

# Liberation Theology for Britain

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'It is Liberation Theology that Britain needs'.

So concluded Fergus Kerr in an editorial comment published by *New Blackfriars* last year.<sup>1</sup> His remark leads us to consider what form a British liberation theology might take, and what obstacles lie in the way of its progress.

The question of a British version of the theology of liberation has received some attention in recent years. Two important public lectures considered it, Charles Elliott's Heslington Lecture of January 1985<sup>2</sup>, and the more well-known Hibbert lecture given by the Anglican Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, in April of that year<sup>3</sup>. David Jenkins' lecture pointed out that the task would not be an easy one—certainly not a simple matter of translation from a third-world context to a first-world one:

British essays in liberation theology would not be mere echoes or reflections of liberation theology elsewhere. As I learnt from my contacts with some of those who developed liberation theology in Latin America and South East Asia, it would not be in the spirit of liberation theology if it were. As an article published in the Philippines in Manila in 1971 puts it, 'the question is not "how can we adapt theology to our needs?"', but rather, "how can our needs create a theology which is our own?"'. Liberation theology rises out of the particular needs of a particular country for hope in relation to justice, peace and love.<sup>4</sup>

As we shall see, there are some questions to be asked concerning Jenkins' reluctance to envisage too close a parallel between a third-world and a first-world version of liberation theology. But he is surely right to emphasise that any such theology must arise out of the particular needs of Britain, even though these will clearly have to be set within a wider international context.

But what are the particular needs of Britain, and what kind of analysis has been made of them? Much of the work has been concentrated upon the inner cities, where the greatest need is perceived to lie (although studies have also been made of the churches' response to rural and small-town deprivation<sup>5</sup>). Moreover, the Church of England has produced the important and much-discussed report *Faith in the City*<sup>6</sup>, which is based upon inner-city problems. Our own contribution will concentrate upon the city also.

An appropriate beginning would be with the Bible. We see, for instance, a clear emphasis upon the city in the New Testament. It is in the city of Jerusalem that the ministry of Jesus reaches its bitter climax. It is to the city that the most important apostle, Paul of Tarsus, is sent at the moment of his conversion ('Rise and go to the city and you will be told what you are to do'—Acts 9:6). And it is in terms of a city that the New Testament conjures up a vision of final blessedness—'I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (Revelation 21:2).

By way of contrast to this New Testament image of the city as climax of Jesus' ministry, focus of evangelisation after his death and form of ultimate perfection when the Kingdom of God is realised on earth, there is the city in contemporary Britain. This is often far from the centre of the churches' ministry. In the major cities there are fewer churches, fewer ministers and smaller congregations per head of population than in the prosperous suburbs and in rural areas. The cities, particularly the inner cities, become all too easily a neglected, or at least under-represented, object of ecclesiastical concern. As John Vincent's tellingly named book *Into the City*<sup>7</sup> makes clear, there is a tendency for the churches to remain outside the city in the relative comfort of the towns and suburbs.

Hence the commitment of John Vincent and others to go 'into' the city, not simply by way of reproducing there patterns of ministry which exist elsewhere, but in order to develop new forms of organisation appropriate to the mass urban community. In the multi-faith and multi-cultural urban community, it is possible to develop alternatives to the denominational, church-building based arrangement which has been traditional. Some of these alternatives have been explored by Vincent and others through the Sheffield Inner City Ecumenical Mission (SICEM), begun in 1971, and the Urban Theology Unit, a voluntary association providing a theological 'servicing agency' for urban mission, which was started in 1969. More generally, the growth of black churches in Britain, and the many small 'disciple groups' meeting in homes or in converted buildings plucked from urban decay, mark a new response by the church in the city. Such initiatives begin to challenge familiar ecclesiastical structures, inviting the drawing of parallels with the 'base communities' of Christians in the third world.

Indeed, those churchpeople who commit themselves full-time to the city and its problems often find themselves moving outside formal structures of the church. As Austin Smith, a Passionist who has spent many years living and working in Liverpool, comments in his book *Passion for the Inner City*:

Though a priest and a religious, my form of activity has been amongst many who have rejected the institutional church.<sup>8</sup>

The institutional church is so lacking in many of the cities that such a situation is hardly surprising. It is a failure that goes back many centuries. Many look back to the waves of migration from rural to urban areas set up

by the Industrial Revolution, a movement of population to which the parish structure never managed to adapt itself.<sup>9</sup> But even in earlier periods of relative social stability, the church's failure to minister to the city was in evidence. In his classic work *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*<sup>10</sup>, R.W. Southern discusses the work of 'Brother' Albert of Mantua, described as 'an itinerant preacher, who apparently on his own authority conducts a mission in an episcopal city'. As a man pursuing 'an activity outside the framework of the organised church', 'Brother' Albert is something of an historical precedent for Smith himself, and according to Southern's account faces similar ecclesiastical attitudes towards the city:

Despite all the natural disorders and disruptions which affected the countryside it was possible to treat the rural community as a stable and inert mass amenable to organisation and control. But what was to be made of the towns—anarchic, engaged in pursuits doubtfully permissible in canon law, embracing extremes of wealth and destitution, subject to over-employment and unemployment different from anything known to the rural community? To such a society the ecclesiastical organisation has not yet, and perhaps never has, adapted itself.<sup>11</sup>

As a counterpoint to the positive biblical concern for the city outlined at the start of our account, we can see in church history a more negative attitude towards the mass urban community. This tradition has fastened upon the theme of towns and cities as 'anarchic', places of sin and temptation. Like Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, or the cities which Jesus upbraids because 'they did not repent' (Matthew 11:20ff), urban communities came to be seen not only as places of deprivation but also of immorality. The duty of the righteous was not to reform them but, like Lot and his family under the instruction of the angel of the Lord, to flee them before they were 'consumed in the punishment of the city' (Genesis 19:15).

Not only was the city seen as a place of loose morals, it was also the focus of 'new ideas' challenging the relative conservatism of the countryside. Against the positive image of the city as focus of hope for human salvation, Christian tradition has also appropriated a more negative view of the city as centre of those twin 'evils', permissiveness and secularisation, and there must be a question as to how far attitudes of this kind will linger in the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

The possibility of such lingering sentiments of hostility towards the city makes particularly welcome the forthright commitment evinced by the Church of England report *Faith in the City*, produced by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas in 1985.<sup>13</sup> It is a report which analyses the history of economic decline and social inequality in Britain with candour, and it is equally candid about perceptions of the Anglican Church in the context of this inequality:

...it is clear that the Church of England has traditionally been

mainly middle class in character: it never attained the kind of pervasive influence, transcending the boundaries of class, that was achieved by Catholicism in Ireland or nonconformity in Wales. Equally, as it moved into the twentieth century, it carried with it a clerical paternalistic legacy; of a male-dominated Church in which the clergy held the power.<sup>14</sup>

It is a refreshingly frank admission of structural shortcomings. Nor is the report afraid to challenge the economic philosophy of present Conservatism (though it does not call it that), and to call for particular policies which the current government clearly has no intention of introducing. Thus it attacks the idea that creation of wealth can be viewed in isolation from its just distribution,<sup>15</sup> and the way in which encouragement of economic self-interest rationalises greed.<sup>16</sup> It demands a rise (in real terms) of the Rate Support Grant to local authorities,<sup>17</sup> an increase in child benefit and financial help for the long-term unemployed,<sup>18</sup> and an expanded public housing programme. Its comment on mortgage tax relief offers a socialist perspective that would make the leaders of the current Labour party quake in their shoes:

Having looked at the acute housing problems of our cities we recommend that there should be a similar examination of the whole system of housing finance, including mortgage tax relief, to give most help to those most in need. It is unjust to tell those in bad housing that we cannot afford to do anything for them, that there is no money available to provide them with a home, and at the same time give subsidies to those on the highest income.<sup>19</sup>

It is when we turn to the weaknesses of the report, however, that the vacuum in ecclesiastical thinking engendered by the absence of a British theology of liberation becomes clear. Two failings stand out. On the one hand, the report's criticism of the nation and its leaders is much more effective than its self-criticism of the church. The section on 'The Challenge to the Church' is one of the weakest parts of the document. No talk of disestablishment. Only a passing reference to the role of the church as a major landowner and landlord in British society, including the inner cities. Such issues tend to be discussed simply in terms of the need to consult with community groups when selling redundant churches, or to make vicarages 'accessible' to local people. Moreover, when positive suggestions are made, for instance towards more non-residential training of ordinands or a 'quota system' for ensuring adequate representation of minority groups on General Synod, there is evidence that the Church has shown, and perhaps may continue to show, resistance to some of the recommended changes.<sup>20</sup> A fundamental examination of the place of the church in society is lacking from the report.

The second failing which stands out from the report is its theological weakness. The section on 'Theological Priorities' is notably ill-informed.

With typical Anglican woolliness, it comments that 'it is often said, and doubtless rightly' (does this mean: 'It is rightly said', or is it somewhat weaker?) 'that conditions in Western Europe are not such that this kind of political "liberation" could ever be a comparable theological priority. Liberation Theology is a development that has grown out of political and economic conditions radically different from our own.'<sup>21</sup> This represents a virtual exclusion of the idea of a British liberation theology, rather than a mere echo of David Jenkins' warning about the different form which such a theology must take in this country. It reflects a lack of theological depth in the chapter as a whole, which is also notable for its throwaway use of Marx<sup>22</sup>—something that Norman Tebbit, in his designation of the whole report as 'Marxist', must have overlooked!

It may be felt that these failings of the report, if such they are, will prove insignificant when measured against the strength of its concrete proposals. But that is just the point. It is precisely an appreciation of the problems engendered by the place of the institutional church in society, together with a clear theological coherence in presenting the report, which are vital to the success of the radical social and economic proposals contained in it. For they have to be appropriated by the church as a whole, and campaigned for in the face of a great deal of criticism from the political and religious Establishment.

The experience of an earlier Church of England report, *The Church and the Bomb*, gives rise to some concern on this score. This report advocated a British non-nuclear defence policy. But the General Synod of the Church adopted instead a policy of 'no first use' of nuclear weapons, and at a later stage the precise recommendations of the report were retracted by its Chairman, the Bishop of Salisbury. At a public meeting in Newcastle he confessed that he had been telephoned on the issue from Downing Street! It was not a good advertisement for the independence of the Church.

The role of British liberation theology becomes clear in this context. It could help to give practical proposals such as those contained in *Faith in the City* a chance of success, by systematically demonstrating their appropriateness to a Christian vision of society. It could also provide a frank analysis of the difficulties facing their appropriation by a church which has the sort of stake in the status quo which the Church of England undeniably has.

Take the latter point, that of the institutional difficulties. The Church of England, as the report itself admits, is overwhelmingly middle-class in character, both so far as its leadership and its membership is concerned.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, as readers of *New Blackfriars* will be aware, there are those who follow Anthony Archer's thesis in *The Two Catholic Churches*<sup>24</sup> and see the Catholic Church in Britain becoming increasingly dominated by the middle class too. From Archer's viewpoint, developments like Vatican II, apparently 'radical' in their theological and ecclesiastical stance, can be

viewed as the successful subversion of working-class 'superstition' by the increasingly dominant Catholic middle class. Rather than viewing the challenge to traditional beliefs purely in terms of doctrinal development, Archer sees it in terms of an attack on the social identity which those beliefs helped to establish and which is now under threat. The shedding of superstition becomes inseparable from the shedding of working-class roots, particularly those established by nineteenth-century Irish immigration, which have helped in the past to maintain an 'anti-establishment' character for Catholicism in Britain.

The point about a church's middle-class character is not simply one of social and educational background and experience. It applies equally much to the way in which limitations of background are preserved by the church itself through its means of training and providing for its clergy. For most Anglican priests, the first step in their career is a theological college, probably far from any large city (Chichester, Durham, Lincoln, Cambridge, Oxford—Queen's in Birmingham and a few others representing a minority). The curriculum may tend to be locked exclusively into the Judaeo-Christian tradition, despite the million or so British Moslems, for instance, living in the inner cities. The ordinand may then progress to a parish, which even if located in a city might well require him to inhabit a large, unmanageable vicarage which acts as a shield against local contact. Here he may complain about the cost of heating, although in many cases his wife will have more reason to complain by virtue of having a full-time job cleaning and maintaining a huge building which will eventually have to be handed back to the church. Should he achieve a bishopric, he may enjoy translation to a mansion or even a 'palace', often maintained by 'servants', from which he will occasionally emerge in a chauffeur-driven limousine. This face of the church may be changing, but it remains the face that many people recognise, and it raises problems for a church seeking integration into the local urban community.

Furthermore, the Church of England bears an important character as the 'established' church. At one level this may not appear significant. A few seats in the House of Lords are offered in exchange for a measure of political accountability in the church's appointments to bishoprics, and even in the rubric of its services. Yet such an involvement with the state does bring a particular character to the Anglican Church. It becomes an 'institution' of society, which is thought of as speaking 'for the nation'. It is expected to reflect a cultural and even religious solidarity of the English people, whose spirit it even incarnates. Anglican broad churchmanship and dislike of dogma are seen to reflect the 'tolerance' and empiricism (even anti-intellectualism) of the nation as a whole. It is in this way that the Church of England often justifies its privileged place in society as against other denominations. As the 'established' church it is able to unite and reflect the spirit of a people—a rationalisation of a single religion for a single nation

which can be traced back through the Tractarians to the Elizabethan settlement of the sixteenth century. In reality, it is an idea which marginalises and offends minorities in this country. If the sovereign is Supreme Governor of the Church of England, required together with their her to belong to this particular denomination, then it becomes all the harder for a million Moslems to see Elizabeth as their Queen too. Once again, if Archer's thesis is to be believed, the Catholic Church in Britain, once clearly representing millions of people excluded from this favourable status, is increasingly trying to receive a share of the 'Establishment cake' for itself, winning a part in state occasions in the name of ecumenism, and making much of a leader whose piety cannot quite obscure his status as the perfect gentleman.

Because of its 'established' status, the Church of England is easily lured into what I would call an 'ideology of reconciliation'. To reconcile and bring healing where there is conflict constitutes the obvious aim of any Christian. But the means to reconciliation may not be such as can be pursued without encountering hostility from those who do not wish to give up privilege. It is familiar enough from Scripture that discipleship of Christ invites hostility (in some parts of the world it still invites, as it used to do, persecution). Whether it is Moses before Pharaoh or Jesus before some of the Pharisees, it is clear that the Judaeo-Christian tradition could well illustrate the words of its most well-known prophet: 'I come not to bring peace but a sword' (Matthew 10:34). This is not to say that the Christian does not seek to reconcile, but that the way to reconciliation is a hard one and may inevitably mean facing opposition. Reconciliation becomes an ideology, however, when the difficult way to achieving it is denied, and instead the leadership of the church utters bland generalities about healing the divisions of society without consideration of the means by which that healing might be made possible. In analysing the difficulty, faced by a church with the place in society enjoyed by the Anglican church, of a programme like that outlined in *Faith in the City* being translated into something approaching 'official church policy', a British liberation theology would play a very important role. It could analyse the way in which the church too easily speaks of reconciliation between the privileged and the under-privileged without making clear the means to such reconciliation, which must be the abolition of privilege itself. Such a means must necessarily arouse the hostility of those who possess privilege in our society, and indeed have managed to persuade the church itself to share in that privilege. But Christianity seeks reconciliation through an acceptance rather than a denial of conflict. Its central tenet, that we should love our enemies, accepts that we will have enemies to love in the first place!

Another difficulty for an overwhelmingly middle-class church in appropriating a radical social programme, is that it is bound to be adopting a theology 'for' rather than 'of' the poor. The danger is one that the theology of liberation has been very alive to in Latin America, and has

sought to overcome through the emphasis upon building up 'base communities' of Christians.<sup>25</sup> The aim is that theology must come 'from' the poor rather than be written for them. Clearly this is not entirely the case in Latin America itself, many of whose leading theologians are western-educated intellectuals whose work can appear highly abstract. Nevertheless, accounts of Bible reading, for instance, among the poor of Central America, can open Western eyes to the richness of interpretation generated by communities of committed but relatively uneducated Christians.<sup>26</sup> In Britain, a liberation theology has to point out that it is not enough for there to be a 'bias to the poor'<sup>27</sup> attempted from within the churches through their social teaching, but there has to be a bias 'from' the poor as they achieve the capacity to express their own faith. The alienation of the poor in Britain from the churches means that they are often the object of attention by concerned ecclesiastical leaders, but seldom themselves become part of the church. As we have noted, men like John Vincent and Austin Smith, who do not wish to speak 'to' the poor but to identify with them, have found themselves moving outside the ecclesiastical institution.

But the most important role of a British liberation theology is that of demonstrating the theological appropriateness of radical social and economic proposals such as those contained in *Faith in the City*. Attention has to be paid to the validity of arguments which often come from the political right in Britain, and which ask what the church is doing producing such a report which, they would say, more properly ought to come from a group of economists, politicians or planners. What has religion got to do with mortgage tax relief, they might ask? Those who (rightly, in my view) take for granted the principle of church involvement in politics are often too impatient with such questions. For they point to a real gap in the armoury of documents like *Faith in the City*. A far-reaching economic and social programme is produced, but very little effort is made to show that its proposals are theologically necessary or biblically based. Indeed, there is more than a hint that such concerns might be too 'intellectual' and 'abstract'.

*Faith in the City* demonstrates that the Anglican Church is capable of making its concern felt on important economic and social issues of the day. But it also shows that what it cannot yet do is to integrate these concerns into a theology. It has concern for the poor but not a theology of the poor. It has a desire to liberate but without a theology of liberation.

For a church really to take the proposals outlined in *Faith in the City* to heart, it has to believe that they are an imperative demanded by the gospel of Christ, rather than a mere twitching of the middle-class clerical conscience. It is here that the contribution of a systematic theology of liberation in Britain becomes central. Mere good intentions expressed in the form of a radical social programme will not carry it against opposition. It has to be shown to be an expression of faith, of 'theology as praxis', in the jargon of



liberation theology. It has to be demonstrated theologically that attitudes towards mortgage tax relief express a Christian commitment, and those who question such involvement not simply dismissed for failing to be impressed by some generality such as 'Take seriously the doctrine of the incarnation'.

In his Hibbert lecture, Professor Jenkins was most concerned to remind us that a British liberation theology would look very different from its third-world counterparts. This point can, however, be exaggerated. A British theology, as he rightly says, will reflect the particular needs of Britain. But these needs cannot be isolated from the needs of other nations. Even though its privileged position within the world is very different from that of a Latin American country, both are still part of the same world, with its increasingly interdependent network of economic and cultural relationships. Both will experience the same global forces of capital and trade, even though they may be affected in very different ways. From another perspective, British (and particularly Anglican) theology has never been a purely indigenous product. A British liberation theology, by modifying and applying ideas generated elsewhere, would only be continuing a tradition of theological practice well established within this country. It would be reasonable to expect a British theology of liberation to adopt terminology familiar from elsewhere, as it sought systematically to think through the implications of God's identification with the poor and deprived in British terms. (This already has been begun in first-world countries through the notion of a 'fourth world' made up of minority and under-privileged groups on the margins of rich nations, for instance guest workers and the homeless.<sup>28</sup>)

In conclusion. The predominant church in Britain has to become aware of its privileged place in society, and of its consequent susceptibility to an 'ideology of reconciliation' which tries to by-pass the opposition which some of its pronouncements on the state of Britain are bound to incur. It has also to give a genuine concern for economic and social reform the sort of backbone which enables it to maintain its commitment when it might be politically easier to marginalise it. A British theology of liberation would, in the opinion of this writer, help to supply that support for proposals which, from reading *Faith in the City*, one suspects that the church expects governments to receive more calmly and impartially than they are likely to. Perhaps the vitriolic attack by Norman Tebbit upon the report as 'Marxist' will have dispelled some of the illusions.

It is worth recalling that when, fifty years ago, the German Confessing Church found itself reluctantly forced to oppose the social, economic and political programme of the Nazi state, it did so in terms of the Barmen Declaration, a statement of theological faith. I am neither suggesting that such a serious situation confronts us today, nor that we simply need our own version of the Barmen Declaration, in many ways an inadequate response to the crisis in Germany at the time. But I do believe that the important social and economic proposals contained in *Faith in the City*, or indeed the

important insights into Christian attitudes to war contained in the earlier Anglican report *The Church and the Bomb*, will only survive the opposition of a hostile political establishment if they are shown to be firmly rooted in the gospel of Christ. This is the vital task of a British liberation theology—not that of reducing theology to politics, as its critics often describe it, but of identifying the theological ground for the church's political commitment.

The Christian vision of a new Jerusalem is of a city in which there is neither material hardship nor that poverty of spirit which seeks only to preserve or increase personal wealth. It may be some time before the churches lose entirely their traditional neglect and distrust of the city, and seek instead a transformation of urban life in the light of the gospel. But there is every necessity to do so. 'The values of the city' is a phrase often quoted in these days of insider dealing. It is the task of a liberation theology in Britain to demonstrate how a concrete programme of urban renewal would transform the city in the light of Christian values.

- 1 *New Blackfriars*, July/August 1987 (Vol. 68, No. 807), p. 319.
- 2 'Is there a Liberation Theology for the UK?'
- 3 'The God of Freedom and the Freedom of God'.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.9.
- 5 See, for example, *The Kingdom of God and North-East England*, ed. J.D.G. Dunn, (SCM 1986), produced by the North-East Ecumenical Group, which looks at instances of rural and small town deprivation, for instance in a number of steel and mining towns which have now lost their main source of income and employment.
- 6 Published by Church House Publishing, London, in 1985.
- 7 Epworth Press, 1982.
- 8 Austin Smith, *Passion for the Inner City* (Sheed and Ward, London, 1983), p. 81.
- 9 See the account by K.L. Inglis in *The Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England*, particularly the introductory chapter.
- 10 Published by Pelican, 1970. The quotation is on page 274.
- 11 Quoted in Austin Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
- 12 It would be more of a factor with the Victorian Church than in the modern era, but then again the roots of many modern problems lie in the Victorian era.
- 13 See note 6.
- 14 *Faith in the City*, p. 31 (para 2:18).
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 53 (para 3:13).
- 16 Page 55 (para 3:16).
- 17 Page 181 (para 8:55).
- 18 Pages 220—221 (paras 9:90—91).
- 19 Page 257 (para 10:98).
- 20 See, for instance, the comments in 6:83 on resistance by residential colleges to the development of non-residential courses (page 129).
- 21 Page 64 (para 3:34).
- 22 See the comments in 3:11 (page 51).
- 23 See the observations of Michael Paget-Wilkes in his *Poverty, Revolution and the Church* (Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1981).
- 24 See Anthony Archer's *The Two Catholic Churches* (SCM, London 1986).
- 25 See the account of base communities in Leonardo Boff's *Ecclesiology* (Collins 1986).
- 26 Ernesto Cardenal, in his *The Gospel in Soliname*, (Orbis, New York, 1976—, 4 vols.), provides a collection of truly grassroots reflections on Christianity.
- 27 The title of a book by David Sheppard, the current Anglican bishop of Liverpool.
- 28 This is the way George Casalis uses the term 'Fourth World' in his contribution to *Doing Theology in a Divided World* (edd. Fabella Torres, Orbis, 1985), p. 114.