

CHRISTOLOGY AND BASE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN LIBERATION
THEOLOGY, AS INTRODUCED BY BERRYMAN AND THE RATZINGER-BOFF
DEBATES

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Fall 1987: Dr Robert Osborn

Two themes which have emerged as crucial to the development of the "theology of liberation" since its inception over the last two decades have been its Christology, and the role within the theology of the basic cell of this "new way of doing theology", the base christian communities (hereafter referred to as CEB's, comunidades eclesiais de base). The former theme, central to the legitimacy within the Christian tradition since Jesus, has, in emphasizing the "Jesus of history", made the principal contribution of restoring the human dimension to the life of Christ, reminding us anew that he was fully human with real human choices, as well as divine. The latter theme, the CEB's, have become the largest sign of hope for the movement as a whole. Small groups of generally poor communities gather in these Christian cells to learn both about the faith they profess and its implications on how they view their world. How then, are these issues addressed in three of the most recent introductory discussions of liberation theology, works that many will go to for their first

impressions of the movement as a whole?" This paper discusses the treatment of christology and the CEB's in these three works: Philip Berryman's Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation, 1984 (hereafter referred to as the Instruction or the "Ratzinger letter"); and thirdly, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff's Liberation Theology: From Dialogue to Confrontation, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

The three works have very different purposes. Of the three, it is Berryman's account which is the most useful beginning in analysing the two issues within liberation theology of the base communities and of Christology. The book as a whole has been written to explain to the reader with no background knowledge of the movement's dynamics the essential principles of liberation theology. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in his official capacity as Prefect of the Congregation of the Faith, and the Boff brothers have written what are in comparison polemical documents which take many positions in opposition to each other on the merits of liberation theology as a whole. As such, their analysis of the two subjects under analysis here comes only in the midst of their wider debate.

For Berryman, the role of the CEB's - a "primary embodiment" of liberation theology¹ - is of such importance that he first provides an account of how this new model of church works in practice so that later on he can explain the actual theology itself. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that for Berryman the new theology is intimately

connected to, and often shaped by, the communities of the American poor. Like the beginnings of liberation theology, the CEB's origins are placed in the context of a pastoral res from the sisters and priests in particular to the realities of post-Vatican II Catholic church in Latin America. A new model eeded to inculcate the conciliar values in an area where Catholicism was far more closely linked to popular religion based on the s than it was to any direct obedience to the official church.² A accounting for the development of the base community modeelf, Berryman then proceeds to examine the CEB's in practice. of what he writes - for instance, that the poor are the ones who responding to this model - is not original, but nor need : this work is only an introduction, and does not purport to treis subject with the depth of, for instance, a Torres , who elizes in this area. Berryman's discussion of the role of the CEB'she rehabilitation of popular religion in Latin America is ilating, however: in this process the pastors who were in touch wie people saw how alienated the people were by the discrediting of of the saints in the post-conciliar era, and so these pastors ca use the popular beliefs within their framework of concientizaci Berryman's tone, furthermore, is always balanced in discu the CEB's. While showing how encouraged the members of the ccties are by the realization that their model of the church is clos that of the Acts of the Apostles than is that of the established ture⁴, he does place the movement in perspective. Thus, while 2.1ion Brazilians may belong to such communities, they represent than two percent of that nation's population, while the celebrbase

communities of Nicaragua attract less than one percent of the Nicaraguan people. Such figures, much smaller than the number of evangelical Protestants in Latin America, lead Berryman to conclude in this excellent summary that the impact of the base communities is qualitative rather than quantitative.

In comparison with his carefully developed analysis of base communities, Berryman's enquiry into the Christology of liberation theology is considerably more lightly discussed. Nevertheless he brings out the major themes as discussed by Sobrino and other liberation christologists: that Jesus is not only the suffering figure as he has been for centuries portrayed in Latin America; that Jesus lived poor and spoke about real material suffering; that he made enemies because he denounced religion with its ties to the state authorities of his time which would consider subversive. His death was not some pre-ordained "cosmic drama", but the consequence of his own human decision to follow a path which Church-state authorities of his time would consider subversive. Sobrino extensively, Berryman here is preparing his reader for the fuller development found in that source and in other works of Ellacuria's. He himself, however, does emphasize well the points fundamental to the christology of liberation theology. Jesus maintained fidelity to his mission even when it looked as if the kingdom would not be achieved; second, that this fidelity

1. Philip Berryman, Liberation Theology: The Essential about the revolutionary movement in Latin America and beyond, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p.63.

2. Ibid., pp.42 and 64.

3. Ibid., p.71.

4. Ibid., p.58.

5. Ibid., p.72.

whole life-death-resurrection cycle is inspiring as never before Latin Americans when presented in this context; and third, that in general liberation theology is very christological, as it seeks to rescue the humanity of Jesus from within the previous metaphysical interpretations of God.⁷

Berryman's book, in sum, is extremely successful in bringing these (and indeed almost all) components of liberation theology to the reader, in an informative, balanced way. Such was not the case, however, of Cardinal Ratzinger, formerly a liberal theologian but under John Paul II the head of the Vatican watchdog on the Catholic Church's teaching, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Concerned at what he saw as a departure from doctrinal orthodoxy in liberation theology, and in the wake of some criticisms in particular by the challenge to the Church's hierarchical structures in Leonardo Boff's Church, Charism and Power, Ratzinger composed on behalf of the Sacred Congregation an Instruction on liberation theology which was in parts most condemnatory of the teaching as a whole. Worried in particular about what was the uncritical adoption of Marxist thought by many liberation theologians, and the weakening of the notion of individual sin and the need for salvation in Christ, Ratzinger listed the potential consequences of these views, consequences which could not be allowed:

the "theologies of liberation" tend to misunderstand or to eliminate[...] the transcendence and grace of liberation in Jesus Christ, true God and

6. Ibid., pp.53-57.

7. Ibid., pp.157.

man; the sovereignty of grace; and the true nature of the means of salvation, especially of the Church and the sacraments. One should also keep in mind the true meaning of ethics in which the distinction between good and evil is not relativized, the real meaning of sin, the need for conversion[...]

One needs to be on one's guard against the politicization of existence which, misunderstanding the entire meaning of the Kingdom of God and the transcendence of the person, begins to sacralize politics and betray the religion of the people in favor of the projects of the revolution.¹⁹

Such strong opinions challenge much of the basic tenets of liberation theology itself. While these tenets fall outside the discussion of this paper, it will be important to note the mindset behind Ratzinger's views on the base communities, and on Christology, to which we shall now turn.

For Cardinal Ratzinger, the "truth about Jesus Christ" is one of the "pillars upon which any authentic theology of liberation will rest", yet the christology of liberation theology is treated only in passing here. Christ is a liberator, but this liberation is first and foremost a liberation from sin. He is also merciful, and as all who suffer are identified with him, so he demands of his disciples the same gift of mercy.²⁰ In Ratzinger's view, the person of Jesus Christ is misunderstood in liberation theology by the aforementioned

8. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation, August 6 1984, XI.17.

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excessive emphasis on his political dimension and the downgrading of the liberation from sin he gave us; furthermore, the experience claimed by liberation theologians in meeting the "Jesus of history" in the revolutionary struggle rejects what Ratzinger calls the "Christological doctrine of Tradition".¹¹

Indeed, it is in the context of its challenge to church tradition and procedures that Ratzinger criticizes the base communities as well. Ratzinger in the Instruction laments the challenge presented by the theological champions of these communities to the hierarchical structure of the church, "which was willed by the Lord Himself".¹² He is more concerned, however, at just what goes on doctrinally in the communities themselves. In particular, he focuses on the simplification of the faith in its presentation within the CEB's. To the Cardinal, the "'base groups' lack the necessary catechetical and theological preparation as well as the capacity for discernment. Thus these theses are accepted by generous men and women without any critical judgement being made" [emphasis mine]. The poor have no "competent" scientific or middle-class training; in Ratzinger's view they do not contribute to theological thought.¹³

Such an arrogant, elitist and dismissive approach deeply affronts the Boff brothers, Leonardo and Clodovis, who in their 1986 work Liberation Theology: From Dialogue to Confrontation counter many of Ratzinger's charges. Assuming some foreknowledge of the tenets of liberation theology on the reader's part, the Boffs, whose theology

9. Ibid., V.8.

10. Ibid., IV. 2 and 10.

11. Ibid., X. 7-12.

12. Ibid., IX. 13.

13. Ibid., XI. 13-16.

more than some liberationists is directly shaped by their experience in base communities, have produced a text which indirectly reports on the present myths, successes, and hopes of liberation theology, in addition to providing a fascinating insight into the Vatican politicking around the Instruction's preparation and the buildup to Ratzinger's effective theological "gagging" of Leonardo Boff in 1985. Christology is barely covered here, other than reiterating once more the main ideas of the liberationists. For the Boffs, the theological theme of liberation and freedom is basic to Jesus's actions.¹⁴ Christ took his incarnation "to the hilt": never indifferent to human suffering, he died and was risen for his practice. Because his message was from a poor person, the poor can boast Jesus was one of them, which the Boffs believe is of utmost significance for the Latin American poor today.¹⁵

On behalf of the poor then, the Boffs take aim at Ratzinger in particular when he minimizes the contribution of the poor in the base communities. The Boffs attribute this dismissive approach to a total lack of experience with how such communities work, or knowledge of the huge pedagogical labor of these last 20 years with its consciousness-raising, rehabilitation of popular piety, appropriation of the scriptures by the communities, and the repeated deepening of faith through meditation on the great themes of faith.¹⁶

The Boffs interpret the Instruction as placing the poor outside the church, which is opposite to the reality the Boffs see of active

14. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Liberation Theology: From Dialogue to Confrontation, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p.53.

15. Ibid., pp.26-7 and 50.

involvement; where the people are the primary ecclesial agents, and the pastors "come second".¹⁷ Indeed, the pastors are taught by the people, and emerge from the communities strengthened in faith.¹⁸ In the union of the hierarchy and the base communities, a new liberative profile of the church is being created.¹⁹ For the Boffs, this intimate association with the poor and the CEB's is the distinguishing characteristic of liberation theology, enabling theology to arise from the "heart of the faith community" rather than the more abstract world of religious academia. As Clodovis Boff argues, in addition, "the people have a right to think their faith".²⁰

Liberation Theology: From Dialogue to Confrontation rebuts other presuppositions of the Instruction also, citing the use by popes of marxist tools of analysis, and those actions of Pope John Paul II on its behalf. Despite, however, the Instruction's "painful" omission in failing to acknowledge the cost of the lives of some of those who have followed liberation theology, the Boffs argue that the Vatican document, in not officially condemning this "new way of doing theology", actually is an endorsement of it.²¹ Is this painting too brave a face on the case? Perhaps the answer lies in Berryman's assessment that many liberation theologians initially considered that the Ratzinger letter was describing a caricature of liberation theology and hence did not apply to their own work.²² In its handling of all aspects of liberation theology generally, including therefore its treatment of its christology and the base-communities,

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-3.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 28 and 32.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

the Vatican has pursued an ambivalent path, Ratzinger's letter be
one part only of a confused and uncertain strategy on how to handl
this theological "problem child"²¹. Ultimately, as the teaching of
liberation theology on christology is less immediately threatening
the Catholic Church's hierarchical structure than the democratizin
CEB's, ²²any future outright attack on liberation theology from th
church hierarchy is more likely to arise from dispute over the
latter issue.

Positions taken on the nature and impact of the base communit
and of christology within liberation theology are not the primary
themes in each of the three accounts under review, Berryman's
Liberation Theology, Ratzinger's Instruction, and the Boff
brother's Liberation Theology. Nevertheless, the stances that are
taken on these issues do inform the overall argument of each as a
whole. For Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, and indeed for Berryman, th
base communities in particular are central to a main strength of
liberation theology, its setting in practice and its galvanization
the theologians involved in this milieu; for Ratzinger, such
communities have no place as theological "wombs", and scarcely any
place in his hierarchically based church. In Ratzinger's thinking,
aspect of christology is that Jesus willed such a hierarchy in his
church; the christology of the Boffs and of Berryman instead draws
a line of thinking which includes placing Jesus in opposition to t
religious hierarchy of his time, a path which led to his death. Th

21. Ibid., pp.11-12.

22. Berryman, pp.188-89.

23. Ibid., pp. 77-79, 98-99, 109-10.

24. Ibid., p.75.

seen, the issues of christology and the CEB's are intertwined in these works, albeit from contrasting viewpoints. In such a manner, and in their general discussion of these themes, Berryman, Ratzinger and the Boffs all illuminate our understanding - even if in Ratzinger's case only by serving as a negative reference point for comparison - of the role of christology and the base communities w/ liberation theology, and consequently our understanding of liberation theology itself.