

Leonardo Boff : Complicity and Criticism

James Alison OP

Leonardo Boff, a 47-year old Franciscan from Brazil, has become one of the best known names in Catholic theology owing to the controversy surrounding his book *Igreja: Carisma e Poder* (Ed Vozes, Petrópolis, 1981). The close coincidence in time of Boff's interview with Cardinal Ratzinger in Rome about the book, and the publishing of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith's criticisms of some aspects of liberation theology, has caused some misunderstanding about the issues at the core of the controversy. Two widely-held misapprehensions had better be cleared up now, before we venture any further. They have been repeated over and over again in the press—when Boff and Ratzinger met, at the beginning of last September, one of the things they warmly agreed about was the shoddiness of the media coverage of the affair.

First of all, it was not—this time—Rome that made the first move. On the contrary. Boff had appealed to Rome. When his book was attacked by Dom Romer, Assistant Bishop of Rio de Janeiro and President of the Archdiocesan Commission for the Doctrine of the Faith, he turned to the Vatican. His own very detailed account of the affair, “Minha convocação à Sagrado Congregação para a Doutrina da Fé: um testemunho pessoal” (which appeared in *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* vol. 44, fasc. 176, Dec. 1984, pp. 845—852) confirms this.

Secondly, and more importantly, the book does not in fact appear to be about liberation theology specifically. Any controversy involving so prominent a writer of liberation theology is bound to have a “political” dimension, but, as Fr. Boff has said himself, in his published statement in response to the Vatican document of 11 March criticising his book: “It is of importance to emphasise that this document does not for a moment criticise the theology of liberation or make reference to Marxism or to Socialism ...”. What the controversy really is about will be made clearer by considering together the two of Boff's books to have appeared most recently in English, both of them published in the U.K. by SCM Press: the book which has been the object of the Vatican's concern, *Church : Charism and Power*, price £6.50 (hereafter “CCP”), and *Saint Francis : a model for human liberation*, price £6.95 (hereafter “SF”).

Those of us who are interested in and sympathetic to the effervescence of theological and social thinking in Latin America have had plenty of reason to be grateful to SCM, who have often made available to English readers books by Boff, Gutiérrez and others. Frequently these books have been editions of works previously published by Orbis in the U.S. However, the latest brace of Boff books comes to us from the Portuguese via Crossroad (also from the U.S.).

With a mixture of sorrow and anger, I must report that in both cases the translations are extremely suspect. However, this is not so serious in the case of *SF* as the considerable disservice done to author, readers and theology by the mistreatment of *CCP*. Since this latter book is controversial I cannot in justice leave readers with the assumption that they are reading what Fr. Boff originally wrote. The original was subtitled by the author *Essays in militant ecclesiology*, and it is thus with some surprise that we discover the English edition to be subtitled *Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*. The peninsular Spanish edition (Sal Terrae, Santander 1982) has a preface which explains the original subtitle, and the fact that these essays were composed at different times and for different occasions, that some are previously unpublished, and some reprints. This vital paragraph is excised from the English edition (p. ix) and no explanation given at any stage of the provenance of the contents; no mention is made of Clodovis Boff's co-authorship of chapter 9. The Editor's note (p. vii) might usefully have given some of Boff's biographical details (how can chapter 6 be understood except in terms of reference of a German theological education?) and it might have clarified the origin of the different essays. In fact, the note does nothing to disabuse the notion that the reader has in his hands a book that was written as a whole; instead it concentrates on the media events of last year, concerning Fr. Boff, Cardinal Ratzinger, and the instruction *Libertatis Nuntius*.

Time and time again Fr Boff is made to appear ridiculously pretentious by the additions, excisions and changes. Thus, where (in the Spanish edition) Fr Boff is concerned to analyse the principal tendencies in the Latin American Church, in the English we have (p. 1) "This will enable us clearly to outline those aspects that apply not only to the Church in Latin America, but also to a new ecclesiology of the universal Church". When did this creep in, and was it Fr Boff, the translator, or the publisher who added it?

In chapter 2 the paragraph headings (from the Spanish) "What is the useful and necessary theology for *our* Church and *our* Society?" and "What is the theology appropriate and necessary to *our* Brazilian church?" (my italics) become "The most useful and necessary theology for Church and Society today" (p. 13) and "Theology appropriate for the Church today" (p. 21). In chapter 3 three pages of

details about the different reactions to the struggle for justice within Brazil are left out from between the first and second sections on p. 22. These pages, quite apart from their inherent interest, provide the basis of the author's competence to write the rest of the chapter.

In chapter 10 the references to the Brazilian experience are left out (p. 131) and the table (p. 132) omits certain elements in the Praxis column (ironically just those elements—Vatican II, bible study groups, human rights groups which are notably present in the Church in the English-speaking world).

In chapter 11 the title "Is the distinction between *Ecclesia Docens* and *Ecclesia Discens* justified?" is translated "*Ecclesia Docens versus Ecclesia Discens*". In chapter 13 a large chunk of splendid (and sadly accurate) invective against certain Latin American hierarchs is left out and a paragraph exploring the close relationship between charisms and human talents (originally entitled ... "charism and human talents") becomes (staggeringly) "*Charism versus Human Talent*".

These are not mistranslations, but radical shifts in the perspective of the book, made presumably at editorial level. The result is to make Boff appear pretentiously sweeping where he is in fact much more modest, and to traduce his constant efforts at catholicity and comprehensiveness by the spurious introduction into titles of polar opposites.

Apart from these shifts there are a considerable number of bad translations. For example, in the preface (p. ix) where Boff wrote that "There is an upsurge of life in the Church that is revitalising the entire body from feet to head" we are given "from head to toe"—extraordinary, given that the basic thrust of the essays is about grassroots renewal. On p. 15 we read of theology as initiation into the christian experience that "its opponents are isolated humanists and totalitarian systems" where we should have "closed humanist (systems) and totalitarian systems". The first full paragraph on p. 71 (with these ... mediation) is meaningless as it stands, as is the sentence "Christianity is not denied in the negative sense but its non-identification with Christianity is affirmed with a view toward improvement and openness to new ways of doing things" (p. 78). This last throws a whole paragraph into confusion.

The mystery surrounding the different Procrustean beds on which this book has lain before reaching us deepens when we discover that the Spanish, not the Portuguese, "comunidades eclesiales de base" is used (p. 8, 44, 109 etc.), that the *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* is cited (p. 170 note 1, 178 note 3) in Spanish, where even the peninsular Spanish edition gives the Portuguese titles. Still more mysterious is the citation of another book by Boff (p. 179 note 12) apparently published in Brazil with a half-Spanish, half-Portuguese title. The natural climax of this hybrid series is the reference to the

French edition of the same book on the next page (Ch. 11 note 2). Is it too fanciful to suspect that we are dealing with a translation not from the Portuguese, but from an unmentioned Latin American Spanish edition?

It is, then, with some misgivings that I approach the task of extricating Fr Boff's thought from this edition. A bit of background is necessary if *CCP* is to be understood at all. The thirteen essays presented here are a disparate bunch published together in Brazil in 1981. Some of them date back up to twelve years before that. One of them, chapter 6 (on the structure and identity of Catholicism) is a modified version of Boff's Munich dissertation. Published in German in 1972, it did not appear in Portuguese until the issue of this book. It is only comprehensible within the framework of a long-standing German Catholic/Protestant debate. Some essays are written from and for the Brazilian situation—the first three, which are on models and pastoral practices of the Church, theological tendencies and pastoral practices, and the Church's involvement in the struggle for justice, and chapters 9 and 10, which are on base ecclesial communities. Some are of more general relevance—chapters 4 and 5, which consider human rights and power in the Church. Chapter 7 is part of a Brazilian polemic about syncretism, waged between Boff and Kloppenburg (Boff's former teacher, and now auxiliary bishop of Salvador). Here Boff attempts to create wider theological space for syncretism, keeping himself (perhaps sadly) to generalities, against the Tridentine tradition of comparative puritanism with respect to the various spiritist and animist religious cultures which flourish among the afro-brazilian population. Chapter 8 ("Characteristics of the Church in a class society") is part of the important search by theologians in Latin America for what it means to be Church, given huge differences of wealth and the all too frequent involvement of Church hierarchy in the shoring up of criminally oppressive class systems.

Chapters 11, 12 and 13, are an integrated discussion which starts off from an examination of the frequently presupposed distinction between the "teaching" and the "hearing" Church, and are especially concerned with trying to reread the reality of the Church from the base ecclesial communities. Boff has chosen a pneumatological approach as the one giving him most room to advance his case within a Catholic understanding of the Church. He, and the many who share his concerns, have a huge task on their hands: Boff himself uses the language of the birth of a new Church (ecclesiogenesis). He is attempting the radical reconception of ecclesiology which is to be fair to the richness of base community experience, which solves the problem of class conflict while being committed to the poor, which is within the incarnational Catholic tradition, and which is institutional

and hierarchical without being clerical and legalistic in its understanding of *diakonia*. Certainly this is too vast an undertaking to be the work of one man, and is likely, in its development, to throw up some dead ends.

It appears to be the aim of the C.D.F. notification (*L'Osservatore Romano* 20—21.3.1985) to point out just such dead ends, and it is heartening that Boff should have accepted these criticisms. (It is too early to be able to comment on the background to, and the effect of, the recent prohibition to teach that has been applied to Boff). The C.D.F.'s four major points are (as Boff himself has pointed out) not directly concerned with liberation theology at all. It would be nearer the mark to see them as criticizing an incipient protestant tendency in Boff's conception of the Church. In question are his interpretation of Church structure, dogma and revelation, the exercise of sacred power (which alone might be seen as an attack on a particular liberationist model for Church analysis) and prophecy within the Church.

In the first place, he is criticized for too relativist a view of the Church structure. He does in fact claim that the Church can *subsist* in other Christian Churches (where Vatican II taught that the Church *subsists* in the Catholic Church). Ironically, the English edition (p. 75) translates this so as to read "The Church may also be present in other Christian Churches", which may be good theology, but is certainly not good translation. Boff is also considered to go too far towards doctrinal relativism in his desire to be free from dogmatism. His application to the Church of a model of society which links social organization and means of production, (leading him to claim that the clergy have expropriated the means of religious production from the people) is criticized for belittling the richness of the sacraments. Finally Boff's view of prophecy in the Church is qualified by the C.D.F.'s insistence that prophetic denunciations must remain within the service of the edification of the Church.

There is no doubt that in his search for intellectual bases for a structure of the Church more compatible with St. Francis' ideal Boff does use a number of disputable elements culled from Protestant theological controversy. This, I think, might justly be seen as an attempt to mediate between Francis' evangelical freedom and Br. Elias' organizational pragmatism—a longstanding Franciscan tension.

In his preface to the Spanish edition of *CCP* Boff is adamant that this is not an exhaustive or definitive work (and it is a truism that, probably justly, it would have interested far fewer people, and have had an importance more closely proportionate to its quality, had it not been for the controversy). He promised us then another, fuller work to be written in conjunction with his brother Clodovis. Now that the C.D.F. has pointed out, and Boff accepted, the inadequacies of these

positions, it will be most interesting to see how Boff resolves the important questions which he has begun to tackle in these exploratory essays.

Meanwhile, however, there are a number of points in Fr Boff's essays which call for comment. First, his historical imagination is rather limited (Dussel is the historian among the liberation theologians). His idea of what the Church has been over the last 1500 years suits the purpose of an argument about power structures, but does not take into account the ambiguity of Church/State relationships since Constantine, and the reasons for centralization since the Middle Ages. Thus (p. 50) we are told that "Christianity became both the official religion and the sacred ideology of the Empire" and that "a paganization of Christianity took place, and not a Christianization of paganism". What of the Arian controversy, of Julian the Apostate, of Emperors and Kings doing penance before Bishops, or their tombs? We are told that after the Reformation "Catholicism became a total, reactionary, violent and repressive ideology". What about the unresolved 'De Auxiliis'? Even those least proud of the Church's record between Trent and Vatican II will find it hard to take such remarks in a book of theology.

Secondly, Fr Boff appears to use sociology when it suits him, not where it does not. Thus, in chapter 4, Fr Boff explains why, for socio-historical reasons, the Church's theological understanding leads it inexorably to repress human rights. Yet he is happy to write, in the next chapter a history of the acquisition of centralized power in the Church without the corollary of a socio-historical understanding of the exercise of power in the societies contemporary to and involved in this development. Thus he misses the extent to which the Church's claims to power (ridiculous by themselves) may have guaranteed some important freedoms for subjects of secular rulers (sanctuary etc): the political effects of Luther's break from Rome on those who lived in the areas whose rulers accepted the Reformation suggest that the acquisition of evangelical freedom often has a greater political subservience as its *quid pro quo*. Fr Boff is not sufficiently ambiguous.

The same is true of Fr Boff's treatment of syncretism where he criticizes the Church for finding it "easier to expand the reigning ecclesial system rather than allow and prepare for the birth of another". Yet, the early Franciscan experience in Mexico, where they encouraged mass baptisms, and were comparatively tolerant of syncretism (at first, and over against the Dominican missionaries' more intellectualist and less massive approach), was that it was exactly expansion of the reigning ecclesial system which enabled some elements of indigenous political systems and freedoms to be saved from destruction by the Spanish. The question of syncretism is deeply

linked to questions of colonialism and cultural domination. Surprisingly for someone for whom the political significance of Christianity is so important, Fr Boff's understanding is too idealist and too little political.

Fr Boff's properly Franciscan love of the Church, and longing to see it more of a sign of contradiction leads him, in many places but most notably in chapter 5, to have an exaggerated notion of the importance (in secular terms) of the Church, and of the extent to which it is ever separable from the world in which it is and of which it is not supposed to be. Thus he tells us (p. 57) that "the quality of Christianity present in western culture ... was superficial". One does not have to be proud of the history of Christianity to wonder for whom the Gospel is, if not for the superficial and half-converted.

Many of the loose ends in *CCP* are tied up in the essays on St Francis, which we are lucky to have at the same time as the more controversial title, and which make for far more satisfactory and enjoyable reading. As befits a member of St. Francis' order, Boff's meditations on his founder are very revealing of some of his own preoccupations, and throw considerable light on some of the attitudes he takes, both in *CCP* and his reactions to the C.D.F. His treatment is often very moving, and contains many insights not to be found in the standard biographies available in English. Perhaps, at the same time, it is the very "franciscanism" of some of his emphases that are disturbing. While he is surely right about the place of the erotic in charity (chapter 1), he plays down reason rather than rationalism so as to shift the emphasis on how we know: this leads to a number of frankly mythical assertions, such as "Ancient man before the hegemony of reason lived a mystic union with all realities including God" (p. 10). Perhaps it is this ambivalence concerning man's intellect which leads Boff to be chary about the Church as institution rather than event (*CCP* p. 155), and to oppose doctrine and practice (*CCP* p. 46) when the institution can only be seen as an aspect of the event, and true doctrine as central to the possibility of having other than a one-off saving "encounter with the living and true God".

It may be this also which leads Boff to neglect a critical sociology of education (of which there are elements in *SF*) in his treatment of the distinction between *Ecclesia Docens* and *Ecclesia Discens* (*CCP* chapter 11): the way the Church formulates and teaches is in necessary relation to secular educational practice—just what sort of relationship needs elucidating and criticizing. The same question is neglected in Boff's (acknowledgedly undeveloped) use of the "means of production" model of society to explain the "gradual expropriation of the means of religious production from the Christian people by the clergy" (*CCP* p. 112.)

Chapter 4 of *SF* (particularly pp. 126—9) goes a long way

towards explaining Boff's own attitude towards his summons to Rome last year, and towards the Notification of March 1985. He knows full well that "The incarnation of the community among the poor, living the Gospel in the concrete place of the poor, can become a risk to an essential dimension of the Church, its catholicity and universality" (p. 126)—surely exactly the keynote of the C.D.F.'s *Libertatis Nuntius*. These pages, where Francis' own reaction to the central authorities of the Church is examined, make sense of Boff's expressions of loyalty, and his acceptance of the C.D.F.'s notification: "Because Francis embraced both forms of the concretization of the Church—as institution and as event—he truly could be called *vir totus catholicus et apostolicus*" (p. 129).

It is in the last chapter of *SF* that Boff touches on what is, at least for this reviewer, at the core of *CCP*. In his ecclesiological essays part at least of what is disturbing is that the critic of the Church does not appear to see himself as its accomplice. He sometimes appears not to have assimilated the unsatisfactory parts of the body which forms him. However, here in chapter 5 of *SF* Boff presents us with a St Francis who integrated the negative, who was both critic and accomplice in our Christian endeavour, without losing the salt of his flight from the established order. It is Fr Boff's movement towards integration of criticism, complicity, and radical christianity which often makes him rewarding reading.

Reviews

POETRY OF THE PASSION : STUDIES IN TWELVE CENTURIES OF ENGLISH VERSE by J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford, 1982), *Clerendon Press*. £17.50

Professor J.A.W. Bennett, who died in 1981, was one of the outstanding medievalists of his generation. He completed this book just before his death; it is based on a series of lectures given at Cambridge, where he was Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English. His book is an excellent testament both to the quality of his mind and to the breadth of his learning. He takes an important theme, the Passion of Christ, and traces it from the beginnings of Christian literature in English to the Twentieth Century. The book does not claim to be a complete survey of this vast subject: but it covers the major texts, and it firmly places the English texts it examines in the context of their European sources and analogues. Perhaps the greatest strength of the book is Professor

246