

*Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic*, by Ivan Petrella and Marcella Althaus-Reid, Series: Reclaiming Liberation Theology, London, UK: SCM Press, 2008, pages: 176, ISBN -978-0-334-04134-4.

Reviewed by Colin Warner

I strongly recommend that every evangelical believer, whatever their convictions or opinions about liberation theologies may be, should read this book. Given that the statistics are correct and not misapplied, and that the reports about global poverty are true, the opening chapters of this book will surely inform the mind, awaken the conscience, and arouse the spirit to consider some form of social action. Investigating the universal context for re-thinking Christian theology, the author concludes that “the defining mark of the current global context is the spread of “zones of social abandonment”. That term *zones of social abandonment* in itself challenges the Christian to think deeply about the real effect that the Church and its theologies are having, or not having upon our world.

The initial purpose of this polemic is to highlight and critique the shortcomings and failures of the second-generation liberation theologians with a view to reclaiming liberation theology by restoring the original fundamental concerns addressed by the pioneers of the movement. The writer is a devout advocate of liberation theology, but with a markedly (Marxist?) socialist ideology driving his theological convictions. He boldly affirms that,

Any kind of Christian theology today, even the rich and dominant countries, which does not have as its starting point the historic situation of dependence and domination of two thirds of humankind, with its thirty million dead of hunger and malnutrition will not be able to concretize historically its fundamental themes.

In the opening chapter, *The Global Material Context of the Liberation Theologian: The Poverty of the Majority*, the global market ideology riding on the back of capitalism and enabling the multinational companies to expand is described as secularist idolatry. In the words of the author it is “an idolatrous logic that makes the market the ultimate judge of the value of every human life.” Three institutions are identified as governing the global economy and setting the rules of interaction between the nations. They are

the International Monetary Fund as an export financing operation, the World Bank as a debt collector for international financial institutions, and the World Trade Organization which dictates the rules for global economic activity that ensure the logic of profit over life operates as a global norm. There are three major agreements that serve the WTO's purpose in controlling, regulating and effecting the distribution of the world's wealth, and if the author's facts are true will cause considerable alarm to those believers truly committed to the advancement of the Kingdom of God upon the earth. I could not but feel that the facts—assuming they are true—have an eschatological significance for readers of the Christian scriptures.

In the second chapter, *The Material Context of the US Liberation Theologian: Poverty in the Midst of Plenty*, As one the richest nations in the world, the author uses USA as the socio economic bench mark for his polemic against the market-driven globalization and its international consequences for the poor, the excluded, the deprived and socially abandoned millions in the wider world. The author lays the charge that “Latin American liberation theologians and United States liberation theologians share the same theological context, a common inability to deal successfully with material context”. What follows should be of a very deep concern to believers in the USA, but also force believers in those other wealthier nations to take stock and open their eyes to the realities around them. Poverty is a universal disease. As the author sees it, “in our time, when exclusion from the global economy is best understood not as a geographic divide, but rather as a social rich-poor divide the understanding of the Third/Two-Thirds World needs to be recovered”. This point of view allows him to write about Third World people living in a First World socio-economic environment. Those with an interest in statistical evidence will find this chapter quite alarming – especially if they live in the USA. Having viewed the problems of the zones of social abandonment in general terms, we are invited to look at the different cultural, ethnic, socio-economic and excluded sectors in Miami, e.g. African Americans, Hispanic/Latinos and Women in more specific terms. However the conclusion reached at the end of the chapter is the issue of class distinction as the primary contribution to poverty. To summarize it, “In economic terms, the lives of the wealthy are far more important to the workings of the global economy than the lives of the poor”.

However the book is also a polemic from within its own ranks against the *Failure of Liberation Theologies* to achieve its goals, offering the reasons why it

has lost its power. In his third chapter the author's well researched and firmly expressed opinion is that "Contemporary liberation theologians do not take poverty seriously." On the failures or shortcomings he highlights the sectarian and cultural interests and the emphasis on specifically deprived or socially excluded groups of an ethnic, gender or cultural, and argues that this has minimized the focus of liberationist goals on the zones of abandonment and the major issue of the world's larger population of the poor, deprived, socially excluded and economically abandoned. He writes,

We share the belief that the emphasis on specific localization that undergirds much of our liberationist discourse, which lends itself to an insular attachment with matters of culture, identity and difference, is too narrow to foster the kinds of overarching and harmonizing emancipatory visions that the goal of social justice requires in our time.

It is this proliferation of liberation theologies—black, womanist, Hispanic/Latino, Latin American etc., resulting in an upsurge of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality as the organizing axes that has blurred the fact that material deprivation actually comes from one's class standing in society. This has to be seen as most important form of oppression.

A second prong of his critique, explaining this proliferation of liberation theologies in terms of a loss of unified action, is that liberation theology has become a respectable, and academically acceptable subject, where debate has replaced determination. This has resulted in the loss of the pioneering vision of liberation theology. Four kinds of attitudes have developed among liberation theologians, which have led to it becoming "a theology of inclusion for the middle class." *Monochromatism* is the term used to describe those liberation theologians with a very limited range of vision, who have focused wholly upon the political liberation of a particular ethnic or racial group and neglected to act in response to the economic exclusion and oppression of the world's poor. He uses the development of black American theology to illustrate this. It is with a similar outcome that *amnesia* is the term used to describe those liberation theologians who having forgotten the wider goals in order to focus in on cultural advancements and on fighting for the education rights of a deprived specific ethnic group. The author uses the Hispanic/Latino theologies to demonstrate this.

A further group of modern liberation theologians are charged with

gigantism. The theologians suffering from this debilitating condition see capitalism everywhere, as responsible for everything, and as an inescapable reality. With this conception even envisioning a means of negative resistance is a close to impossible task. Paralysis ensues. Finally *naiveté* is the last of the debilitating conditions to which liberation theologians are prone. A very good examination of feminist theologies serves to explain the way *naiveté* has tamed this tigress of contemporary theologies. All too often, as a consequence of the previous three, worldly and sophisticated “theologians suddenly become ingenuous, credulous, and succumb to wishful thinking and/or poetic rapture in which rhetoric is pumped up to mask an absence of new ideas”. It is therefore in this third chapter that the author delivers his polemic against the current trends in liberation theology that diluted or even neutered the dynamic thrust that came in the early period of liberationist reaction against the beast called capitalism and its unjust distribution of wealth and subjection of the poorer nations of the world.

The final chapter *Beyond Liberation Theology* seeks to offer remedies for the reclamation of the ground lost to liberation theology as a result of the issues raised in the earlier chapter. The author is clear in his polemic and declares, “Liberation theology must recover the rebellious spirit of its youth and once again rebel”. Instead it now operates “at the margin of politics and has been co-opted into mainstream theological discourse”. The feeling of outrage against the zones of social abandonment and widespread poverty has been abandoned or abdicated in the confrontation with neo-liberalism and its secularist idolatrous theology disguised as social science. This is highlighted by the author’s return to an analysis of contemporary society in the USA, but is also widened into his attack upon globalized capitalism and the multitudinous sacrificial victims of the unjust and unfair distribution of its wealth. He totally rejects the tendency in the academic field to describe liberation theology as contextual theologies, particularizing theologies or Local theologies as fundamentally wrong because the academy tries to downplay the radical nature of real liberation theology. Two major proposals stand out in the author’s concluding way forward. The first is that the social sciences must become an integral part of American liberation theologies, and he justifies that recommendation. However the ethnic, cultural, racial and colour differences cannot be overlooked or circumvented, even though *they are created by human subjects and is a sight of conflict and contestation*. So

the author closes with a call for a coalition of the different groups, not based on biology but in an oppositional relation to the racist, sexist, and classist struggle against injustice, deprivation, economic exclusion and zones of social abandonment.