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Liberation Theology: The Church's Future Shock (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by Russell Maatman

Liberation Theology: the Church's Future Shock, by Gerard Berghoef and Lester DeKoster. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 1984, 197 pp. \$12.95. Reviewed by Russell Maatman, Professor of Chemistry.

"Liberation Theology" is referred to throughout the Christian world. What is liberation theology? Does it belong in the main stream of Christian thought? This book, written by evangelical Christians in the Reformed tradition, provides answers to these questions.

First, a word on the style of the book. It is written for the mass audience. It is easy to read; it is polemical; it is a book containing many short chapters, short paragraphs, and short sentences.

One might think that the book is therefore not worth serious scholarly consideration. But the authors have done their homework. They do base their case on the writings of a large number of writers, mostly liberation theologians. They do carefully analyze this theological position as they attempt to compare it with evangelical Christianity. Anyone who reads this book will understand exactly what position the authors take and why they take it. Furthermore, such a reader will have difficulty in adopting a different view: Berghoef and DeKoster prove their point very well. Perhaps the ball is now in the court of the defenders of liberation theology.

The main point of *Liberation Theology* is this: liberation theology is Marxist and Marxism is anti-Christian. This point is carefully worked out, step by step, in the five sections of this book of twenty-five chapters. The title of the first section and the question it answers is, "What is Marxism?" In logical sequence the next three sections have these titles: "Why Not Marxism?" "What Is Liberation Theology?" "Why Not Liberation Theology?" The fifth section, "Orthodoxy and Liberation," consists of an alternate response to the problems addressed by the liberation theologians. The fourth and fifth sections are much longer than the others and take up over half the book.

Here is the argument: Marxists teach that there must be a class struggle wherever workers do not own the means of production, that is, wherever capitalism exists. Because capitalistic ideas dominate the economic

structures and pervade the rest of society—for example, the church, the arts, and government—only violent rebellion can bring about change. Then, according to the Marxists, the struggle will end in victory for the worker. Old structures will wither away and the new human being will emerge. The authors document this part of their argument with quotations from Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and V.I. Lenin.

Berghoef and DeKoster maintain that liberation theologians claim to be Marxists and that they hold to the particulars of Marxism just outlined. For the liberation theologian, capitalism is sin. Since the Bible teaches that opposition to God is sin, the Bible opposes capitalism. Liberation theologians also claim that capitalistic ideas so pervade society that a radical change is called for. They talk of combatting, fighting, and taking a revolutionary stand against class enemies (p. 65). Finally, liberation theologians agree with Marxists in claiming that the struggle against capitalism will produce a new human being. The authors quote Jose Miranda, a Mexican: "... (M)an can cease being selfish and merciless and self-serving.... We reject the imposition of an allegedly unchangeable nature, in virtue of which man will be a wolf to man as long as there is history" (p. 66). Others whom Berghoef and DeKoster quote in developing their picture of liberation theology represent many countries and include the following (in some cases the country is given): Hugo Assman (Brazil), Pierre Bigo (Columbia), Paul Blanquart, Leonardo Boff, Jose Miguez Bonino (Argentina), Jean Cardonnel, Emilio Castro, Jose Comblin, Jose Maria Diez-Alegria (Italy), Enrique Dussel (Argentina), Alfredo Fierro (Spain), Paula Freire, Segundo Galilea (Columbia), Enzo Gatti (Italy), Rosino Gibellini, Jules Girardi, Gustavo Gutierrez (Peru), Luis N. Rivera Pagan, Joseph Petulla, Juan Luis Segundo (Uruguay), Luis del Valle (Mexico), and Raul Vidales. Those familiar with the liberation theology movement will recognize that the authors rely

on writers who are within or close to the movement.

Berghoef and DeKoster point out what ought to be obvious to Christians: Capitalism, even when it is defined as the ownership of the means of production, is not necessarily wrong. Both Biblical and modern examples prove the point. The poor are not necessarily sinless. Christ does not teach class struggle and violence. Finally, human beings will not change before Christ returns; and they certainly will not change themselves. It is amazing that liberation theology is taken seriously by many Christians. No doubt its popularity rests on the existence of great injustice in the world. But the end—removing injustice—does not justify the means.

The last section of the book is a presentation of the authors' approach to the social problems which concern liberation theologians. The authors maintain that wherever orthodox Christianity has been accepted, it has been fruitful; that a good case can be made showing Western democracy arose because of the acceptance of the Christian position; and that a real care for the poor naturally flows from the teaching of this Christian gospel. In other words, teaching the Bible has led to action, and there is consequently much good in the world. The book ends with a short summary of ideas previous-

ly presented and lists of discussion questions for the chapters.

The book is helpful in explaining ideas often written and spoken about. Thus, the authors clearly explain "dialectical materialism" and its relation to Hegelian philosophy. Likewise, they show well how the foundations of Marxism form a unified whole and, by implication, why there can be so little variation in Marxist thinking. They also point out certain things which many people might not notice. First, they observe that liberation theologians are severely critical of oppression in certain parts of the world, but do not find oppression in Soviet-sphere countries. Second, even though some liberation theologians claim not to accept some of the extreme ideas given above, these theologians do not attempt to expose liberation theologians who do accept those ideas. One must conclude that those who call themselves liberation theologians do not in fact have very great differences among themselves.

Liberation Theology has a few typographical errors, a style that may be too polemical to change minds, and too many exclamation points. But it also has valuable material and I recommend it to all who wish to keep abreast of current theological trends.

Until Justice and Peace Embrace by Nicholas Wolterstorff; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983; 197 pp. Reviewed by Mike Stair, Former Instructor in Theatre Arts.

The words *justice* and *peace* by definition pertain to Christianity. That doesn't mean they are practiced, and Nicholas Wolterstorff's estimation of their application in contemporary Reformed Christianity is anything but a list of accomplishments. This is, he admits at the outset, a contribution "...to the formation of a new consciousness and a firmer resolution." At issue is the struggle for the spirit of a culture enticed and buffeted by a system that puts representation before reality and interest before equity.

Wolterstorff, a Calvin College philosophy professor, sadly considers some aspects of applied Reformed Christianity, including the tarnished area of piety. The social thought of the early Calvinists stands to illustrate the

...tension between demand and reality....

One does not apprehend the contours of characteristic Calvinist social piety until one discerns the pervasive presence of (this form) of guilt. Some will say it is not guilt at all, but a peculiar form of hypocrisy: people saying that they ought to work at social reform but not believing it and happily filling their social roles in the ordinary way. Perhaps in some cases this acquiescence is the result of hypocrisy, but my own experience suggests that it is more often otherwise.

Although the tension is as old as society, Wolterstorff believes that its new growth results from a veiled adherence to traditional structural archetypes.

The six-plus-one alternation of labor and rest is not the alternation of work with recovery from work so as to be able to go back to work; it is the alternation of mastery of the natural and social world with thankful enjoyment of the world. The day of rest, the sabbath, (Wolterstorff quoting Johan van der Hoeven) is important precisely in connection with and in opposition to the rush and the lust for hurried expansion of power that so easily affects history and man's experience of it.

Thus, fanatical faith in progress and the power of technological improvements seduce to some extent every member of an affluent core society into believing that opulence is spreading and that it will eventually reach all human-kind.

Christian social action, as the reports from Ethiopia daily remind us, is no guarantor of justice and peace. Wolterstorff runs through the record of two approaches by Gustavo Gutierrez, a liberation theologian; and Herman Dooyeweerd and Bob Goudzwaard, neo-