

# A Theology For Britain In The 80s ?

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Has Liberation Theology taken root in Britain? The *Times* (28 August) detected it as an alien influence when the Archbishop of Liverpool and other local churchmen supported the BCC grant of £500 to the Liverpool 8 Defence Committee. The complaint was that although it might be appropriate in its countries of origin, with their acute poverty, cruelty, exploitation and political corruption, in Britain it can do nothing but play into the hands of political extremists. But £500 won't go very far towards a revolution these days. It will soon be eaten up in fares and lawyers' fees. It is clearly the sign of the churches taking sides – that is, changing sides – in a political struggle, that the *Times* doesn't like. Whatever we may think of the Liverpool events, the 80s is clearly going to be a dangerous decade. There have been warnings of deepening social division, more urban conflict and a police force changing its main concern from crime-prevention to national security. If this is the way things are going, there will certainly be serious attempts by British Christians to learn lessons from the Liberation Theologians and apply them on their own ground.

It was concerns of this kind that caused a group of politically-minded Christians to organise a conference entitled "A Theology for Britain in the 80s" at Easter time this year in Digby Stuart College, Roehampton and to get funds from – the BCC. The event had been planned for two years and the participants were personally invited months beforehand and asked to prepare themselves through discussions with their "base groups". However, judging by the lateness of some invitations, the organisers had difficulty in attracting many of the people they had first asked to this theological banquet. Some of the guests, it seems, had pressing reasons of their own for not turning up; and the organisers had been obliged to go out and compel others to come in and fill the empty places.

Who were the missing guests? We who had been brought in at the eleventh hour began to find out as the conference progressed. The question around which the conference was focussed was

“Who does theology?” For the organisers, the answer to this had already been provided by Liberation Theology: “not the academic theologians, but the poor and oppressed”. That is, the poor and oppressed are in a position to speak the truth about the living God, while the academic theologians “remote from the mainstream of life” (as the pre-conference literature put it) are not. The aim was to restore theology to ordinary people, from whom it had been stolen by “specialists, who get knowledge from books more than from life; who know far too little about what it is like to be pushed this way and that in the flow of life; who use a language which bears little relationship to our common speech”. These assumptions were implicit in the way the conference was planned and in the sort of people who it was hoped would attend. The people they had in mind were, “the kind of people with whom Jesus consorted”: the members of marginalised groups, blacks, unemployed, handicapped, women. . . . The conference was meant to be not merely about them but for them. It was hoped to bring some of them – together with some radical church-workers and academics – into contact with an impressive team of Liberation Theologians, including James Cone, Jon Sobrino and Tissa Balasuriya. The object was to inspire, if possible, an indigenous political theology for Britain “from the perspective of the poor and the marginalised”: something comparable perhaps to the liberation theologies of those countries in which theologians seem to have entered into an altogether new relationship with the oppressed; but something which would be a native product and not merely an importation.

So some of the urban church-workers invited had been asked to bring along a few of their people – black teenagers, working mothers, unemployed workers and others at the bottom of the heap in British society. However, even with the offer of bursaries to help them, practically none came. The prospect of four days full board in a very well-appointed training college, free travel and good theology in addition failed to attract them. As we read our Sunday papers on the third day of the conference, we found out that some of them had their own more pressing agenda to attend to a few miles away in the streets of Brixton.

The people who eventually did come were predominantly male urban pastors and church agency workers. The attendance was smartly summed up by one of the visiting theologians from the Phillipines as falling into two categories: those who were funded by the churches and those who were seeking to be funded by them. Among these were, in addition, a handful of working class activists: a vicar from the East End, an SNP community worker from Glasgow, the unique Dick Pooley of PROP, the prisoners’

organisation, a disabled-rights campaigner in her wheel chair. . . . Between them these provided some of the most disruptive and worthwhile moments in the carefully organised proceedings.

But the main conference objective – that of getting a liberation theology going among the ordinary oppressed Christians of Britain – was clearly set on the road to failure. And a failed theology conference at Roehampton would not be worth reporting if it were not for what its failure revealed about the contradictions that would probably beset any political theology project likely to be set up in this country at present. A major contradiction is presented by the conference form itself. Theology as we encounter it is almost always packaged carefully by the people who normally make it and live by it, and an Easter time weekend conference with its workshops, seminars, group encounters, steering committees and reports is one of these. It is, in fact, one of the most distinctive products of middle-class academic life. People who go to conferences expect to be subjected to the conventions of procedure and language which characterises them. But these conventions would have been very foreign indeed to some of the people invited to this one. One of the urban church-workers from Liverpool was asked to introduce herself in her group by stating who she was, what she did, and what she thought about her power/powerlessness. She observed that, had she been one of the young black people she had been asked to bring along, her most likely response would have been to tell the questioner to “piss off”. There were those at the conference who were leaders in their own communities and to some extent socially bilingual. They became acutely aware of the power of the middle-class conventions of procedure and politeness. They were faced with a dilemma: whom did they really represent? They had come in order to represent the downtrodden, but in so far as they were successful people who had refused to accept defeat, they had already ceased to be representative of their own people – as the Glasgow community worker pointed out to the conference at large. They had become the kind of people who go to conferences, unlike the defeated and marginalised of this world, who do not. So going to a conference of this kind was a form of co-option into a branch of the ruling class, which effectively severed them from membership of just those groups which had given them value in the eyes of the organisers.

The conference did not, in the event, provide a model for the theological subversion of British society. What it did do – which was perhaps more useful – was to provide us with a working model of the very society which it had aimed to subvert. Thus, the ruling-class prerogative of defining the issues beforehand for the benefit of all was perfectly reproduced in the opening plan of the con-

ference. Three problem-issues were identified beforehand: class, sex and race. The participants were invited to put themselves into base groups according to whether they felt they were “powerful” or “powerless” in one of these general categories. When one (disabled) woman was wondering – like everybody else – which category to put herself into, she was told, “Oh, sex/powerless I should think”. Women and men, black and white, found themselves already neatly classified. According to the programme, these were the issues, they had been defined by the middle-class /male/white and therefore – by their own definition – all-powerful organisers. Those who were sufficiently stubborn and unco-operative to persist in the attempt to define their own issues in their own terms soon found that there was neither room for them to meet nor a place on the programme. One group, which had defined itself by interest (economics) rather than by social category, was told with unconscious symbolism that it could meet outside the door. Luckily, the plan caused so much embarrassment that it didn’t last beyond the first session.

But there was more to come. There is a familiar ruling-class tactic of dividing off and labelling other sections of society as social “problems” or “issues”, while the defining class itself is assumed to be problem-free normality. The “problems” then have to compete with one another for the scarce resources of the community after the main apportioning has already been done by those in command. In the conference, this was mirrored in a bizarre episode involving a parade of society’s victims. It had been pointed out to the organisers that representatives of the marginalised, who had been so carefully but unsuccessfully wooed, were not much in evidence at the organiser/speaker level of the programme. Were the very few who had come expected merely to listen? The response to this was to set up a session in which representative Woman, Black, Working Class, Ex-Convict, Gay and Handicapped (not all one person) were given exactly five minutes each of valuable conference time to expose and plead for their particular disability. They did this with varying degrees of embarrassment to the reverent applause of the undisable audience, which responded with eager middle-class self-flagellation every time they were denounced.

One of the non-programmed groupings which found itself up against the pre-determined structure of the conference was formed by the women present who wished to identify themselves as Women rather than as sex/powerless. They tried to arrange a meeting on this basis. But the only time it could be arranged was at a time when other meetings were taking place, such as Jon Sobrino’s seminar, which several women had a personal and professional int-

erest in attending. Thus women faced again the situation with which they are so often confronted: a conflict of loyalties, a conflict between identifying themselves as women with specific rights and needs and being identified by their other social interests, being mothers, workers, members of professions. The solution to this dilemma, as women are discovering, is not to accept definition at the hands of patriarchal society at all. Given the assumptions implicit in the structure of the conference, and its mode of procedure, women who identified themselves as such could not escape being categorised as “sex/powerless” and expected to take their place as one more marginal group among others, forced to jostle each other for a place on the agenda and to submit to decisions of the male committee as to how much was their “share”. It was precisely because they had foreseen such an outcome as this, that several Christian feminists who had been invited to the conference, had decided not to come. One of these was the co-ordinator of the Feminist Theology Project, who was initially very interested in the idea of working on a theology for Britain in the 80s. After reading the pre-conference literature however, she became suspicious of the attempt to assimilate women as marginal elements in the liberal/patriarchal vision of how things should be developing. For her, as for other Christian feminists, the time has passed when they need to plead their case alongside other claimants at conferences on liberation organised by men. A new kind of theology is already being developed by women’s groups up and down the country and it is one of the most vigorous and hopeful kinds of theological renewal in Britain today: a new bread for the hungry, as it were, with women at the point of production and distribution instead of having to queue with others for a slice of the official bread, made entirely by others. But the conference had failed to tap this source of liberation theology. There was no feminist theology on the book-stalls, and the one British theologian with enough self-assurance to force her way into the programme was eventually allowed one short unscheduled speech near the end.

The absence of feminist theology was paralleled by the total absence of any kind of indigenous black theology. Given the aim of the conference this absence was even more remarkable. It was another of those conference ironies that visiting black theologians were strongly represented but immigrant ones were not. James Cone was there to speak for North American Black Theology, which he did with an astonishing combination of Southern Black sermon and university lecture. But he was present very much as a visiting celebrity, a man well established in academic life, doing his recognised job of putting white theology in its place for the benefit of whites. And they loved it. But where was the theology

of those immigrant and indigenous black churches which can now be found in any British city with a sizable black population? There can be no doubt that some of these churches have a well developed theological viewpoint, but it is equally certain that it would not be expressed in the kind of language that is easily acceptable to white liberal churchmen. There was, moreover, no mention made of the Rastafarians and their intensely theological culture, which can be sampled any day by listening to the reggae which gets on to Radio I. It may not be "Christian" in any sense recognisable to those of us from the mainstream, churches, but it is a Bible-based political theology of an oppressed group in British society which has taken a particularly powerful and well-articulated form. It would be well if the natives of Babylon could get to know about it while there is still time.

The trouble was not, of course, that Blacks weren't wanted. But they were wanted only on terms that could be assimilated into the conference structure for the purposes of white social-problem-solving: e.g. as members of community projects, sponsored and led by whites. Blacks, on the other hand, who take the Bible into their own hands and re-define the world, using very traditional language which is embarrassing to white liberals, are a different matter.

Who does theology then? It is difficult to see how any answer to this question could have emerged from a conference which failed to connect with two independent sources of non-academic liberation theology already established on their own terms in Britain. The reason why they were missed was – as we have already argued – partly due to the conference form itself. But the a priori distinction between "academic" theology and the theology of the "poor" must take some of the blame too. There is clearly some use for this distinction in a class-divided society in which theology is mostly assumed to go on in university departments and in which the poor can rarely get a decent education. But there was a strong inclination in some of the organisers of this conference to push the distinction towards a clear-cut dualism of values: "poor" = good; "academic" = bad. Like the traditional dualism which it seeks to reverse, it does not lend itself to finding real theology in unexpected places. There can be no surprises if you think you know where the truth is always to be found. There is some resemblance here to the secular pursuit of middle-class leftists for the "real" Working Class Culture, the source of all true value. The origin of real value – in politics or in theology – is never so simply identified.

One of the unfortunate results of this dualism at the conference was a pervasive anti-intellectualism. If it is an article of faith that academics are hopelessly out of touch with reality and that



real theology can only be done by the poor, then whatever the poor are found to be doing of a religious nature – so long as it isn't getting into theology departments – tends to be counted as "theology". The word then becomes highly ambiguous and virtually useless for the purposes of serious discourse. So almost anything connected with religion was called "theology" without any acknowledgement that – as any Rasta could have told us – some disciplined reasoning is necessary if we are going to find out the truth about God. There will be texts, there will be traditions, there will be technical discourses even in the most oppressed of religious groups with a real theology. It will have a good deal more relevance to the life of the community than the theology of the universities, but it will still be something more definite and thoughtful than day-to-day religion itself.

This evacuation of the concept of theology went hand in hand with that wonderful liberal creation, the ideology of non-directiveness. Despite the manifest directiveness of the agenda and the structure of the meeting, there was still a strong presumption that any attempt to direct a session is a sure sign of authoritarianism and that it needed to be suppressed in favour of equal participation. Only the visiting Third World theologians were allowed to break this rule and conduct directed seminars. This was because they did not accept, or were not aware of, the non-directive ideology, which is probably an Anglo-Saxon invention. But it may also have been due to the fact that your middle-class anti-intellectual has a special place in his heart for the pronouncements of Third World gurus where he would be intolerant of any attempt at direction from someone closer to home.

The inability of any British participants to take charge of a theological debate was a recipe for total impasse in the area of main concern to the conference – British political theology. But impasse or no-change is exactly what non-directiveness is designed, in its liberal way, to achieve. Its results expose it for what it really is – an ideology that allows those who have the power to keep it while allowing everyone else to "have their say". It implies an individualistic notion of truth which – like other forms of individualism – disguises persistent inequalities of power. It is, of course, very flattering and seemingly democratic to say that "the views of everyone here count for the same; experts count for as much or as little as everyone else". But to abolish criteria and make everything of equal value is to destroy value altogether. If everyone's opinion is equally valuable it is also equally value-less and there is no change in the structure of power. Those who had it at the beginning will have it at the end, because new leadership has been prevented from emerging. The oppressed are invited to have their say

on a level of equality with everyone else within the institutions established for that purpose, giving the impression that justice is at last seeing the light of day. But in the process they are neutralised one by one. Community leaders in Liverpool 8 and Manchester have realised this recently and refused co-operation with the riot enquiries for that reason.

Our conference illustrated the point in its own way. The theory was that the conference would decide its own direction and that this would emerge from out of the base groups and workshops. So everybody was encouraged to have their say, and there were so many says that, predictably, the direction proposed became all directions at once and the impasse ensued. At this point the organisers were on hand to save the situation by wheeling on their own agenda, prepared for such a contingency, and so effectively overriding some important initiatives that had arisen from the conference, such as proposals for an Economy Project and a Radical Academics' group.

You don't have to have a conspiracy theory of society to realise how liberal individualism does the job of the establishment for it. It is a reason for the establishment to encourage and finance conferences of this kind whenever they can. This way it can contain middle-class Christian dissent with the minimum of effort.

Yet sometimes, against all the odds, despite the truly powerful ability of British liberalism to contain dissent and block change, things do happen in unexpected places which are unforeseen and potentially subversive. There were, towards the end of this conference, one or two indications of how a Liberation Theology for Britain might be generated. On the last day, when most of us were confused and frustrated, some participants managed to identify each other as the ones they really wanted to talk with before they all went home with nothing accomplished. One small group was made up of a feminist theologian from a Scottish University, a male religious from a Catholic theology school, a radical assistant manager of a Barclays bank, an elderly Africaner clergyman in exile who had been jailed for taking the part of Blacks: not exactly the poor, but . . .

They agreed with everyone else present that theology is too important to be left to the theologians. But one other thing they were also certain of after the experience of the conference: that the poor are in no sense served by anti-intellectualism. Exactly what relationship there should be between the trained theologian and the poor of the world is one of the central questions of Liberation Theology. Their first thoughts on the matter are best presented as a number of theses:



1 *Everyone has the right to do theology*, though not everyone is in a position to do it, even when God is really present in their lives.

2 *A merely academic theology cannot be a true theology*. We cannot talk about God entirely outside the crucible of suffering. Only those who are so open to the love of God that they are completely open to the agony of the people can speak about the living God.

3 *It is however objectionable to say that only the poor can do theology*. The main reason for this is that the poor need the trained theologian in their struggle against injustice and oppression. This is particularly the case where theology is used against the poor in the name of Christian civilisation and values.

4 *The theologians are not themselves the poor*. We have to note that the Third World theologians who had spoken to us were not themselves the poor even though some of them had suffered imprisonment and exile because of their solidarity with the poor of their countries.

5 *The cry of the poor needs to be interpreted*. It is the task of the theologian to hear these cries and to articulate what the poor themselves are unable to articulate. Often the only way the poor can make themselves heard is by burning buildings and attacking the police. The theologian can help to refine the anger of the poor into a real weapon for their liberation.

6 *Theology cannot be done in individual isolation*. It always arises from a particular community. The value of the theology depends on the value of the community which produces it. It is the business of the theologians to question their community: what effect do the activities of that community, including its theology, have on the poor of the world?

7 *No theologian will have credibility with the poor who is not in some way implicated in their struggle for liberation*. If academic theologians do what they can to attack the sources of poverty and oppression in their society the time of their suffering will come sooner or later.

8 *When trained theologians abandon their gifts, their power and their opportunities they betray the poor*.

It is essential to realise that access to the kind of language which is normally meant by "doing theology" in our society is access to a form of power. For those who have such access to renounce it is, for the most part, naive posturing. Such power is not easily renounced and to claim to do so for the sake of a spurious identification with the poor makes those concerned into tools of the establishment powers. The poor – those without access to any power of this kind – will recognise that they have been betrayed.

The power which theology conveys needs to be used in such a

way that the voices of the powerless can be heard. In a country like Britain, theology may appear to be a mere fringe activity which bears no relation to the realities of public life. But even when it seems to be so, theology is nevertheless everywhere present in idolatrous and oppressive forms, as it was when the Gospel was first preached. It is surprising for instance, how much theology of a certain kind nowadays emanates from places like 10 Downing Street and the Defence Ministry. It is the task of the theologians to bring such idolatrous theology into the light of day and to overcome it with the real knowledge of God, founded on faith, learning and compassion for the poor. Those who can do theology must do it: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel", said that first century intellectual, Paul of Tarsus.

The conference on *A Theology for Britain in the 80s* failed to live up to the sincere hopes and expectations of its organisers. This does not mean, however, that it was a waste of time, but rather that its significance needs to be re-interpreted. There was a temptation to see it as a rehearsal of the Great Supper in the well-known parable. That parable – as J. Jeremias observes, is one in which the evangelists explore the role of the missionary church: just as, no doubt, the conference could be seen as an attempt to explore the potential role of a missionary church in contemporary British society. That the parable had, in some sense, already been taken to heart by the organisers was clear from their invitation policy, by which they went straight to the inhabitants of the highways and byways rather than to the professionals and the respectable citizens. But having taken on themselves the role of the host in the parable, they disconcertingly ended up, not with the downtrodden and powerless, but with various respectable and by no means powerless members of British society. The lesson is perhaps that the missionaries of the Church are in no position to decide beforehand which people are to be desired as followers of Christ and preachers of the gospel. It takes all sorts – as Jesus made clear with his invitation policy. It may include assistant bank managers, or even academics.