

# Comment

## *Theology of Liberation under siege*

By the time you read this Rome's big new document will have spawned millions of words. We are talking, of course, about the document that the Holy Office released four days before its widely-publicised interviewing of the Brazilian liberation theologian Fernando Boff on September 7.

“Vatican's new blast against ‘left’ priests”, headlined *The Sunday Times*. But supposing we, at *New Blackfriars*, had received that text—the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’*—unsolicited, as an article sent to us for publication by an unknown author. Would we have published it?

Let's surprise you. We would. We would have been uneasy about the author's account of Marxism, feeling in particular that he was much too dependent for his knowledge of the subject on thinkers like Adorno and Habermas, and did not seem to be sufficiently conversant with the writing of the marxist thinkers from whom Latin American theologians have drawn most of their inspiration, such as Gramsci. All the same, we would have seen it as “a useful contribution to the discussion”.

This is a way of saying to you that there is something very unusual about this document. But do not misunderstand us for a minute. “A useful contribution to the discussion” is precisely what it is not meant to be. It is probably the first intellectually stimulating document ever to emerge from a curial office—and there have been shoals. It bears the imprint of the mind of a man whom we once all admired as an outstanding theologian. It is easy to read a lot of it as if it were a theological article because it is the creation of somebody who belongs to our time, not somebody dug up on the Appia Antica. But this does not alter the fact that it is an official warning to the Catholic bishops and theologians of the world, especially of the third world, signed by Cardinal Ratzinger and published by order of the Pope. And much more too. It is a piece of ammunition in an immense power battle extending even beyond the Church, beyond Christianity.

Do you realise what a novel situation we are witnessing?

A great temptation on these occasions is to fish around for precedents, and the obvious one is the Holy Office's decree *Lamentabili*, the Vatican's official declaration of war on “modernism” in 1907. That would be a mistake. The one similarity is that it is just as difficult to guess who are the theologians holding the

offending opinions (one or two of the opinions mentioned in the new document sound very peculiar indeed).

The differences are, in fact, striking. The new document says its aim is simply to draw attention to “the deviations, and risks of deviation, damaging to the faith and to Christian living, that are brought about by certain forms of liberation theology which use, in an unsufficiently critical manner, concepts borrowed from various currents of marxist thought” (Intro.) This is not the language of the anti-modernist decrees, however the new document may in fact be used (and the Church’s inquisitors, official and self-appointed, are sure to get out of it as much mileage as they can).

But what really separates the document from the world of *Lamentabili, Pascendi dominici gregis*, etc. etc., is that the main battle-grounds in Pius X’s campaign against modernism were seminaries (what first-degree student of 20th-century international history has ever heard of “modernism”?) whereas the fight against liberation theology is part of a battle for Latin America. What makes the situation we are witnessing novel, at least for us, is that for the first time for centuries many people in power in the wider world think that theology—a certain sort of theology— is *important*.

We Christians in the West think that our theology can sometimes aid us in our family squabbles; we stopped seriously believing long ago that our theology could change the world. But the new document will be studied carefully not only by Brazilian seminary professors but also by the leaders of Latin America’s 100,000 base communities and by the CIA and by a string of seedy dictators. We are not going to make out what is really going on in it if we do not remember *all* the readers it is written for.

Western liberals who read the whole of it will be pleasantly surprised. They will point out what it has to say about the overall scene. Can this possibly be “an attack” on liberation theology? “In certain parts of Latin America”, it says, “the seizure of the vast majority of the wealthy by an oligarchy of owners bereft of social consciousness, the practical absence of the shortcomings of a rule of law, military dictators making a mockery of elementary human rights, the corruption of certain powerful officials, the savage practices of some foreign capital interests constitute factors which nourish a passion for revolt among those who consider themselves the powerless victims of a new colonialism in the technological, financial, monetary or economic order” (VII, 12).

This is not the language of defenders of the status quo. And the document has plenty more to say on these lines. “Mankind will no longer passively submit to crushing poverty.”, it states. “Many factors, and among them certainly the leaven of the Gospel, have contributed to an awakening of the consciousness of the oppressed” (I,4).

The theologies of liberation “deserve credit for restoring to a place of honour the great texts of the prophets and of the Gospel in defence of the poor...” (IX,10). “More than ever, the Church intends to condemn abuses, injustices and attacks on freedom, wherever they occur and whoever commits them. She intends to struggle, by her own means, for the defense and advancement of the rights of mankind, especially of the poor” (Intro.).

When did the Holy Office ever write stuff like this? Surely this will be a blow to the dictators and the CIA? Or will it?

The passages quoted are not just camouflage. We see here the contribution made by theologians of rather different outlook from that of Ratzinger himself. (Ratzinger went to Paris and talked with Yves Congar, for example.) But do not be misled. These are admissions and concessions that the Holy Office had to make if it was going to launch an intelligently-argued assault on liberation theology, and not be accused by the world of selling out to Mr. Reagan. And, *judging it on its own terms*, the assault sweeps all before it. The accused is condemned before the trial starts.

Some of the specifically theological points the document makes were worth making—like its critique of the idea that *all* evil is accounted for by bad structures (IV,14–15). But this is not the right place for something like the closely-argued criticism of marxist ideas which the Holy Office has planted here.

Unlike Pedro Arrupe, the great former Jesuit General, the document denies that we can draw on marxist analysis without taking over the complete marxist world-view (VII, 7). (Yet even right-wing social theorists have done just this without batting an eyelid, and the Pope himself used the concept of alienation in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*. The blood of Marx and Freud flows in all our veins!) The argument’s second premise is that at the heart of the marxist world-view we find the concept of class-struggle (VIII). These two premises established, the conclusion is in sight: a theology incorporating the idea of class-struggle is irreconcilable with basic Christian teaching on the Church, ethics, and above all the love-command of the New Testament (IX, X), and many theologies of liberation do incorporate this idea although their authors do not know that it is there (IX,1).

For the past 351 years have I and my fellow-Dominicans borne the shame of Galileo’s condemnation utterly in vain? For, surely, as these disputes about the sense in which marxism is a system with a “hierarchy of beliefs” lie outside the compass of theology and church discipline—being properly the business of researchers in political theory, sociologists, etc.—it is not the business of the Church in its official teaching capacity to supply answers to them. Here we see the kind of problem that can crop up once somebody wants to argue intelligently in an official document about issues which are not all strictly to do with doctrine or morals. A man cannot ride two horses.

In fact, of course, people sitting in armchairs in Western

universities—the kind of people most likely to raise this awkward point—are not the people this document is meant for. How will its target audiences read it?

Liberation theology's sources are as numerous and hard to trace as the sources of the Amazon, and marxism is only one of them. Most liberation theologians will read the document, wince, and then breathe again (even if from now on at least some of them will have to keep this document constantly by their typewriters and watch their jargon more). On the other hand, some people working in base communities are likely to feel confused, for they are often living in a situation where the opportunities for subtleties are limited and marxism looks like the only workable alternative to the rule of empty-belly-and-jackboot. But many of them will be much more confused by the mysterious severe references to the "Church of the People" (IX, 11–13), which—surely quite mistakenly—could be interpreted as referring to base communities in general. In fact, these communities typically are not "a challenge to the sacramental and hierarchical structure of the Church" at all (there are, as always, exceptions).

And Mr Reagan's advisers, and Latin America's generals and right-wing bishops—how will they see the document? Quite differently. They will not worry about the bold commitments to social justice, and the nuances and intelligent reasoning. All that will seriously concern them will be how the document comes across on the media. For many of these people the document's mere existence is enough: the simple message that most of the world will get through the media is that the Catholic Church does not approve of liberation theology. (Shamefully, the summary of the document circulated to the English-speaking press virtually ignored all the positive things it says about social justice.) Popular knowledge of that disapproval will certainly help to discredit and isolate "progressives", whether or not they happen to have any marxism hidden in their theology, and that was an aim in CIA policy several years before Reagan went to the White House, as the Banzar Plan showed.

So have the politicians of the right got what they wanted after all? Not completely. In spite of the right-wing shift in the Vatican—as in numerous other places—the bizarre idea, circulating at the moment, that the Vatican has somehow become trapped in a huge CIA plot is just fantasy (there are better ways of explaining coincidences). Six months ago José Ramos Regidor charged Cardinal Ratzinger with having "un antimarxisme préconçu et idéologique", and this is substantially correct. Nevertheless, in the new document we do have all those strong statements about social justice. The Church is much too complex to be taken over.

We must not let those statements be forgotten. At the moment, if measured solely by *political* criteria, the arrival of this document must be seen as a setback for the builders of a Church genuinely dedicated to the creation of a more humane world. But later on socially-committed theologians may be grateful for some of the very positive things

scattered through it, quite often in subordinate clauses. Like the jittery governments of Eastern Europe, we must not for one moment underestimate the power of ideas. The politicians may be on top at the moment, but, by the nature of things, it will always be the theologians who—if there is truth in their ideas—have the last word.

The world too is very complex—much more than is obvious from inside any ancient European capital, as this document shows. But this truth is slowly penetrating even the walls of the Vatican, and in these dark days we should be thankful for small mercies like that. One of the relevant papal texts mentioned in the document (V, 2) is the apostolic letter which Paul VI wrote to Cardinal Roy in 1971, *Octogesima adveniens*. In that letter Pope Paul said: “In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyse with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country” (n.4).

J.O.M.

## Doing Theology in English

Nicholas Lash

*The text of a brief report presented to the Upholland Theological Consultation of April 1984, at which Fergus Kerr OP gave the paper which we published in June.*

### *Introduction*

Nine years ago, the editor of *The Month* invited me to reflect on the state of English Catholic theology. In preparation for this Consultation, therefore, I turned back to the article I produced on that occasion<sup>1</sup> and asked myself: how much has changed?

By and large, I think, very little. Others of you are better placed than I am to comment on the state of theology in seminaries, colleges of education, and houses of study of religious orders. In the universities,