

Preface

Eccentric God

Christians commend a virtue called hope. They might say things like, 'I only dare to go to communion because I hope in God's mercy'; or, 'We struggle on because we hope in the ultimate victory of the kingdom.' Hope has an object, which is the mercy and justice of God; hope is expressed in a style of living which presses on against the odds, which refuses to believe in inevitabilities, which is not bamboozled by currently powerful ideologies.

'The option for the poor' is an expression of Christian hope. It is the task of a journal like *New Blackfriars* to ask what such a phrase might mean, why it is being used so much, whether it is a central or a peripheral issue in theology.

Central or peripheral? Christians who have begun to take the option seriously will point out that it calls in question what we have understood, up till now, as 'centre' and 'periphery'. Who is to judge? Who has the right perspective? What is the context in which we do our theology? Who has the power to define what's what?

I am already suggesting here that *the* option for the poor is not just *an* option for some richer people who are concerned about that sort of thing. Nor is it adequately defined as a church's decision to increase its financial commitment to inner cities or the Third World. That individual concern and that ecclesiastical commitment are necessary expressions of the option, but the option, like the camel which put its nose into the tent, is soon found to be much more demanding. It raises questions about the very meaning of the Christian message.

We have noticed already one way in which that meaning is questioned: the issue of centre and periphery is one about the context in which theology is done, about perspectives. Becoming a little more specific, I suggest three ways in which the option must operate as a challenge to Christian self-understanding: What are the sources for our theology? How are the Word and Sacrament to be ministered in the church? And what kind of God do we believe in and proclaim?

Conversion to the option for the poor does not present us with a different set of Scriptures, a different tradition, different ethical imperatives, or a denial of the perception that all human striving for meaning is grist to the theologian's mill. It is more that the perspective on the whole theological enterprise, and on all the data of theology, is provided by the twin foci of contradiction and hope. And those foci are

not arbitrarily grabbed out of some theological dictionary, but are demanded by the struggle to hear and speak and realize God's Word in the negativities and the miracles of our contemporary world. That is why the articles in this issue are concerned with quite specific instances of socio-economic dysfunction and of pastoral response in today's first-world society and church. The contradiction is, on the one hand, simply what should be and what is; and, on the other hand, between what God says and what prevailing ideologies say God has said, ought to have said and is saying. The hope both inspires and arises from the determination to question the death-dealing assumptions of a society which diminishes so many human beings.

That contradiction and that hope are the gift of the poor to the church. The rediscovery of the Bible as the critical and hope-bringing text which it is, and of the sacraments as the liberative acts which they are, can only take place in a church which is listening to and identifying with the poor—with all who have been and are being disabled by social, economic, cultural, religious or emotional deprivation, and are hungry for change. It would be a nonsense for the church to be siding with the poor in the public arena if its ordering of its own life were somehow exempt from the scrutiny it exercises on society. And if the Scriptures and the sacraments are about God's salvation of the oppressed, then it would be a poor theologian or bishop who did not realize that an essential way to hear God's Word today is to listen to today's oppressed. I will not attempt to spell out the practical implications of this for church order, but will simply point out that we tend to use a model of ministry which is, in spatial terms, downwards from above or outwards from the centre; that kind of model needs criticism, not least because it implies a particular picture of God—as V.I.P.

God cannot adequately be expressed by any model. In any era the 'problem of God' is not a question of belief versus unbelief; it is a question of truth versus idolatry. Those who are in tune with the prevailing culture are most in danger of falling into ideological slumber. The poor, by subverting the presumed relationship between centre and periphery, can offer us a Copernican revolution which dethrones the idol and restores to us the God of hope.

COLIN CARR OP

See the inside back cover for information about the coming conference.