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‘Hunger for Bread, Hunger for God’ – a Latin American Perspective

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Introduction

The aim of this essay is to explore ways in which the theology of liberation that is being developed in Latin America can be used and appropriated by Christians in Eastern Europe. At first sight, there appear to be considerable problems in any such project. Firstly, liberation theology is fundamentally a contextual theology, and since the context of Latin America is very different from that of Eastern Europe, what is there within liberation theology that could be translated into this new situation? Secondly, perhaps more importantly, there are problems of language. For Eastern Europeans, the language of liberation, of community, of oppression and marginalisation, has distinct resonances, if not direct parallels, with the language used by the former communist state. For Latin American Christians, the language of reconciliation, of renewal, of personal development, is a language promoted by a particular sector of the church which is at odds with the liberationists’ understanding of the option for the poor.

In other words, before any dialogue between East and South can get off the ground, there needs to be a clear understanding both of the context and of the history of the respective peoples. The vocabulary used by the theologians of liberation in these two areas of conflict has to be explained, so that the dialogue may be more fruitful. Indeed, the subtext of this essay argues that the dialogue is necessary for both parties. Furthermore, despite the formal differences in terms of language, the substance which this language attempts to articulate is in fact similar.

To that end, this essay gives an account of the Latin American perspective. I argue that the different emphases of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference (CELAM) at Medellín in 1968 and at Puebla in 1979 provide a means of understanding the different preoccupations of Latin American and Eastern European theologians. It should be emphasised at this initial stage that we are dealing with emphases, not with oppositions. The concept of ‘liberation from’, which I argue is characteristic of the documents of Medellín, is not absent from, nor contradicted by, the documents of Puebla. Rather, in Mexico the bishops were confronted by an economic, political, social and ecclesial situation which was different from that in 1968. Consequently, the concerns expressed in 1979 reflected this contextual change. Thus the concept of ‘liberation for’ which, I suggest, is distinctive in the Puebla documents must be understood in the light of Medellín and, above all, in the light of the commitment made at Puebla to the ‘preferential option for the poor’.

The main part of this article is devoted to an exploration of these two themes, in the light of some brief remarks about the distinctive methodology of the Latin American

liberation theologians. The purpose of this exposition is to facilitate an understanding of the most significant aspects of this theology, since much of the primary source material is unavailable in English, and the secondary literature that exists frequently depends on texts from the 1960s and 1970s. The concluding part of the essay, however, outlines how this distinction between ‘liberation from’ and ‘liberation for’ – which has been expressed more popularly as ‘hunger for bread, hunger for God’ – may provide a fruitful starting-point for a dialogue between East and South. The situation in Latin America at the present time demands that the first part of this phrase be given priority. Eastern Europe, however, does not (yet) share the poverty and marginalisation endemic in Latin America. In the Eastern European context, civil and political rights – the ‘negative freedoms’ of political philosophy – are the critical objective. For Eastern Europeans, ‘liberation for’ is a more urgent preoccupation (at the moment) than ‘liberation from’. But the two are not incompatible; they are mutually reinforcing.

This point is confirmed when one considers the context in which the phrase ‘hunger for bread, hunger for God’ originated. The context gives evidence of the extent to which the insights of liberation theology are supported by Pope John Paul II. On his visit to Peru in 1985, the Pope went to Villa El Salvador, a shanty town on the outskirts of Lima. In the course of the eucharistic celebrations, a young couple, Victor and Irene Chero, read out a message of welcome. In their short address, they spoke of the living conditions in Villa El Salvador.

Holy Father, we are hungry, we are suffering poverty, we have no jobs, we are sick. Our hearts wracked with grief, we see our wives giving birth with TB, our children are dying, our children are growing up weak and with little future. But in spite of this, we believe in the God of Life. . .

Later, quoting Luke 4:18–19, they asked that their hunger for bread and hunger for God be satisfied.¹

After this welcome, the Pope replied, speaking from a prepared text. At the end, however, he continued spontaneously:

I have listened carefully and I see that there is here a hunger for God. This hunger constitutes a great richness, a richness of the poor that must not be lost through any programme. You cannot replace the goodness of God with any other worldly goods. So for you who are hungry, I wish you an ever greater hunger for God.

But there is also hunger for bread. The Lord has taught us to pray each day, ‘give us today our daily bread’. We must do everything possible to ensure that this daily bread is given to the hungry. It is a requirement for Peruvian society, for the good of Peru. The shanty towns must not lack their daily bread, because it is a right, a right expressed in our daily prayer ‘give us today our daily bread’.

So I wish that the hunger for God remain; but that the hunger for bread be satisfied, that the means be found to deliver this bread. I wish that you may no longer be hungry for bread, but that you may still be hungry for God.²

In this improvised reply, the Pope underlines the twin characteristics of the Latin American people: the characteristics emphasised by Gutiérrez when he writes that the people of this continent are both Christian and oppressed. Hunger for God and hunger for bread are not mutually exclusive, therefore. The action to ensure that the hunger for bread is satisfied takes place within the context of the hunger for God. It

is in this sense that one should understand the commitment of liberation theologians and parts of the church in Latin America to the 'preferential option for the poor'. This option does not derive from political convictions but from their understanding of the nature of God. It is, therefore, a 'theocentric' option, since the hunger for bread is not part of God's plan for humanity.

The next two sections of this essay explore more fully the content of these two ideas 'hunger for bread' and 'hunger for God' in the Latin American context.

Hunger for Bread – or 'Liberation From'

The origins of the concern on the part of the Latin American church to consider the contemporary social, economic and political situation can be traced to the Second Vatican Council. The idea of 'discerning the signs of the times' which was so prominent in the Council's efforts to open the church to the world has been highly influential. Indeed, it was the experience of some of the Latin American bishops and theologians present at Vatican II that led to the conference of CELAM at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. The purpose of the Medellín conference, as it was conceived by Bishop Larraín of Chile, was to apply the insights of Vatican II to the Latin American context.³ The final document that was produced by the bishops has had a profound and enduring impact on the church in Latin America.⁴

The first part of the document is dedicated to 'human promotion'. It contains five sections, the first two of which are 'justice' and 'peace'. These two sections, both drafted in the initial stages by Gutiérrez, contain a powerful critique of contemporary Latin American society. Their location at the beginning of the document further indicates the extent to which the Latin American bishops were convinced that social analysis – knowing the 'reality' – is an indispensable prerequisite to doing theology. In the document on 'peace'⁵ the bishops denounce 'internal colonialism': the way in which groups in society define as subversive any attempt to change a social system which perpetuates their position of privilege. They criticise capital flight, tax evasion and the repatriation of profits, the growing foreign debt and international imperialism. They demand peace with justice: 'where there are unjust inequalities in social, political, economic and cultural terms. . . there is a rejection of our Lord'. Above all, they criticise the 'institutionalised violence' in which 'whole populations lack the minimum for survival [and] live in such a state of dependency that they are prevented from taking any initiative or responsibility, or any participation in social and political life'. They go on to list a series of obligations for the church, among which are the need for the church 'energetically to denounce the abuses and unjust consequences of the excessive inequalities between rich and poor, powerful and weak' and the need 'to denounce the unjust action which at a world level is effected by powerful nations against the self-determination of weak countries'.

The structure of this bishops' document, which places a critique of social, economic and political conditions before the development of theological reflection, has been followed by almost every subsequent episcopal document. It is also present in the working document for the fourth CELAM conference held in Santo Domingo in October 1992. More significantly for our purposes here, however, this emphasis on social analysis has been foundational in the theology of liberation. At the time of the preparation for Medellín, in 1967, Gutiérrez delivered a series of lectures in Chimbote, a fishing village north of Lima. Originally, he had been asked to talk about a 'theology of development', but as he himself has said on a number of occasions, as he read the Bible, the word 'liberation' seemed to be much more appropriate.⁶ In this way the theology of liberation began.

In a continent like Latin America, the challenge does not come in the first instance from the non-believer, but from the non-person. That is, from someone who is not recognised as a person by the existing social order: the poor person, the exploited, the one who is systematically and legally deprived of his or her humanity. . . . The non-person questions above all, not our religious universe, but our economic, social, political and cultural world. . . . The question is not, then, how to talk of God in an adult world, but: how to proclaim God as Father in an inhuman world? To say to non-persons that they are sons and daughters of God, what does this imply?⁷

This quotation from Gutiérrez's recent book *The Truth Shall Set You Free* clearly sets out the methodological distinctiveness of the theology of liberation. It is fundamentally an inductive approach to theology; Gutiérrez considers the theological enterprise to be the attempt to articulate in systematic form the questions which come from attempts by the people – especially the poor – to do theology. The critical problem for the Latin American theologians is not that of secularisation but that of proclaiming the God of Life in a world of death. This methodological point is of the utmost importance because it is from this insight that the concern for social analysis derives. It is because these theologians are attempting to articulate what it means to say to poor people 'God loves you' that questions of politics, economics and culture arise.

From the outset, theology of liberation and the documents of the Latin American bishops have been concerned with justice in society. Their writings reveal the critical importance of describing in detail those injustices within society from which the people need to be liberated. Having looked briefly at the document of Medellín as a means of underlining the significance (and the orthodoxy) of social analysis, we should now explore some of the specific issues in this analysis, not least because it is the language and character of this 'socio-analytic mediation'⁸ that have led critics to describe liberation theology as Marxist⁹ – a label which will provoke understandable unease among readers in Eastern Europe. The most controversial aspect of this analysis has been their use of dependency theory as a means of understanding the relations between Latin America and the First World. It is therefore appropriate to consider this aspect in greater detail.

Dependency, Development and Domination

The use of dependency theory in social analysis was one of the distinctive features of liberation theology as it emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The liberation theologians were critical of the relations of domination and oppression which result from the centre–periphery dichotomy that they establish using dependency theory. Leonardo Boff was a typical exponent of this method of analysis in the middle and late 1970s: 'Underdevelopment is the other side of the coin of development and is its consequence. . . . The determining cause of our underdevelopment . . . is the system of dependency, which is the same as saying oppression and domination, internalised in the various countries of the periphery by the representatives of the Empire.'¹⁰

This centre–periphery relationship is also characteristic of the analysis of Gutiérrez and Dussel (among others) during this period. McGovern argues in his account of the social analysis of liberation theology that there are two distinct trends: one is that of dependency theory, the other is based on Comblin's analysis of the national security state.¹¹ I would argue, however, that the national security ideology is itself a consequence of the dependent relationships which develop between the ruling elites of the

countries of the centre and those of the periphery as a means of consolidating the power of the latter.¹²

In a recent essay entitled 'Theology and the social sciences' Gutiérrez put forward a defence of the use of dependency theory by liberation theologians during that period, arguing that any criticism was unwarranted on two counts. Firstly, the liberation theologians developed their analysis from Latin American social scientific research, much of which was written by non-Marxists. In other words, the liberation theologians were only availing themselves of current developments in social theory – in any case, many Marxists are themselves critical of dependency theory. Secondly, the use of this theory does not entail a whole-hearted endorsement of everything implied in it. As Gutiérrez writes, 'in the context of theological work, it is simply a means to gain a better understanding of social reality'.¹³ Furthermore, he points to the fact that this centre–periphery analysis was also used by the Latin American bishops at Medellín.

Over the past decade, however, liberation theologians have moved away from a reliance on dependency theory as such, as this theory has lost ground in the field of social science. In the introduction to the second edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez recognises the deficiencies of this theoretical model, not least because it fails to account for the internal dynamics of oppression and domination. He prefers now to focus on the opposition between a 'developed and rich North (whether capitalist or socialist) and an underdeveloped, poor South'.¹⁴ Clodovis Boff likewise prefers to develop a North–South distinction, but with an important difference. He argues that the countries of the North also manifest a situation of conflict between dominant and dominated classes – the situation of blacks and women in the USA, for example.¹⁵

This characterisation of the relationships between Third and First Worlds has the added merit of reflecting the Vatican's analysis of the global situation, as John Paul II has also condemned the gulf that exists between the rich North and the poor South. In his inaugural address at Puebla, he spoke of the rich getting ever richer and the poor ever poorer. He added a further dimension to this critique in a speech in Canada in 1984. Commenting on the parable of the last judgment, he insisted:

In the light of these words of Christ, the poor South will judge the opulent North. And the poor peoples and nations – poor in different respects, not only through the lack of food, but also the lack of freedom and human rights – will judge those who seize these goods, accumulating for themselves the imperialist monopoly of economic and political dominion at the cost of others.¹⁶

What is common to all these analyses is a recognition of the importance of attempting to understand the structural processes by which the poverty of Latin America is maintained. The divergences that exist within liberation theology relate more to the choice of model used to characterise the centre–periphery or North–South relations rather than to the place of such analysis within the theological enterprise. For the liberation theologians – as for the Pope, as his response to the people of Villa El Salvador demonstrates – theology must be contextual. The 'socio-analytic mediation' is an indispensable first stage in doing theology.

Debt

In the period since the 1970s, a further critical aspect of the Latin American social and economic situation has dominated the writings of bishops and theologians: the debt

crisis. In theological terms, the problem of foreign debt has more affinities with biblical material than the issue of underdevelopment. Debt looms large in the Old Testament critique of relationships within society. Indeed, the concept of the 'Jubilee' year in which all debts are to be forgiven serves as a powerful symbol of the extent to which indebtedness has no place in God's plan for humanity. Debt also plays an important part in the Gospel narratives: the parable of the wicked servant is just one example.

Christians cannot disregard the issue of debt and forgiveness, since this point appears in perhaps the most basic text of all: the Lord's Prayer. The Pope's speech in Villa El Salvador makes use of this prayer to underline the importance of dealing with the problem of hunger and poverty – 'give us today our daily bread'. In the same way, we also pray – or at least used to pray – 'forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who owe unto us'.

One example can suffice to indicate the way in which this prayer, which is so fundamental to the Christian faith, has been manipulated in the Latin American context to serve radically contradictory ends. In an article in *Pasos* in 1987, Franz Hinkelammert commented that until the 1970s the Lord's Prayer in Spanish and Portuguese used the word 'debts' in the verse mentioned above. However, in the 1970s 'forgive us our debts' was replaced by 'forgive us our sins'. As Hinkelammert points out, the reference to debts was expunged at precisely the time at which it might have had a significant impact on people's attitudes.

Taking into consideration the difficulties implied in effecting change in texts which are of such ritual significance as the Lord's Prayer, it is astonishing how quickly this new translation became accepted, a translation which, above all, bore no relation to any translation of the Bible at the time.

He comments further on the logic that lies behind such a transformation:

The fact of this change demonstrates the bad conscience of those who defend the payment of the debt, and who wish to impose this debt on the Third World. To continue to speak of the forgiveness of debts as a condition of the forgiveness of our own debts by God would have been very expensive for those who wanted the debt repaid. It is much cheaper to change the translation of a text, even if it is a sacred one.¹⁷

This critique of the way in which theological language has been appropriated to serve the interests of those committed to enforcing the Third World debt is not limited to theologians. Many Latin American bishops are equally vociferous in their opposition to the payment of the debt. Even a cursory glance at the statistics of the debt reveals the depth of the problem. According to the OECD, between 1982 and 1990 the total resource flows from developed countries to the developing countries totalled \$927 billion. Over the same period, developing countries remitted *in debt service alone* \$1345 billion; there was thus a net transfer from the South to the North of \$418 billion. (For comparison, the US Marshall Plan transferred \$70 billion (in 1991 US\$) to Europe at the end of the war.) In spite of this transfer, at the start of the 1990s the debtor countries were 61 per cent more in debt than they had been in 1982.¹⁸

In the Latin American context, the examples of Peru and Brazil indicate the extent of the debt burden. In 1970, the total long-term debt of Brazil was \$5128 million (12.2 per cent of GNP). Service payments on this debt were 12.5 per cent of exports. By 1986, the debt had risen to \$97,164 million (37.6 per cent of GNP) with service payments accounting for 41.8 per cent of exports. The Peruvian case is similarly dramatic. In

1970, the total long-term debt was \$2655 million (38.1 per cent of GNP). By 1986, it had risen to \$12,386 million (50.5 per cent of GNP). However, considered in relation to gross *domestic* product (GDP), the debt represented 94.6 per cent of GDP in 1985, declining to a mere 68.2 per cent in 1986.¹⁹

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the issue of the foreign debt is a significant element in the social analysis of the Latin American church. For these statistics do not reveal the extent to which the poor of the continent have paid the price of this debt. The consequences of the need to earn foreign currency to service the debt, the effects of IMF conditionality for new loans, and the world recession are all too apparent in the poverty and living conditions of the majority of those in Latin America. In Brazil, at least 16 million people are currently earning a minimum wage, which in September 1992 was worth 230,000 cruzeiros per month. The *cesta básica* – or basket of goods which are needed to support a family of four for a month – increased by 31.2 per cent in the month of August to 1,687,000 cruzeiros. The estimate for September was 2,000,000 cruzeiros.²⁰ Although the debt alone is not responsible for the deterioration in living standards and the fall in real income, the crisis has, in the words of one commentator, 'turned a highly unjust form of economic development into an intolerable one'.²¹ Or, as Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga writes,

this continent . . . until now has been blocked, dependent and subjugated to a foreign debt which is unjust and evil: a debt the Latin American people should not pay because they did not create it; a debt the Latin American people cannot pay because they have already paid it with raw materials and cheap labour, handing over their own property, their soil, their minerals; a foreign debt that is a sin to pay, a sin to collect.²²

These two issues of debt and development are prominent in the social analysis of the Latin American church – of bishops and theologians alike. In this continent, the reality of poverty, oppression and marginalisation extends beyond the shanty towns of the megalopolis to the indigenous peoples, blacks and women. For the conditions from which these people seek liberation are not determined solely by economic factors. They are determined by political, cultural and social factors too. As Gutiérrez argues,

to physical death one must add cultural death, because in a situation of oppression one sees destroyed everything that gives unity and strength to the dispossessed. This is the place of social analysis in the theological endeavour, because it helps us to understand the concrete forms . . . of this reality of injustice and death.²³

The language of liberation, oppression and injustice must not be understood, therefore, in a Marxist sense, but in a Christian sense: reality is judged in the light of Christ. The reality of death is perceived as contradictory to the God of life and love who wants all people to be free. It is the poverty suffered by the majority of Latin American people that cries out to be remedied. In this context, the liberation theologians are adamant that the church cannot remain indifferent, cannot fail to pronounce a theological sentence on conditions that seem so remote from the Kingdom of God.

To the people of Eastern Europe, this language, together with the emphasis on social analysis, might seem at best misplaced, at worst alien and alienating. This section has tried to give an indication of the context out of which this theology emerges. As yet, Eastern Europe does not for the most part share this reality. To the outsider, at least, the concerns of that region are democracy, civil rights and political rights. These are

also of the utmost significance in Latin America, as the recent impeachment of President Collor in Brazil graphically demonstrates, but poverty is even more pressing. For Eastern Europeans, then, the concept of 'liberation for', the sense of 'hunger for God' articulated by Victor and Irene Chero, may be more helpful.

Hunger for God or 'Liberation For'

Between 1968 and 1979, the situation changed considerably in Latin America. At the political level, military dictatorships gave way to faltering democracies. Economically, the region experienced growth – particularly in Brazil – but the inequalities and injustice within society criticised by the bishops at Medellín remained constant. At the ecclesial level, however, there was considerable change. With the election of Alfonso López Trujillo as secretary of CELAM, the influence of the conservative wing of the Latin American church increased dramatically. Some bishops who had joined in the criticism of social conditions at Medellín regarded the primitive flourishing of democracy as proof that society had been transformed. In this new context, they argued, the church did not need to speak out against injustice, since democracy guaranteed the essential rights of the people.

The preparations for the conference at Puebla were consequently a running battle between López Trujillo and those bishops and theologians who were convinced that the insights of Medellín were still valid. Dioceses throughout Latin America sent their comments on the initial working papers drafted by López Trujillo and the CELAM staff, many of which were highly critical of the tone of the documents and of the attempt to retreat from the pastoral line established at Medellín. In the event, the conference produced a compromise document which, while confirming the conclusions of Medellín, gave prominence to other themes such as spirituality, liturgy and integral liberation. Nevertheless, the *Final Document* from Puebla advanced the reflection of Medellín in important areas.

In the first place, in his opening speech, John Paul II denounced the structures which enable 'the rich to become ever richer at the cost of the poor becoming ever poorer'.²⁴ He also spoke of 'the poor, the needy, the marginalised; all those in whom we see the suffering face of our Lord'.²⁵ These insights of the Pope – the identification of Jesus Christ with the weak and the needy as expressed in Matthew 25, together with his critique of structural injustice – were taken up by the bishops and reformulated in the *Final Document* as the need for the church to adopt a 'preferential option for the poor'. This phrase has been of such significance in the subsequent life of the Latin American church that it is worth considering in greater detail.

The Preferential Option for the Poor

The word 'preferential' has perhaps caused most controversy, as it is argued that the liberation theologians and Latin American bishops are using this word in an exclusive sense. That is, God's love for the poor excludes any concern for the rich – or even the comfortably off. Such a discrimination runs contrary to the church's teaching about the Kingdom of God and about the nature of God as God of love for *all* people. To understand 'preferential' as somehow exclusive is to miss the point. What is meant here is that God has a special love for the weak, the needy and the oppressed, precisely because they are in that situation. This concern does not derive from the fact that these are 'better' people, but from their having been impoverished in some way. Gutiérrez as usual puts this point most clearly when he gives an analogy to explain the phrase. A

mother with two children, one of whom is ill, will be more concerned for the ill child. Her 'preference' in this sense is not motivated by the fact that she loves the ill child and not the other, but by the fact that the ill child is in a position of greater need. So, argues Gutiérrez, does God have a preferential concern for the poor. Consequently, this concern should be shared by the church also. The option for the poor is not, therefore, at the expense of, or to the exclusion of, the rich.

The word 'option' also requires some brief explanation. As is argued by many liberation theologians, the word 'option' is misleading to the extent that it suggests that there is a choice involved here. In fact, they argue, this commitment is a duty of all Christians because of the kind of God that God is. The option for the poor is not the result of a particular set of political principles – it is not because one is left-wing or right-wing that one takes up this concern. Rather, the commitment derives from an understanding of the nature of God. In the words of Gutiérrez,

the *ultimate motive* of what is called the 'preferential option for the poor' is found in the God in whom we believe. There can be other valid reasons: the awakening of the poor today, the social analysis of the situation, human compassion, the recognition of the poor as the protagonists of their own history. But to tell the truth, the fundamental element of this commitment to the poor is theocentric. Solidarity with the poor and oppressed is based on our faith in God, the God of life who reveals himself in Jesus Christ.²⁶

Finally, who are the 'poor'? This is perhaps the most contentious issue of all; it is worthy of a much fuller discussion than is possible here, but some brief comments must suffice. In the earliest stages, liberation theologians defined poverty strictly in socio-economic terms: the poor are those who are impoverished in material terms. It is possible that this emphasis on material poverty was the cause of the criticism by others in the church that liberation theologians were not addressing the issue of spiritual poverty. Put simply, there seemed in this opposition to be a reflection of the opposition between the Beatitudes in Luke – blessed are the poor – and the Beatitudes in Matthew – blessed are the poor in spirit. Indeed, there has been much theological reflection on this divergence not just in Latin America.

However, to attempt to make such a clear distinction between material poverty and spiritual poverty is to misinterpret the sense in which the liberation theologians use the term. For, as Gutiérrez, the Boffs and many others argue, there is no real opposition between Matthew and Luke. They suggest that Matthew's 'blessed are the poor in spirit' refers to what they call 'evangelical poverty'. They are opposed to an understanding of spiritual poverty which legitimates poverty. Poverty, they argue, is not a good thing. Their reading of Matthew explains 'poor in spirit' as referring to those who enter into solidarity with the poor: those who open themselves to God, who become (in Gutiérrez's words) 'spiritual children'. As Leonardo and Clodovis Boff write, the evangelically poor 'do not seek to idealize either material poverty, which they see as a consequence of the sin of exploitation, or riches, which they see as the expression of oppressive and selfish accumulation of goods; instead they seek the means to social justice for all'.²⁷ As a consequence of the increasing collaboration with theologians from other Third World countries, however, the liberation theologians in Latin America have enriched their understanding of who the poor are. In recent years, their writings have expressed poverty as including those who are marginalised by race, sex and culture. They are particularly concerned with the oppression suffered by women in what is predominantly a machistic society, with the conditions of the indigenous peoples, and with discrimination against black people.

This understanding of the many faces of poverty does not negate their distinction between material, spiritual and evangelical poverty, but rather broadens it.

The Evangelising Potential of the Poor and Spirituality

This development of reflection around the theme of poverty is not unique to the theologians. It can be found in the writings and in the pastoral practice of much of the Latin American church. For this reflection is not dependent upon a deductive assessment about the nature of poverty in the abstract, but rather is based on pastoral insights. It is the work alongside indigenous peoples in the Andes, in the Amazon, alongside washerwomen in the shanty towns of Rio, Caracas and Lima, alongside the black people of Salvador, Barlovento and Cartagena which has challenged the church to redefine its theological understanding of poverty. Of considerable influence in this process has been another evocative phrase from the *Final Document* of Puebla, which speaks of the 'evangelising potential of the poor' (n. 1147).

This idea, together with the commitment to the 'preferential option for the poor', provides the connection between the two emphases of 'liberation from' and 'liberation for', demonstrating the integrity of the two terms. 'Liberation from' cannot be understood independently of a vision of that for which liberation is oriented. 'Liberation from' poverty, injustice and structural sin leads to a new society which, for Christians, is to be defined by communion with God and communion with our neighbours. For it is through the liberation of the poor that we are liberated; it is through contact with the poor that we learn of the gratuitous love of God for all people.

The interdependence of these two ideas can be seen clearly when one tries to explore what is meant by the 'evangelising potential of the poor'. I think that what the bishops are responding to with this phrase is the way in which the base ecclesial communities have enriched the life of the church. The 'hunger for God' to which the Pope referred in Villa El Salvador is a characteristic of the base communities of Latin America. It is a hunger for the Bible, for a greater understanding of what it means to be Christian, but all the time set against a background of what it means to be Christian in the particular situation in which the base communities find themselves. The creativity in terms of liturgy, worship, biblical interpretation and discipleship that has emerged over the last three decades in the grassroots communities has been well documented.²⁸

What is relevant here, however, is as much the new model of being church that is offered by these communities. The emphasis on 'liberation for' which one can discern in the documents of Puebla is set within the context of integral liberation: liberation at the level of the individual, of the community and of the structures of society; liberation from sin before God and before one's neighbour, and from 'social sin' caused by institutionised violence. For the poor people who form the vast majority of the population in Latin America, what it means to be Christian is intimately connected with what it means to be poor – and vice versa. The people of the base ecclesial communities regard themselves as Christian and oppressed.

In this way, hunger for God and hunger for bread are inseparable in the Latin American context. If Medellín highlighted the need for the hunger for bread to be satisfied, while Puebla concentrated more on the hunger for God, then these two conferences must be seen as part of one process, or 'journey' as the Latin American people like to express it. The fundamental basis of both these ideas is the belief in the God of Life. It is the spirituality of liberation theology that is the starting point of their social analysis, not the other way round. As Gutiérrez is fond of saying, we are our

spirituality.²⁹ For this reason, perhaps, the liberation theologians have produced rereadings of the monastic rules: Leonardo Boff a reading of St Francis; Clodovis Boff of the rule of Augustine; Marcelo Barros of St Benedict; Carlos Mesters of the Carmelite rule.

The spirituality which underpins the theology of liberation, and gives expression to this hunger and yearning for God, could be summarised therefore as 'contemplative in action'. For the liberation theologians, as for many in the church in Latin America, the first action of the Christian is, like that of the companions of Job, to spend time sharing the suffering of the people. Methodologically, the first 'act' of liberation theology is contemplation of God, which necessarily includes solidarity with the poor, the weak and the dispossessed in whom we see the suffering face of God. Only then can one reflect theologically. To be Christian reflection, the hunger for bread must be within the context of a hunger for God; but to be authentically Christian, hunger for God must have regard for the reality in which the people live. 'Spirituality is not restricted to the so-called religious dimensions of life: prayer and worship. It is not something sectarian, but all-encompassing. It is concerned with all of human existence, individual and communitarian. It is a way of life . . . spirituality is in fact the terrain of freedom.'³⁰

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to explore the content of some key ideas of liberation theology. The purpose of the discussion has been to outline the context in which the language of liberation emerges, in the hope that people who are trying to do theology in other parts of the world will be able to understand the substance of the insights of Latin American theology without being distracted by the language in which it is expressed. For people in Eastern Europe this task is particularly difficult. For this reason, I have tried here to suggest that the difference of emphasis between 'liberation from' and 'liberation for' might provide a fruitful means of access in a dialogue between Christians from these two continents.

A secondary aim of this essay, therefore, has been to suggest some of the ways in which liberation theology might be appropriated in that different context. The most important point is methodological: for the Latin Americans, theology must be contextual; it must be a theological reflection on the lived faith experience of the people. This inductive approach to the theological enterprise has implications for the pastoral commitment of the church, and for its strategies of evangelisation. In order to speak of the evangelising potential of the poor, one must first recognise the poor as subjects. To proclaim the preferential option for the poor is to denounce systems and structures in society which deny dignity to all people, which discriminate between people and non-people. In this area, above all, it seems to me that the experience of Latin America has significant parallels with that of former communist countries.

For this reason, I am convinced that dialogue between theologians and the church in these respective regions must be helpful. It is particularly important that the conversations should not be hampered or prevented by misunderstandings at a linguistic level. I hope that this essay might make some contribution to the removal of such misunderstandings, as part of the wider aim of the promotion of human freedom and dignity.

Notes and References

- ¹ 'Saludo de las comunidades cristianas del sur de Lima', in *Discursos y homilias de Juan Pablo II al Perú* (CPC, 1985), pp. 86–7.
- ² 'A los habitantes de los "pueblos jóvenes"', in *Discursos y homilias* . . . , p. 92.
- ³ On Medellín, see *Irupción y caminar de la iglesia de los pobres – presencia de Medellín* (CEP, 1989), especially the article by Gutiérrez, 'Significado y alcance de Medellín'.
- ⁴ See *Medellín – Conclusiones* (Ed. Paulinas, 1986).
- ⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 40–50.
- ⁶ I have been fortunate to be able to discuss this point in particular, and liberation theology more generally, with Gutiérrez over a number of years, both in the UK and in Lima.
- ⁷ G. Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Set You Free* (SCM, 1990), p. 7 (my translation from the original Spanish, *La Verdad los hará libres* (CEP, Lima, 1985)).
- ⁸ The phrase is Clodovis Boff's. See his *Theology and Praxis* (Orbis, 1987), which is an abbreviated translation of his 1976 PhD thesis. A more concise explanation of the term is given in C. Boff and L. Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Burns and Oates, 1987), especially chapter 3.
- ⁹ A good account of the critics is contained in A. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics* (Orbis, 1989), especially chapters 3 and 7. Alastair Kee, however, is critical of liberation theologians for not being Marxist! See his *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology* (SCM, 1990).
- ¹⁰ L. Boff, *La fe en la periferia del mundo* (Sal Terrae, 1978), p. 29. See also Boff, *A graça libertadora no mundo* (Vozes, 1976), pp. 88–98.
- ¹¹ McGovern, *op. cit.*, chapter 7.
- ¹² See J. Petras and M. Morley, *US Hegemony under Siege* (Verso, 1990).
- ¹³ Gutiérrez, 'Theology and the social sciences', in *The Truth Shall Set You Free*.
- ¹⁴ G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (SCM, 1988), p. xxiv.
- ¹⁵ C. Boff and J. Pixley, *The Bible, the Church and the Poor* (Burns and Oates, 1989).
- ¹⁶ John Paul II, 'Homily in airport of Nomás (Canada)', 17 September 1984. Cited by Gutiérrez in *The God of Life* (SCM, 1991). This speech echoes certain phrases of Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*, especially no. 63. See also Diocese of Cajamarca (Peru), *Vamos Caminando – a Peruvian Catechism* (SCM, 1985), p. 38.
- ¹⁷ F. Hinkelammert, 'La deuda externa . . .', *Pasos*, no. 14, November 1987. Cited by H. Assmann in his article, 'Reflexão teológica sobre a dívida externa', *Dívida Externa e Igrejas* (CEDI, 1989), p. 123.
- ¹⁸ These statistics are taken from S. George, *The Debt Boomerang* (Pluto, 1992), pp. xv–xvi.
- ¹⁹ These statistics are taken from the World Bank *Development Report* 1988, pp. 252–3, 256–7.
- ²⁰ These statistics are taken from the Fundação Getulio Vargas. Published in *O Estado de São Paulo* on 8 September 1992.
- ²¹ S. Branford and B. Kucinski, *Debt Squads* (Zed Books, 1988), p. 33.
- ²² P. Casaldáliga, *In Pursuit of the Kingdom* (Orbis, 1988), p. 2.
- ²³ Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Set You Free*, p. 10.
- ²⁴ John Paul II, 'Discurso Inaugural', III.4 in *Puebla – Documento Final*.
- ²⁵ *ibid.*, I.4.
- ²⁶ Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Set You Free*, p. 13.
- ²⁷ Boff and Boff, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–9.
- ²⁸ On the base communities, see especially L. Boff, *Ecclesiology* (Collins, 1986); C. Mesters, *Defenceless Flower* (Orbis, 1989). There is an extensive literature in both Spanish and Portuguese, but little of the popular material has been translated.
- ²⁹ Much has been written on spirituality from a liberation perspective over the past decade. See especially G. Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (Orbis, 1984); J. Sobrino, *Liberación con espíritu* (Sal Terrae, 1985); P. Richard, *La Fuerza Espiritual de la Iglesia de los Pobres* (DEI, 1988); J. Espeja, *Espiritualidad y Liberación* (CEP, 1986).
- ³⁰ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*.