between this and actual practice are frequently not explored. The consequence is that pastoral or practical theology is thought of as something of a second rate after-thought, and pastoral carers find it difficult to reflect critically on their practice.¹³ Not surprisingly, this often results in a kind of 'pastoral pragmatism' whereby people do what seems most obvious to them to do, and systematically fail to interrogate and change their way of acting. Emphasising liberating praxis, liberation theology challenges pastoral care to develop new practice-focussed critical methods of engagement with its task.

Finally, pastoral care has largely failed to engage creatively with contemporary trends in theology. Despite efforts in the USA by a number of pastoral theologians, pastoral care often remains divorced from theology and is not perceived to have much to contribute to it.¹⁴ Liberation theology's assertion, that action is the starting place for worthwhile theological reflection and activity, challenges pastoral care to develop and assert its own importance within the life of the church and the generation of theological insights.

Put in this way, the challenge of liberation theology for pastoral care may sound abstract and somewhat remote. Putting it more concretely, however, my thesis is that pastoral care in the Northern hemisphere needs both to be liberated from some of its own practical and theoretical limitations and narrownesses, and to become socially and politically aware and committed to the cause of those who are oppressed. It is by

¹³ See further Paul Ballard, ed., *The Foundations of Pastoral Studies and Practical Theology*. Cardiff: Faculty of Theology, 1986; Don S. Browning, ed., *Practical Theology*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983; Michael Northcott, 'The case study method in theological education', *Contact* 103, 1990, 26–32; Stephen Pattison, 'Some straw for the bricks: a basic introduction to theological reflection', *Contact* 99, 1989, 2–9; Simon Robinson, 'Mechanisms in aiding theological reflection', *Contact* 102, 1990, 23–8; Michael H. Taylor, *Learning to Care*, London: SPCK, 1983.

¹⁴ See, for example, Don S. Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983; *A Fundamental Practical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991; Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1958; Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983. Wesley Carr, *The Pastor as Theologian*. London: SPCK, 1989 is a British attempt to bridge the gap between theology and pastoral care.

looking at the practicalities of performing the latter aspect of the task that the former will be thrown into relief.

An encounter between liberation theology and the theory and practice of pastoral care will be illuminating and transforming. But this encounter must be managed and structured if it is to be meaningful.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

I shall assume that the reader of this work is someone who is interested in pastoral, or any kind of care, and who has some desire to learn more about, and use, liberation theology. I first encountered liberation theology when I was working as the part-time chaplain of a psychiatric hospital. The nature of this kind of publication makes it likely that many of my readers will be, like myself, white, middle class, reasonably affluent and probably conventionally educated and trained within a patriarchal environment. The basic question which underlies this work is, in what ways can liberation theology illuminate and challenge my concerns and practice in pastoral care? In trying to answer this question, I shall proceed in the following manner.

Liberation theology is diverse and pluriform with a huge literature now published in English. The purpose of the chapters in the first part of this book is therefore to outline something of the background and nature of liberation theology, as well as some of its main features. These chapters will give a broad critical account of the nature and method of liberation theology as a whole, orienting the reader in this field.

The final chapter in the first part inquires into what can be learned from liberation theology, and which of its methods and insights might most usefully be deployed in attempting to construct a critique of pastoral care. I will examine some of the objections to, and difficulties in, trying to relate this distinctively Latin American theology to pastoral care in advanced capitalist democracies like Britain, the USA, and Canada. Finally, a practical integrating and structuring methodological spiral which organises the use of the insights of liberation

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theology in pastoral care will be outlined. This determines the shape of the rest of the book.

The encounter with liberation theology suggests that pastoral care may have been myopic about its socio-political context, implications and biases. It has failed to recognise oppression and to analyse pastoral situations in terms of injustice and conflict of interest. A practical reorientation of pastoral care theory and practice requires recognition of this. The chapters in the second part of the book, The socio-political context of pastoral care, exemplify the analysis needed to begin to answer the questions, who are the oppressed, or the poor, how are they oppressed, what is the place of pastoral care in their oppression, and how can they be liberated? A social and political analysis of pastoral care with mentally ill people is undertaken with these fundamental questions in mind.

Mentally ill people may be perceived to be a tiny minority group whose troubles and oppression are essentially in their own minds. In fact, about one in ten people in Britain are diagnosed as clinically mentally ill at some point in their lives. The chapters dealing with their situation will show that, as a group, they are literally and metaphorically amongst the poorest and most oppressed in our society. Historically, they have been marginalised and poorly treated. They have had few choices or options. They have been allowed few resources of any kind and within the state health care system they have been deprived of facilities, abused and neglected. Community care promises little amelioration of this situation.

Arising from the analysis of the social and political context of mentally ill people is the question, 'does pastoral care with mentally ill people recognise this situation and attempt to "set the captives free", or does it tend to be blind to, or even collude with, the forces of oppression?' A detailed analysis of pastoral care with mentally ill people therefore forms the first section of the last part of the book, The politics of pastoral care. This analysis goes beyond the situation of mentally ill people, however, to pose questions concerning the politics of pastoral care in general. The need for a socio-politically aware and committed pastoral care is established, and principles for

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undertaking this are outlined in the penultimate chapter. These will help pastoral carers to reorient themselves if they wish to embody commitment to justice and liberation in their work. The final chapter extends and interrogates the relevance of these suggestions in relation to pastoral care with women. Women are not a minority group in our society – yet there are good reasons for thinking that they, too, have been oppressed. Lest it should be thought that liberation is only required by minorities, and that the liberationist perspective is only applicable in extreme, marginal situations of pastoral practice, this chapter examines the situation of women and how pastoral care interacts with their quest to attain their full potential.

AIMS AND HOPES

By the end of the book a number of things will have been accomplished. First, it will be seen that liberation theology presents a real challenge to the theory and practice of pastoral care in the Northern hemisphere. Secondly, it will be recognised that it is possible to use some of the insights and methods of liberation theology with integrity to illuminate and transform pastoral practice in our own context. Thirdly, readers will be conscious of the ways in which pastoral care can collude with structures of injustice and oppression. Fourthly, they will have some knowledge of the analytic tools, methods and processes needed to uncover these structures. Lastly, and most important of all, the book will hopefully have succeeded in convincing them that their own practice of pastoral care must become more socio-politically aware and committed to the liberation of the oppressed, as a matter of priority and urgency.

CRITICAL LIMITATIONS

Having outlined a structure and stated my aims and hopes, it is necessary to highlight some further features of the book. First, it is mainly a critique of present pastoral practice offering a preface to liberating pastoral care. Ceasing to do evil, or becoming more aware of the negative implications of one's

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actions, is actually an important preliminary to positive reconstruction and reorientation. It is a valuable ground-clearing exercise to clarify the socio-political implications and context of pastoral care as a prelude to engaging in socio-political aware and committed pastoral action.

To those who believe that if an activity is criticised it should only be done in the light of a developed positive alternative, the question may be put: do things which we come to understand as bad have to be immediately replaced? Does there have to be an alternative to slavery before we can work to abolish slavery? Does there have to be an alternative punishment for children in schools before we can call for an end to corporal punishment?¹⁵ It is progress in itself if aspects of pastoral care are recognised as being oppressive and negative in their effects, and questioned without an immediate requirement for a better and more positive alternative, welcome though that would be. Critique is a positive contribution to pastoral care theory and practice, a staging post on the way to alternative constructive action.

My encounter with liberation theology has led me to become very aware of my own social and political position in society, and of the forces of injustice and oppression which I either resist or collude with in my pastoral practice. I believe that my action and choices are actively affected by this analysis and awareness, but in the end I have not become personally engaged in much overtly liberating activity of the kind practiced in Latin America. I remain a middle-class professional with the energy and facilities to write books. Some may feel frustrated both with my personal reaction to liberation theology, and with the fact that this book only begins to become involved with the liberation process which might produce, for example, interesting new theological insights out of liberating praxis. Others, however, may be reassured that they can learn from liberation theology without, in the first instance, selling all that they have to give to the poor, and adopting a completely new life style.

¹⁵ I have developed this from Jeffrey Masson, *Against Therapy*. London: Fontana, 1990, pp. 29–30.