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# Pro Rege

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Volume 8 | Number 1

Article 10

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September 1979

## Non-Systematic Theology

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### Recommended Citation

Van Dyke, Louis Y. (1979) "Non-Systematic Theology," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 8:  
No. 1, 43 - 44.

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# Incidentally

by James Koldenhoven

## Non-Systematic Theology

On June 19, 1979, Dr. Sidney H. Rooy, Professor of Church History at the Evangelical Faculty of Theology in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and teacher in the Seminary by Extension for church members and pastors, paid his second visit to the Dordt campus.\* His informal meeting with faculty members was centered around a definition and description of the concept of liberation theology.

Dr. Rooy's own perceptions of the problems extant in Latin American and possible solutions to those problems moved from a period during the early 1960s of what he called "innocence" to a keen awareness of the problems by the early 1970s. At first he refused to believe surfacing tales of torture and of political repression, but the irrefutable evidence of the poverty of Chilean immigrants around him and the political restiveness of university students

caused him to look more deeply into the matter. In sixteen Latin American countries, according to Dr. Rooy, the ruling elite usually consists of an oligarchy composed of the Roman Catholic Church, the army, business men and landholders which rules for its own interest and benefit. Under this arrangement, which is essentially a police state, the rich get richer while the poor, suffering from a rampaging inflation rate of 900% over the past four years, get poorer. The lower economic classes, for example, must spend 70% of their income just for food.

Dr. Rooy argued that liberation theology offers a dramatic answer to the problems of oppression. He emphasized that liberation theology is not systematic and that there is no real definition of the movement. People of differing theological positions hold certain views in common that bind them

together. Their mutual concern for the poor is a rallying point. Liberation theologians wish to work in strategic alliance in order to accomplish the tremendously difficult task of breaking the stranglehold of the rich over the poor. They wish to raise the consciousness of the oppressed and the exploited so that they are able to recognize who they are and what they ought to be, namely, creatures created in the image of God; that they have certain rights and responsibilities; and that they have a right to the earth's resources in order to fulfill those rights and responsibilities.

Dr. Rooy cited several prominent liberation theologians in order to indicate that the proper term really ought to be liberation *theologies* because of the divergent views of those involved. Hugo Assmann, the Costa Rican sociologist, places an emphasis on the Marxist tools of analysis, while Gustavo Gutierrez, from Peru, works with the implication of what it means to be a poor person. Enrique Dussell is supervising the production of a ten volume history of the church in Latin America from the perspective of the poor instead of the perspective of the rich. In his history he claims to find a spark of evangelical Christianity which he believes should be fostered. The Protestant, José Míguez-Bonino, encountered reformed Christianity through the influence of Karl Barth, and he now places a heavy reliance upon Luther and Calvin in his thinking. Protestant Juan Stam believes in the verbal inspiration of Scripture. Thus, liberation theology, while not a systematic theology, has a certain basic thrust which binds members together in the interests of the poor and of God's kingdom in Latin America.

Dr. Rooy listed several principal themes evident in liberation theology. One theme is a belief in the unity between the plan of creation and of

salvation, that is, the purpose of Christ's coming was to restore the brotherhood of all men. One must grasp fully the significance of the radical character of man's fall from grace. Traditionally, man has not taken the fall seriously enough since he ignores that satanic and demonic political, economic and social system by which he is governed and of which he is a part. A second major theme is the view that salvation is an historical process. Religion must be more than the perfunctory performance of the rites of baptism, marriage, and extreme unction practiced by the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand, and it must encompass more than the world-flight pietism of Protestant fundamentalism on the other. The implications of religious belief must be applied to daily living. Another main theme connected with the previous one is that the Kingdom of God must have relevance for today. Also, there is a salvific dimension in service to the poor, and finally, there is an emphasis on both orthopraxis and orthodoxy. The two cannot be separated, but a primary emphasis is placed on the former.

Dr. Rooy's visit again graphically reminded us that we must be circumspect in our analysis of the causes of upheaval in Latin America. A thorough study of the history of these republics is of pressing importance in order for us to avoid making facile and glib generalizations. The path to the present has too many twists and turns for us to conclude that the recurring turmoil is simply a struggle between capitalism and communism.

Louis Y. Van Dyke

\*For an account of his first visit, see John C. Vander Stelt, "Christianity and Latin America," *Pro Rege*, IV (June 1976), 33-34.