

The option for the poor in South Africa

Albert Nolan OP

'This phrase (the option for the poor) burst upon the ecclesiastical scene only a few years ago. Since then it has become the most controversial religious term since the Reformers' cry, "salvation by faith alone".'

These are the opening words of Donal Dorr's recent book on the option for the poor and Vatican social teaching.¹ He is not exaggerating. I should say that the challenge to the church, to almost all our churches, represented by this term 'option for the poor' goes far beyond anything envisaged by the Reformers. It challenges both Catholic and Protestant, and it challenges us in a very fundamental way.

Here, I should like to do little more than open up the debate about the option for the poor in South Africa. The question has been raised here and there in a variety of forms, mostly without the term 'option for the poor'; but in South Africa there has been no systematic Christian practice based upon it and not much research and reflection around this controversial phrase. My intention, then, is to open up the specific approach implied in this new theological term for further research, reflection, debate and practice.

There is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding about the meaning of the phrase itself, and even a measure of deliberate distortion of its meaning. Hence, in the first place, it will be necessary to state quite clearly what we are talking about and even more importantly what we are not talking about. Then we shall have to give some account of how this new theological theme is grounded in the Bible. And finally we must venture some suggestions about what it may mean in the struggle for liberation in South Africa today.

Option for the poor: what does it mean?

One of the most common misunderstandings is that an option for the poor means a choice or preference for preaching and ministering to the poor rather than to the rich. The more recent phrase 'preferential option for the poor', made popular by the Puebla Conference of Latin American bishops, has tended to reinforce the idea that all we are talking

about is a pastoral preference in the distribution of the church's services, resources and preaching. We must give more of our attention to the poor and work with them by preference. Some would argue that the church should serve *only* the poor and have nothing whatsoever to do with the rich. Others would respond by saying that the gospel and its message is for all and we cannot abandon the rich. But all of this misses the point.

The option for the poor is not a choice about the *recipients* of the gospel message, *to whom* we must preach the gospel; it is a matter of *what gospel* we preach to anyone at all. It is concerned with the *content* of the gospel message itself. The gospel may be good news for the poor and bad news for the rich but it is a message for both the poor and the rich.

The opinion that the preferential option for the poor is simply a way of emphasising the all-importance of almsgiving, charity and relief work need not delay us here. The poor are not people who are deprived because of bad luck or misfortune. The poor are the oppressed, the victims of the social sin of injustice. The option for the poor is concerned with the *sin of oppression* and what Christians should be doing about it.²

One sometimes hears the objection that the poor are not all saints and the rich are not all sinners. There are indeed people who understand their option for the poor in a way that simply romanticises the poor and imputes guilt to everyone who is not poor. It is thought that anyone who is poor and oppressed is incapable of doing wrong and that anyone who is rich must have knowingly and willingly chosen to make the poor suffer. But this again misses the point. The option for the poor is not a preference for some people over other people. It is a matter of taking up the *cause of the poor* as opposed to the cause of the rich. The moral judgment involved here is not a judgment about individuals who are rich or poor, but a judgment about the morality or rightness of two conflicting causes. The option for the poor is a judgment about the rightness of the cause of the poor and a condemnation of the cause of the rich, whatever the measure of personal guilt of those involved may or may not be.

It has also sometimes been thought that the option for the poor is a matter of *lifestyle*: an option for poverty. We do not necessarily help the poor and oppressed by imitating their deprivation. The option for the poor may indeed influence our lifestyle, it may even have a very profound effect upon our material and economic life, but all of this will be determined entirely by the exigencies of the struggle for liberation as it is being waged at any particular time.

The option for the poor then is an uncompromising and unequivocal taking of sides in a situation of structural conflict. It is not a matter of preaching to some people rather than others, or a matter of being generous to the 'underprivileged', or a judgment about the personal guilt

of the rich, or even, in the first instance, a matter of lifestyle. It is the assertion that Christian faith entails, for everyone and as part of its essence, the taking of sides in the structural conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed.³ Nothing could be more threatening to the cherished beliefs of so many of today's Christians. Nothing could be more threatening to so many of our churches in the way they operate in the world today. Nothing could be more controversial and challenging for our theology and our practice as Christians.

Those who feel threatened will say that this is not the gospel, it is politics. The gospel, they will argue, is about peace and reconciliation and not about taking sides in a conflict. Yes, but surely the gospel does not require us to reconcile good and evil, justice and peace? Does it not rather demand that we take sides against all sin and especially against the all-pervasive sin of oppression?⁴

These are weighty assertions, though. They call for a solid biblical grounding. In other parts of the world, and by no means only in Latin America, a great deal of biblical research has been done around this topic. We shall need to be well acquainted with their research as we try to develop our own South African perspective on the poor in the Bible.

The option for the poor in the Bible

The option for the poor is not a biblical phrase but it does sum up very neatly and succinctly one of the most central themes of the Bible. We know that the concept of the poor is central to the whole biblical revelation, but it is so easy to 'spiritualise' all that is said about the poor in the Bible by quoting texts that refer to 'spiritual poverty' as the attitude of total reliance upon God and having a humble and contrite spirit. There are obvious ulterior motives for this kind of interpretation but the real point is that what is said in different parts of the Bible about the poor must be interpreted as far as possible in terms of the *different historical contexts*. Any generalisation that ignores the different historical contexts is sure to be arbitrary and biased.

The option for the poor in the Exodus story

Exodus was the original and paradigmatic saving act of God. It was the foundational revelation of Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews. As Rubem Alves puts it: 'The exodus was the experience that moulded the consciousness of the people of Israel ... determining the logic with which Israel assimilated the facts of its historical experience and the principle by which it organized them and interpreted them.'⁵ The story was told and retold, celebrated each year at the Passover, and used as an interpretative framework for understanding all God's saving activities, including the death and resurrection of Jesus—the new Passover.⁶

The outline of the Exodus story is clear enough. We are introduced

to a group of people in Egypt doing forced labour as slaves, building cities and prestigious buildings for the Pharaoh (Exod. 1:11). Their cruel oppression and broken spirit (Exod. 6:9) is described at some length. The scene was as common in the ancient world as it is today.

The new thing, the new revelation, was the appearance of a God called Yahweh who actually took notice of them, who saw their oppression, heard their cries and helped them to escape from their oppressors. Here was a God who actually sided with them rather than, like all other gods, siding with the kings and Pharaohs who oppressed them. Later they recognised Yahweh to be the only God, the creator God, the God of their Fathers.

What does this tell us about the option for the poor?

Here we have the original poor people of the Bible, the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Their poverty is obviously material and economic but what is far more striking is that their poverty is the direct result of the structural oppression of Egyptian society. The poor here are the oppressed and what is described at length is precisely their oppression. Recent studies on the meaning and usage of the Hebrew words for oppression have proved beyond any doubt that almost the whole Bible is concerned with the political problem of oppression, and that poverty is seen consistently as the result of oppression.⁷

In the Exodus story the option for these oppressed Hebrews is taken in the first place by Yahweh himself. God takes sides with the oppressed and against the oppressor in no uncertain terms. And this is precisely what counts in Exodus as the fundamental revelation about Yahweh.⁸ There is no sense whatsoever in which he can be seen as a God who tries to reconcile or make peace between Pharaoh and his slaves. God rescues or liberates the oppressed from the oppressor, and this is what he continues to do throughout the Bible. As we read in Psalm 103:6 (JB): 'Yahweh, who does what is right, is always on the side of the oppressed'.

The other interesting thing about the Exodus story is that it is the poor and oppressed themselves who must take an option for their own cause. The work of Moses was precisely to persuade the Hebrew slaves to take up their own cause, and that is what faith and trust in Yahweh meant for them in practice.⁹

The option for the poor is almost always thought of today as a commitment which the non-poor have to make to the cause of those who are oppressed. But what is far more fundamental in the Bible is the option of the poor for their own cause. It cannot by any means be taken for granted that all poor people will take up their own cause. Some of them will be too broken in spirit and too lacking in hope of success. Others will abandon the cause of the oppressed as a whole in order to promote their own private cause of moving upwards into the ranks of the oppressor. This is the sort of option for the oppressor that enables the

oppression to continue. The option for the poor is not intended only for those who are not poor and not oppressed.

Of course, in the Exodus story Moses himself would be the example of someone who, though not himself oppressed, took sides with the oppressed workers of Egypt.

The option for the poor in Canaan

Exodus was only the beginning of the liberation story in the Bible. When the descendants of the Hebrew slaves reached Canaan they joined forces with oppressed peasants and other rebels most of whom had a common ancestry. Together they began to build the new nation of Israel. With their background of oppression and with the new hope based upon Yahweh, the liberator of the oppressed, it is not surprising to discover that they built a nation in which there were no rich and no poor, no kings, princes or even chiefs, and no slaves. It was a federation of twelve tribes and the land was divided equally amongst the families or clans (Num. 33:54; 34,18).

Recent scholarship has shown beyond doubt that the Israelite society of the twelve tribes was indeed an *egalitarian* society and that this structure was based upon belief in Yahweh, the liberator of slaves. In this respect, Israel was unique among the nations of the ancient world.¹⁰

What does this tell us about the option for the poor? It makes it quite clear that the option which God takes, and which the poor themselves take for their own cause, is an option for an egalitarian society in which there will be no oppressor and no oppressed. It is not fundamentally an option for some people and against other people, but an option against all oppression and injustice in favour of a world in which all people will benefit from a just freedom and equality.

The option for the poor in the Prophets

For reasons that would take too long to explain here, the egalitarian society of the twelve tribes did not last. Gradually inequality set in, despite the attempts of the Jubilee legislation (Lev. 25:8—55) to stem the tide, until eventually the people began to ask for a king in order to be like other nations. The prophet Samuel resisted and warned them that the king and his officials would become rich at their expense and they themselves would become slaves again. But the people insisted and, as the Bible understands it, God allowed them to have a king (1 Sam. 8: 1—22).

This was the beginning of oppressive structures within Israel itself. Saul did not become rich but he proved to be a jealous tyrant. David was a pious and benevolent dictator who began slowly to take on the trappings of an oriental monarch. But it was Solomon and his successors who fulfilled Samuel's worst fears. The majority of the people were

reduced to much the same poverty and oppression as that from which Yahweh had once liberated them in Egypt and Canaan.

Hence the rise of the great prophets. Although most of the prophets probably did not come from the oppressed classes of Israel, they took up the cause of justice for the poor as Yahweh's cause. The result for almost all the pre-exilic prophets—so the New Testament claims—was persecution, imprisonment and martyrdom (Matt. 23:29, 33; Luke 6: 22, 23, 26). Their identification with the cause of the oppressed led eventually to their own oppression. It was when Jeremiah himself was hunted and persecuted that he could count himself as one of the poor (Jer. 20: 13).

The prophets were almost by definition those who took an option for the oppressed. The kings were almost by definition the oppressors.¹¹ And it would not be unfair to say that the prophets failed mostly, because the oppressed themselves had not taken an option for their own cause. The result was the destruction of Israel as an independent nation, the deportation of its elite (middle and upper classes) to Babylon (Jer. 29: 1—2) and the disappearance of its poor and oppressed classes into the surrounding nations.¹²

The option for the poor during and after the exile

During the centuries after the fall of Jerusalem and the monarchy, in exile in Babylon and after the return to Jerusalem, the remnant of Israel remained a small colony oppressed by a succession of empires: Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman. There was suffering but on the whole, even in exile, it was not remotely as bad as the oppression experienced originally in Egypt. There was a measure of persecution but now it was mostly a religious persecution. With the exception of the Maccabees and later the Zealots, there was no attempt to struggle for liberation. Israel became submissive and opted for a kind of religious independence.

It was during this period that they developed that very special form of Jewish piety that we call *spiritual poverty*. The scrolls of the law and of the prophets had been taken into exile by the elite. These they read, interpreted and rewrote in terms of their present experience.

The poor and oppressed were central to the written tradition they had inherited. The poor were God's favourites. Thus they read the texts about the poor as applying to themselves, the oppressed remnant of Israel (Zeph. 3: 11—13; Isa. 49: 13). But now being a member of the remnant of Israel and remaining faithful to Yahweh becomes a matter of personal choice and individual responsibility. And if we also remember that the warnings and condemnations of the prophets made the remnant feel guilty and repentant, we can understand how poverty comes to be thought of as a moral category rather than a social category. To be God's

chosen people the religious remnant of Israel must imitate the 'virtues of the poor', which are understood to be the virtues of being humble, meek, contrite, patient and totally reliant upon God (Isa. 57: 15; 66:1—2; Ps. 34: 18; 51: 17; Mic. 6: 6—8; Dan. 3: 39; Zeph. 2: 3; 3: 11—13). To be truly poor becomes a matter of the heart and of the spirit: a humble heart and a contrite spirit.¹³

How does this relate to the option for the poor?

The Jews who developed this spirituality of poverty were indeed oppressed, but they regarded themselves *alone* as the 'poor of Yahweh'. This was the beginning of the detachment of spiritual poverty from its roots in material poverty and in the social category of all the oppressed classes. Instead of taking an option for the poor one can then take an option for the 'virtues of the poor' in a way that enables the status quo of oppression to continue unchallenged.

However, some aspects of the piety of the poor that was developed during this period can be of value to us in our commitment to the cause of the poor. It was Jesus and his movement that brought the piety of the poor down to earth again and rooted it firmly in an option for the materially poor and politically oppressed.

The option for the poor in the gospels.

In the time of Jesus and his disciples, the remnant of Israel was very conscious of being oppressed by the Romans. But, like the prophets in previous times, what Jesus draws attention to is the internal structures of oppression. Oppressor and oppressed, rich and poor, could also be found within Jewish society and religion. The Sadducees and the Pharisees, the scribes, the chief priests and the elders (that is, the nobility and rich landowners) were in various ways oppressors; while the poor, the blind, the lame, the crippled, widows and orphans, the 'sinners', the tax collectors and prostitutes were all in their own way oppressed people.¹⁴

In this situation Jesus took sides quite clearly and unequivocally. He spoke of a God who blessed the poor and the oppressed and brought the good news that they would be set free and that God's kingdom belonged to them (Luke 6: 20—23; 4: 16—22; 12: 32).

Jesus' option for the poor included a determined effort to get the poor to take an option for their own cause. He insisted again and again that it was *their faith* that would heal them and save them.¹⁵ He used his position to restore their dignity and confidence in themselves by telling them that they were 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world'. In short, he told them not to bow down or lie down but to stand up and walk (Luke 17: 19; Mark 2: 11—12). His preaching of the kingdom gave them hope for the future.

Jesus' option led him to identify himself totally with the poor:

‘whatever you do to the least of these you do to me’ (Matt. 25: 40, 45). It was for his stand in favour of the poor and against the oppressor that he was, like the prophets, persecuted and eventually killed.

There is no way that one could argue that the category of people Jesus was opting for were the morally and spiritually poor. They included sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors. They included people who were hungry and thirsty and begging on the streets. What moved Jesus to identify with them was not their *piety* but their *suffering*.¹⁶ That is not to say that there is no idea of spiritual poverty in the gospels. There is. But it is different from the piety of ‘the poor of Yahweh’ in exilic and post-exilic Judaism. The essence of the distinction between material and spiritual poverty in the gospels has been summed up very simply and concisely by Nicholas Berdyaev: ‘If I am hungry, that is a material problem; if someone else is hungry, that is a spiritual problem’.¹⁷

The central challenge in the gospels is the challenge that Jesus presented to the rich and the powerful and to all who had sided with them. He faced them with a simple and uncompromising option—the choice between God and money (Matt. 6: 24 par.; compare Mark 4: 19 par.). Those who choose God would have to sell their surplus possessions (Matt. 6: 19–21; Luke 12: 33–34; 14: 33) and join with the poor in a sharing community in which no one would be in need (Acts 2: 44–46; 4: 32, 34–35), that is to say, where there would be no rich and no poor, no master and no slave. They would not be poor in the sense of destitute (Greek *ptochos*) but they would be poor in the sense of having rejected all avarice, greed and oppression (Greek *penes*).¹⁸ Or, in Matthew’s words, they would ‘hunger and thirst for justice’ (5: 6; compare Luke 6: 21); they would not be destitute but they would be ‘poor in spirit’ (5: 3; compare Luke 6: 20).¹⁹

Here then is the new spirituality. There is no glorification of poverty but a determination to overcome it. There is no denial that we have enemies but a determination to love them too (Luke 6: 27–35). There is no refusal to recognise the reality of sin in the world but a determination to be forgiving (Matt. 18: 21–22). There must be a struggle against all forms of oppression but there must be no revenge (Matt. 5: 38–39).²⁰

This would be the spirit of the new community that takes an option against suffering and oppression. It would be the sign or symbol of the new Israel, the kingdom that is to come.

The option for the poor in South Africa

In our situation of a cruel and relentless oppression that is perpetrated in the name of God and the Bible, it becomes imperative to preach about God as the one who has taken sides, here in South Africa, with all who are oppressed—and to preach this to everyone. It will then be necessary to spell out, work out and live out the consequences of this for the

various groups amongst the oppressed and the oppressing or exploiting classes.

The oppressed must take a clear option for their own cause, for the cause of *all* the poor and oppressed. An option to become upwardly mobile by oneself or with a small group that abandons the rest of the oppressed is not an option for the poor but an option to join the oppressing and exploiting classes. People in South Africa are oppressed in many different ways and to different degrees. Workers are oppressed, some much more than others; blacks are oppressed, but some suffer considerably more than others; women are oppressed, but not all to anything like the same extent. It becomes possible therefore to be oppressed on one account while being part of the oppression on another account. An option for the poor is an option against every form of oppression and exploitation. An analysis of the relationship between the various forms of oppression is helpful here. But a Christianity that does not challenge the poor and oppressed themselves, including women, to take an option and join in the struggle for liberation is simply unbiblical.

Many of the churches in South Africa, especially through their official statements and sometimes in Sunday sermons, are beginning to take a prophetic stance. But in view of what we have seen of the option for the poor in the Bible, we may well ask whether the stance of these churches has gone nearly far enough. There is a growing denunciation of injustice but there is no clear annunciation of hope for a future liberated society. There are challenges to the government and to whites in general but there is no clear statement that the oppressed should take up their own cause as God's cause. The stance of the churches is not clear. If whites are supposed to take an option against oppression, what does this mean in practice? Not many of them are likely to want to take an option for the poor but what do we say to those who do not want to do so?

Those who profess a willingness to side with the oppressed in South Africa will have much to learn. It is obvious that siding with the poor is easier said than done. A purely theoretical decision that apartheid is heretical and sinful is not enough. In religious terms, what is required is a deep conversion, an experience of being born again and a long spiritual journey. Before one's option for the poor can become a truly practical reality, there are ingrained prejudices to be overcome as well as other emotional and cultural obstacles.

One of the more serious emotional obstacles is based upon the fact that we do not experience the same daily sufferings and insecurities as the poor. When you are not humiliated at every turn and regularly beaten up by the police, you do not experience the same emotions of fear, frustration, anger and indignation. You may side with the oppressed but you will not easily feel the same way about the oppressor. And that makes it more difficult to share God's anger at what is happening daily in

our country. However, as we get involved in a practical way and as we begin to risk our own security and comfort, our reputation and even our lives, a certain sharing of the experience of oppression and of God's anger becomes possible.

And then there are cultural obstacles. It may be that a new culture is being born within the struggle for liberation in South Africa, but at present we have to face the fact of cultural differences and try to transcend them as part of our option. The cultural differences are not merely African and Western. There are also cultural differences between the working class and the middle class of any race, between youth culture and adult culture, and between people of various backgrounds: Afrikaners, Indians, Portuguese. These differences are not significant and they can easily be overcome by people who have taken the same option but there is no value in pretending that they do not even exist.²¹

Taking an option for the poor is like setting out on a new spiritual journey.²² It is so easy to get stuck along the way, at the liberal stage of paternalism or at the romantic stage of glorifying the poor. It is so easy to think that one has all the answers because of one's superior education or analysis. A thoroughgoing option for the poor includes the willingness to question one's assumptions and to learn from those who are oppressed. It is only after one has learnt to have confidence in the ability of the oppressed to promote their own cause and to bring about their own liberation that one can begin to share that struggle with them and to make a contribution in real solidarity with all those who have taken an option against oppression.

Centuries of apartheid or racial capitalism have left their mark upon all classes and groups in South Africa. Only the self-righteous will claim to be immune. We need to be redeemed, liberated and cleansed.

What I am suggesting is that we might try to do this by exploring together in practice and in study and research, a common option taken by all classes and races for all the oppressed. The term 'option for the poor' itself does not matter. We might choose to call it something else. What matters is the uncompromising commitment to the cause of the oppressed as the cause of God.

* A version of this, with minor differences, appears in the Festschrift *Resistance and Hope*, published by David Philip (Pty) Ltd, Werdmuller Centre, Main Road, Claremont 7700. RSA.

1 D. Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, New York, 1983).

2 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

3 For the latest account of the Latin American debate on the meaning of the option for the poor, see G. Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, New York, 1983).

- 4 See A. Nolan, *Taking Sides* (London, 1983).
- 5 Quoted in T.D. Hanks, *God So Loved the Third World* (Maryknoll, New York, 1983), p. 6.
- 6 J.S. Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of freedom* (Maryknoll, New York, 1981), *passim*, and A. Fierro, *The Militant Gospel: A Critical Introduction to Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York, 1977), pp. 140–51.
- 7 Hanks, *God So Loved*, and E. Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, New York, 1982).
- 8 Fierro, *Militant Gospel*, pp. 140–2; Croatto, *Exodus*, p. 20.
- 9 Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*, pp. 60–4.
- 10 N.K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, New York, 1979).
- 11 J. Kegler, 'The prophetic discourse and political praxis of Jeremiah: observations on Jer. 26 and 36', in W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann (eds.), *God of the Lowly, Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* (Maryknoll, New York, 1984), pp. 49–54.
- 12 B.W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Essex, England, 1978), pp. 399–400, 404–5, 418.
- 13 The most comprehensive, although not the most crucial, study of the spiritual poverty of this period available in English is A. Gelin, *The Poor of Yahweh* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1964).
- 14 A. Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity: The Gospel of Liberation* (London, 1977), pp. 92–100.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 31–6, 41.
- 16 Gutierrez, *Power of the Poor*, pp. 95, 116, 138, 140–2.
- 17 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 207.
- 18 See the interesting study of the meaning of words for poverty in the New Testament by W. Stegemann, *The Gospel of the Poor* (Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 13–21, 33–53.
- 19 Hanks, *God So Loved*, p. 11; G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York, 1973), pp. 290, 299–302.
- 20 See the interesting approach of G. Theissen to the spirituality of the Jesus movement: *The First Followers of Jesus: A Sociological Analysis of the Earliest Christianity* (London, 1978), pp. 99–110.
- 21 B. Tlhaqale, 'Transracial communication', in *Missionalia*, 11, 3, pp. 113–23.
- 22 See the spiritual journey in G. Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, New York, 1984), *passim*.