

Liberation Theology and Basic Communities In Latin America and in Britain

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This article is inspired by an interest in basic christian communities in Latin America, and also by a critical interest in some attempts to translate the Latin American experience to this country. The texts on which my criticism is based are John Vincent's essay 'Doing Theology' in *Agenda for Prophets* (ed D Haslam and R Ambler, 1980), and, to a lesser extent, *Basic Communities* by David Clark (1977). I want to make it clear that I am concerned with David Clark's view of the significance of the basic communities and not with the communities themselves. I shall be going on to argue that both writers implicitly deny the importance of a scientific study of society and the importance of intellectual work in social theory, politics and economics. They appear to be anti-intellectual, preferring an instinctive, common-sense response with an emphasis on action. This means that they have no way of developing an awareness of their own ideological conditioning and so seem to accept many liberal middle-class values in an uncritical way. A comparison of the Latin American and British situations reveals that if the church in the west is ever going to stand with the poor and the weak, then western christians must develop a critical attitude towards those class ideologies which they take for granted as common-sense. This is only possible through a social and political education, in theory and practice.

First, I want to look at the nature of the basic christian communities in the third world. They are primarily a communal response by poor christians to a life of shared struggle and hardship. They are to be found mainly in Latin American countries and in Africa. Clodovis Boff describes basic communities in an article in *Concilium* (1981), 'Tensions between the Churches of the First World and the Third World'. He describes them as being made up of mostly poor people, only flourishing in poor areas, either country districts or the edges of the cities. Each group numbers about ten people. Sometimes a single group is called a basic community. More often the community is an association of about ten groups. They are not necessarily related to the parish structure, but are not in principle incompatible with a parish. The size of the basic christian community is similar in Tanzania. (Described in an article

in *Pro Vita Mundi*, No 62 and reprinted in *Afer*, African Ecclesiastical Review, October 1977.)

'Basic christian communities in Tanzania are formed of two to twelve families (say fifty to one hundred and fifty persons) who choose their own head from among themselves; and he is assisted as far as is possible by a nun or catechist . . . The bond of union between these groups is not the eucharist but rather the reading of the scriptures in common and meditation thereon . . . Each member has to try to bring all the details of personal life into line with what has been understood from meditation on the Gospel. In this each one is helped by everybody else, sometimes by a priest. The aim (for priests, nuns and catechists alike) is not to live for others but really to live with others.'

Boff describes the Brazilian communities as existing in the same scriptural framework.

'The community takes shape as such around the Word, particularly the words of the Gospel, not primarily round the person of a priest.'

The reading of the Word is always related to the situation of the group. Each group is both a cell within the church and a grass-roots community in the local society. The faith of the members produces an atmosphere of joy, hope and freedom.

'This evangelical joy expresses the transcendence of the spirit rising above the most oppressive social conditions – a special gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not the ingenuous happiness of those who know nothing of the contradictions and hardship of life. No, it goes with a fairly critical outlook on reality, a very sharp class feeling, and an extremely committed and dangerous struggle, all without a trace of bitterness or resentment.'

Sharing is a very important characteristic. There is sharing of faith, prayer, the Word, problems, material goods and physical help. The community is run as a collective, a real exercise in participatory democracy. Each person's contribution is valued and encouraged. This is what produces the strong commitment to the group and develops political and theological awareness. Theology is no longer to be the preserve of the elite. 'If the faith belongs to all, its deepening in the form of theological reflection should also be for all.' (Boff)

The groups are also characterised by their class-solidarity and political militancy. The basic communities are deeply rooted in popular religion. They do not want to become cut off from the mass of poor christians. Boff writes,

'The whole dynamic of base communities is towards action, and action for liberation in particular. This can go from mere

struggle for survival to attempts at changing the social (political) structure of society.'

Within these communities faith, shared hardship, action for change and liturgical expression are all inseparable from each other. This forms the inspiration for the liberation theologies of Gutierrez, Sobrino, Segundo and others.

It is not surprising that such basic christian communities are exciting signs of hope for western christians. The editors of the *Concilium* volume, Virgil Elizondo and Norbert Greinacher, write in their introduction,

'Out of the suffering and misery of the churches of the Third World the Spirit is bringing about a newness which will truly purify, enrich and bring new life to the enslaving and dying forms of the churches of the old world . . . the church of the third millenium is beginning to take shape among the poor people of today's Third World.' (Editorial, pp vii-viii)

For some decades now, radical christians in Britain have been trying to think of ways to close the gap between the life of the churches and ordinary life in the world. Radicals (not always the same ones) have also seen the damage which the church suffers through its close identification with bourgeois respectability and the Establishment. Here, in the basic communities, is the vision they have been looking for – a church deeply rooted in ordinary daily life and arising out of the least powerful groups in society. The basic communities are also a focus for the interest in, and concern about, people in the Third World shared by christians of all denominations. There is already an interest in small informal groups as an important way of developing and expressing faith. Taking all these things together it is not difficult to see why people in Britain should be so interested in finding ways of adapting the Latin American model for this country.

The 'Urban Theology' of John Vincent is a British form of liberation theology. It is basically a praxis-oriented theology directed towards the social and economic deprivation which exists in modern Britain. The 'Urban Theology Unit' in Sheffield has six permanent staff and runs courses for clergy and laity. The Unit is largely Methodist, but ecumenically oriented. Vincent defines 'doing theology' as 'a process whereby elements of christian faith "go to work" or "come alive" or achieve new meanings and implications within the realm of this or that specific area of human concern'. (*Agenda for Prophets*. p 123). For Vincent, "'political theology" is "doing theology in the context of politics". Political theology is the result of taking seriously the special questions and situations of the political realm, the utilising of aspects of the christian faith to serve some kind of response.' (*Agenda for Prophets* p 124)

Probably the most fundamental criticism that should be levelled at Vincent is that he slides together the two discourses of theology and politics and ends up with what Schillebeeckx describes as 'double-dutch'. (Article in *New Blackfriars*, October 1981). However, I do not want to elaborate on this fault now, as my main concern here is to look at his attitude to politics and society. The main problem is his strong hostility to theorising about either of them. His authority for his attitudes and his actions seems to be his own experience and feelings.

'It is my own experience that those who adhere to political philosophies are sometimes less useful when it actually comes to doing battle than those who tend to work on more "do-it-yourself" models.'

(*Agenda for Prophets* p 125)

At another point, when he has listed some facts about urban deprivation, he writes,

'... at this point it is inevitable that I turn to my own experience to "explain" things: and that experience inevitably turns to theology also as a way into the way things are, and the way they could be different.'

(*Agenda for Prophets* p 126)

He is particularly hostile to any Marxist theory,

'Marxism, like capitalism, belongs essentially to an industrial producer society, and we now need to be thinking of the next kind of society we want. Again, Marxism is already too biased a tool to be flexible enough to deal with the present realities in our 'mixed' economies. Finally, it is at least arguable that there is a christian or catholic method of social organisation which is to be preferred to either the capitalist or socialist ones.'

(*Agenda for Prophets* p 125)

John Vincent believes that christians can work for change in society by forming themselves into an alternative society.

'What Jesus did, then, was to set up an alternative political reality, the Kingdom-disciplined community.'

(*Agenda for Prophets* p 129)

'Wherever humanity has become 'stuck', not knowing where to turn, it is good politics to get on and act an alternative parable. The world might even notice and move over.'

(*Agenda for Prophets* p 133)

There is also present here a false assumption about how God works in the world – i.e. that he is only likely to work through the church. Vincent's model of the church is unexpectedly both triumphalist and paternalistic. Apart from all these criticisms, it is also likely that a 'christian' political position which claims to be distinct from the socialist option will end up on the side of anti-socialist forces. (On this, see J L Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, p 130, on the Christian Democrats in Chile.)

This vision of the church as an 'alternative society' is also favoured by David Clark in his book *Basic Communities*, which is sub-titled 'Towards an alternative society'. Indeed there are many sections of the book which read like a religious branch of the commune movement, e.g. chapters on ecology, alternative technology and living off the land. The book is mainly taken up with descriptions of different sorts of religious communities in Britain, grouped according to type, e.g. 'communities of learning', 'caring communities', etc. They include L'Arche (for the mentally handicapped), the Community of Celebration (charismatic renewal), Othona, (self-sufficiency and simple life-style), the S.C.M. and the Cyrenians (night-shelters). Clark's purpose in writing the book was to pay tribute to those 'who have turned their backs on fame and fortune to build dreams into realities . . . It is meant as a small gesture of acknowledgement of their vision and determination.'

(*Basic Communities* p vii).

'These communities of interest find themselves pioneers of an alternative church and society, not in any grandiose way, but in the sense of pursuing issues and developing a style of life which is set over against much that others, both locals and even cosmopolitans, take to be normative.'

(*Basic Communities* p 3)

Clark's own stance is individualistic and humanist, emphasising personal growth and integrity. He fails to look beyond the small group to consider larger social formations.

'The endeavour is to create structures that provide man with the maximum space to grow to maturity without losing his identity; those institutions with us at present, religious and secular, are increasingly failing to meet that requirement.'

(*Basic Communities* p 17).

Clark is more obviously an individualistic liberal than Vincent, but both have a broad social-democratic affiliation. Their concern is with the consequences of capitalism, which they deplore, e.g. urban deprivation, inhuman housing (in Vincent's case), waste of the Earth's resources and alienating hierarchical institutions (for Clark). However, they do not go beyond the consequences to the fundamental cause of them. In an article in the *New Left Review*, No 126, 'Freedom, Justice and Capitalism', G A Cohen criticises this evasion,

. . . social democrats tend to refrain from those necessary moves, which raise issues more radical than they like to face . . . it is as though they are sensitive to the effects of exploitation on people, but not to the fact of exploitation itself. They want to succour the exploited while minimising confrontation with those who exploit them.'

(p 14)

There are certainly *some* similarities between the third world basic communities and those in Clark's book, between the political theology produced in Brazil and that of the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield. There is a general populist principle, insisting that all the people 'do' theology and take back the church for their own. There is a general commitment to anti-hierarchical and anti-bureaucratic attitudes. Sharing and participative democracy are valued by all. Their theology is praxis-oriented and deeply rooted in its context. The people interpret their faith through their experience. However, it is here, at the level of experience, that the similarities come to an abrupt halt. Of course, British theologians like Vincent and Clark are very aware of the differences. That is why Vincent gives his theology a different name – 'urban theology'. Yet I do not think they fully appreciate the important unacknowledged effects of being middle-class in Britain and not slum-dwellers in a Latin American military dictatorship.

The first and most obvious effect is in the political awareness of the basic communities. The Latin American situation is so obviously harsh, oppressive and unjust, with wide gaps between rich and poor. It is not surprising that those who are at the bottom of society see their problems as related to the overall structure of society. They can see that any piecemeal reforms would be ineffectual. Their attitude is basically revolutionary. In Britain the nature of the struggle is much less obvious. The post-war welfare state has given the impression that a capitalist social system can be humane and 'caring'. The complexity of the British social system means that there are no clearly drawn battle lines of class division. There is a basic polarisation between those who profit from capitalism and those who are exploited by it, but there is such a complex structure of alliances between groups and sub-groups that the polarisation is not always apparent. Because of the complexity of the situation it is possible to argue for the obsolescence of the notion of class division and to claim that Britain is now a one-class society. There is a separation of 'social problems' from political and social theory, and urbanism is blamed rather than capitalism. To the British base communities, solutions seem to be possible at an individual level,

' . . . people . . . have been engaged in exploring new dimensions of community. They are radicals in the sense of attempting to return to the roots of being human; they are involved in the establishment of what are coming to be known as 'base' or 'basic communities'.' (Clark *Basic Communities* p 17)

The political awareness is different, not only because the societies are different, but also because of the *class position* of basic communities in Britain or Latin America. Practically all those in

Britain are populated by people from the educated middle-class. Even if they are poor, their education, their contacts, their greater social power and confidence give them much greater choice and control over their lives than working-class people. For them, understandably, capitalism does not seem to produce such a bad society; it is only that some problems – consumerism, poverty, etc. – need solving. Many British middle-class Christians with a social conscience are caught in a vicious circle, in captivity to class ideologies. They are unable to break out because they deny that ‘class’ or ‘class ideology’ has any meaning. It is a strange paradox that Liberation Theology is popular among radical Christians in Britain and that through this they have encountered the argument that all thinking is coloured by a class position. In spite of knowing that praxis-orientation has an important *class* element in Latin America, the British thinkers then assume that class is irrelevant in this country, and that solidarity with the poor comes about automatically through being concerned about their situation. The British radicals are rarely *victims* of poverty and injustice, and although it is not impossible for them to see reality from the point of view of those who are, it cannot be achieved simply through an act of will. A process of re-education is necessary.

The third effect of the differences arises out of a fact which, amazingly, neither of these writers mentions. This is that the popular culture of Latin America, the culture of the most oppressed social groups, is profoundly religious. There is not the great gulf between religion and everyday life which exists in this country. This means that it makes sense to describe the true nature of the church as ‘the church of the poor’. In Britain, the institution of the church has a marginal place in working-class culture. The established church has long been regarded as a class enemy by some working-class people. Methodism, once seen as a radical alternative, today has even less involvement in working-class life than Anglicanism. Religious writers and preachers in Britain are driven to interpret ‘Blessed are the poor’ as a reference to ‘poverty of spirit’ rather than material poverty. There are, of course, a certain number of working-class Christians in this country, but they tend not to oppose the predominantly middle-class values which go with British Christianity. They often find themselves ruled over by paternalistic clergy. Politically conscious and militant members of the working-class rarely have anything to do with the church.

Middle-class liberal Christians are in rather an uncomfortable situation. They are sensitive to the poverty and injustice which they see in their own society. They can see that the church is called to identify itself with the poor. Yet, always, by their education, and often by their class origin, they are cut off from the working-

class. Their membership of the church is even more of a barrier. It associates them with what working-class militants see as paternalistic charity. I think it is this painful tension which produces the anti-intellectualism which predominates among socially-concerned christians. They feel guilty about their education and very sensitive to any criticism which implies that they are safe in an ivory tower of intellectual work. They go out of their way to emphasise their involvement in practical issues or local campaigns. They dismiss theoretical work as self-indulgent and of no practical value. John Vincent writes,

‘there has fortunately, been more ‘doing it’
than theory so far.’ (J Vincent *Doing Theology* p 131)

Similarly, in the introduction to *Agenda for Prophets*, David Haslam refers to,

‘prophets, both of the Old Testament and contemporary times, who have given comfort, liberty and even life to the cause of justice and peace in a christian context, while Dr Norman (and many of us) have been sitting comfortably in our fireside chairs ‘thinking theology’.

(*Agenda for Prophets*. p 16)

It is because of this guilt about ‘thinking theology’ that so much emphasis is put on the new term ‘doing theology’. However, the great contradiction with which the advocates of ‘doing theology’ live is that they are, in fact, mainly engaged in intellectual work. The Urban Theology Unit is an educational institution. Conferences are held in which people ‘do theology’. It is true that it is a different sort of theology – liberation theology or political theology – but it is no less a theoretical task. The result of trying to avoid the appearance of being engaged in anything like scholarship or academic work is that the theology becomes vague and ill-disciplined. It claims attention by rhetoric, moralising and stirring up the guilt which lies just below the surface of the educated liberal christian. Because of the denial of the value of theory it has no strong foundation of either rigorous theology or a proper understanding of sociology or politics. In fact there is a great deal of theoretical work which needs to be done by christians who are working for a more just society. In his *New Left Review* article, G A Cohen justifies the use of analytical philosophy in a critique of society,

‘It might be said that its delicate techniques are irrelevant to the understanding and exposure of ruling-class doctrine, since that has its source in class interest, not conceptual error. But the claim that the source of ideological confusion is class interest rather than conceptual error rests upon a false contrast. For the truth is that class interest generates ideology precisely by instilling a propensity to errors of reasoning about ideolog-

ically sensitive issues . . . class interest, and not conceptual complexity, is the motivating principle of ideology, but conceptual complexity helps to explain why class interest is able to have the effect it does.' (New Left Review No 126)

Similarly, socially-concerned christians cannot afford to neglect theoretical work. Political theologians ought to be involved in the useful political tasks of sorting out the conceptual complexity of certain issues, e.g. those of 'class' and 'freedom'. The affirmation that Britain is no longer a class society can only be contradicted by rigorous sociological and economic studies. Even where the existence of class is conceded, a common christian argument is to deplore all reference to it as divisive and a stirring up of enmity and strife. Herbert McCabe has effectively sorted out the confusions and conceptual errors in this argument in his contribution to *Agenda for Prophets* – 'Class Struggle and Christian Love'.

The concept of freedom is a locus of conflict between liberal and socialist views of reality. Yet the words 'freedom' and 'liberation' tend to be used by theologians in a fairly general and imprecise way. This is why different political activities can all claim to be christian work for human liberation. The same words and the same phrases can be used to justify both a class-conscious revolutionary commitment and, very different to this, a complete disregard of political theory in favour of a programme of small-scale reformism. British political theologians need to analyse properly the nature of the freedom that allegedly exists in particular forms of society. Contemporary knowledge about economics, sociology and politics should not be dismissed as the mere airing of opinions about the world. Knowledge about society is not gained instinctively. Truth in theology is dependent on a true knowledge of the world, and growth in knowledge about the world can lead to a fuller knowledge of God. Discoveries about the nature of human society made in the last hundred years have many implications for the study of theology. Perhaps the most crucial of these is the discovery of the inseparability of ideas and human thought from the economic, social and political context. This means that class differences and political opinions are vitally relevant in theological debate. This has always been the case, but we have only recently become aware of it. Theologians in the past were usually associated with the same social grouping and so the question was unlikely to arise for them.

The group of British theologians and church members which we have been looking at has re-interpreted Latin American liberation theology in a way which fits their broadly social-democratic political position. I have tried to show some of the distortions which result.