

Liberation Theology

edited by Ronald Nash;

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reviewed by Johan D. Tangeider

What does it mean to be on the side of the poor? How can injustice and exploitation be overcome? In their attempt to address these questions, liberation theologians have reinterpreted the biblical concerns for the poor in terms of Marxist ideas. They have taken Scripture texts and given them political meaning. Scripture is no longer the primary source of revelation, but consciousness and the experiences of the oppressed classes. Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation* (1973) is probably the best known early book expressing these ideas. For Gutierrez the best pastoral advice he could give was to join the Marxists, who are presumed to be actively creating brotherly conditions of life.

Ronald Nash calls liberation theology one of the major heresies in the contemporary church. This new theology for the poor is called characteristic, indigenous, Latin American Roman Catholic thought. But after close examination, it turns out to be the influence of European trained clergy, and mission personnel from Europe and North America. The movement is heavily influenced by the political theologians J.B. Metz, Jurgen Moltmann, Dorothee Sölle among others. In his essay, *Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope-European Roots of Liberation Theology*, Robert C. Walton, shows how Moltmann wishes "to call men back to the image of the Old Testament God of Israel, the nomad God who led His people out of the land of Egypt."

Liberation theologians are one-sided in their critique. They blame the first world countries, and the U.S. in particular, for all the economic, political and social ills in the Third World. The choice of scapegoat is selective, to say the least. Why don't the lovers of freedom and justice condemn the bondage wherever it exists, including the communist nations of the world? In his insightful essay, *A Theology of Development for Latin America*, the Roman Catholic thinker Michael Novak demonstrates that internal structures common to Latin America are the fundamental obstacles to overcoming under-development. The U.S. is not the villain. Novak faults the Roman Catholic church in particular for the ills of Latin America. He says of the bishops, "They accept no responsibility for three centuries of hostility to trade, commerce and industry. They seem to imagine that loans and aid should be tendered them independently of economics laws. And that international markets should operate without economic sanctions.

The contributors of this collection of ten essays note the questions liberation theologians seek to address, their sincere compassion for the poor, their one-sidedness by putting all the blame for the Third World's problems on the shoulders of the First World. And they fault them for the way they handle biblical revelation.

The authors conclude that liberation theology is not a helpful corrective to the weakness of traditional, orthodox theology, but a dangerous defective.

The essays in this book, with the exception of one, are much needed and useful analyses of a theology which contributes to the revolutionary turmoil in the Third World. I found Dr. Nash's essay, *The Christian Choice between Capitalism and Socialism*, the exception. He has many good things to say about the need to help the poor and oppressed people of the world. But I don't believe that we may baptize capitalism as THE Christian economic system. Nash calls the latter a moral system. He writes, "It is important to realize that capitalism does pass the moral test; capitalism is a system that fosters and furthers moral behavior in individuals." But impersonal systems do not foster morals, people do. Neither capitalism nor socialism have biblical roots.

I hope that this well-documented impressive volume will receive a wide audience among Christians committed to work in the political, economic and social arenas. Of all the works I have read on liberation theology, this is one of the best!