

# RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



The Institute  
on Religion &  
Democracy

September 1989

*What Is the Option for the Poor?*

## Sorting Out Liberation Theologies

**BRIEFLY:** Liberation theology is the rage on the U.S. religious Left. Oldline Sunday school texts, church magazines, and seminary professors hail it as the great new light from the Third World. Some conservatives overreact by damning all liberation theology as communism dressed up in Christian clothing. But Pope John Paul II has taken a more subtle approach. He encourages an orthodox theology of genuine liberation, while opposing false theologies which compromise the Christian faith with a failed Marxism. The "father of liberation theology," Gustavo Gutierrez, seems to have moderated his stance. Yet other liberation theologians persist in equating communist dictatorships with the kingdom of God. U.S. churchpeople must learn how to distinguish between helpful and unhelpful versions of liberation theology.

Liberation theology arose in the late 1960s as a radical response to the underdevelopment of Latin America. Frustrated by the persistence of poverty, some Latin theologians turned to "Marxist analysis" for an explanation. From it they concluded that the international capitalist system was to blame for their continent's problems. Reform within that system was no solution, they contended; only a revolution, installing some form of socialism, offered hope. They summoned the Church to a new position, on "the side of the poor" in a class struggle against the rich. This approach often meant identifying the Church with "popular movements" -- usually Marxist -- who had taken up arms against authoritarian right-wing governments. Cuba was regarded by many liberationists as a model of the desired revolution.

During the past two decades, however, the reputation of Cuba and other communist countries has fallen precipitously, and the validity of Marxist analysis has been severely contested. Even Mikhail Gorbachev and some fellow communist rulers in Eastern Europe have made striking confessions of their system's shortcomings. For example, Hungarian Foreign Minister Gyula Horn recently conceded that his country's one-party dictatorship had no right to call itself a "socialist democracy." "In a real sense," Horn said, the government had been "not democracy but a party and state monopoly." Horn repudiated



RNS Photo/Wide World

**Archbishop Paulo Evaristo Cardinal Arns, Sao Paulo, Brazil**

any Marxist motivation in Hungary's new moves toward a multi-party system. "In fact, we discredit the ideas of Marx," he said (*New York Times*, April 25, 1989).

So are the advocates of liberation theology now willing to say that they, too, discredit Marx? Unfortunately, many are not yet as clear-sighted as the reformist East Europeans. Especially in Third World countries which have not experienced communist rule, there are liberationists who still put their faith in the Marxist ideal. They may not carry a party card, but they still pay their respects at the shrine of communist "achievements" -- even as the longtime party faithful wander away disappointed, having seen no achievements worthy of worship.

### A Letter to "Dearest Fidel"

Consider, for instance, Paulo Evaristo Cardinal Arns, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil. Cardinal Arns is a key patron of liberation theology, and a hero to many religious radicals in the United States. He was the featured speaker at a February conference of 250 U.S. Catholic social action officials. According to Religious News Service (RNS), the Brazilian cardinal received a warm welcome from his U.S. audience. Moreover, the *National Catholic Reporter*, in a June 2

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editorial, proposed Arns for a Nobel Peace Prize.

Last Christmas, this same Cardinal Arns sent a letter of "fraternal" greetings to "Dearest Fidel" Castro. But Christmas was not the theme of Arns' message; ironically, it focused on a more political occasion: the thirtieth anniversary of Castro's seizure of power.

Many other observers found Castro's anniversary a melancholy spectacle, as his people suffered under unrelieved repression and stagnation. Cardinal Arns, though, gushed praise for the Cuban communist regime: "We all know with how much heroism and sacrifice the people of your country were able to resist foreign aggression and eradicate misery, illiteracy and chronic social problems. Today, Cuba can feel proud to be an example of social justice on our continent, so impoverished by foreign debt." The cardinal even spoke of Castro's dictatorship as a kind of divine revelation: "Christian faith discovers in the conquests of the [Cuban] Revolution signs of the kingdom of God, which are made manifest in our hearts and in the structures which permit us to make of political community an act of love." Arns closed by assuring Castro of his prayers for the dictator's continuance in power: "I ask the Father that He always grant you the grace of guiding the destinies of your country."

### **Toward a More Authentic Liberation Theology**

Cardinal Arns might have avoided his embrace of Castro if he had heeded warnings from the Vatican. In a meeting with Brazilian bishops in March 1986, Pope John Paul II stated that "a theological reflection on liberation can and must exist," but must be "founded on solid doctrinal elements pertaining to the most authentic magisterium (teaching) of the church." This healthy liberation theology would show a special concern for the poor, protesting against injustices they suffer and seeking political changes to benefit them. But, the pope added, liberation theology must be "purified of elements that could adulterate it," lest it cause "grave consequences for the faith" (*Washington Post*, March 14, 1986).

A subsequent papal instruction ("On Christian Freedom and Liberation," March 22, 1986) specified possible adulterating elements in liberation theology: the adoption of secular ideologies which ignore the spiritual dimension of life; the reduction of theology to an argument, and of the Church to an instrument, for a predetermined course of political action; a preference for forms of collectivism which violate individual rights; a distortion of the "option for the poor" into partisan support for movements of class hatred; and a too-ready endorsement of violence as a means of struggle. That these caveats militated against

liberation theology's use of "Marxist analysis" was abundantly clear. The instruction closed with a sharp warning against the consequences of giving church blessing to a totalitarian regime: "It would be criminal to take the energies of popular piety and misdirect them toward a purely earthly plan of liberation, which would

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very soon be revealed as nothing more than an illusion and a cause of new forms of slavery."

Some exponents of liberation theology have shown themselves sensitive to the papal warnings and to the lessons of experience. Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian priest often called "the father of liberation theology," now speaks of Marxism much less and with greater reservations. In recent interviews Gutierrez has forsworn any exclusive commitment to Marxist analysis -- or any other ideological framework. "We believe in different possibilities, pluralities; ... we reject the idea of [a single] 'Christian politics,'" he has said (*RNS* July 18, 1989). Gutierrez increasingly stresses individual spiritual life: "It's not enough to change social structures; we need to change persons too. We don't have liberation only when we have just social structures. Another important aspect of liberation is more 'religious,' more 'Christian': liberation from sin" (*The Other Side*, Nov. 1987).

The Peruvian theologian still exhibits a strong preference for socialism; however, he has declared himself willing to consider -- "very theoretically" -- the possibility that capitalism might offer a better way out of poverty. Among his goals Gutierrez now includes human rights more prominently. Conscious of the failings of communist regimes in this regard, he affirms the need "to express our solidarity with Christians living in the East bloc" and "to avoid delusions" about existing socialist systems (*New York Times*, July 27, 1988). Gutierrez has stated that Sandinista Nicaragua does not represent his vision of liberation theology in practice (*News Weekly*, March 5, 1986).

### **A Band of Revolutionary Pilgrims**

Cardinal Arns, by contrast, seems quite taken with delusions about Cuba. And Arns is scarcely the only church leftist who continues to believe communist claims. Several other leading lights of Brazilian liberation theology have undertaken what seems to be a program of adoring pilgrimages to communist lands.

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In 1987 the Franciscan **Leonardo Boff** headed a delegation of five Brazilians who visited the Soviet Union. Boff declared himself impressed with Soviet-style socialism. He claimed that it "provides better conditions for a Christian to be authentic," because "Soviet society is not based upon exploitation, individualism or obsession to consume, but upon work and a fair distribution of benefits" (*Washington Times*, Aug. 14, 1987).

In a later article Boff briefly acknowledged, "We cannot forget that there were historical prices paid for this [Soviet] accomplishment -- millions died," and there were "restrictions to free public expression of religion." But these small problems did not sway him from his verdict: "In real socialism, in spite of all the contradictions, ... the fulfillment of social-collective needs is better realized than in capitalism." Boff discerned a "special presence" of the Holy Spirit in both Lenin's 1917 revolution and Gorbachev's recent reforms. He voiced hope that churches around the world could "reconcile themselves to ... the existence and consolidation of socialism," "incorporate socialist culture," and even "collaborate in the building of socialism" (*Crisis*, Jan. 1989).

**Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga**, from the state of Matto Grosso, apparently enjoys political tourism more than tending to his backwoods Brazilian flock. He has spent months at a time in Nicaragua, accompanying Miguel D'Escoto and other pro-government churchmen while avoiding or denigrating the harassed Nicaraguan bishops. Casaldaliga told an interviewer the lesson he drew from his sojourn in the land of Sandino: "The important thing is the example that Nicaragua gives to all Latin America, attacking head-on the dragon of imperialism and capitalism." Reflecting on his visits to Cuba and meetings with its dictator, the Brazilian bishop mused, "At times the beard of the apostles blends with that of Fidel Castro, without any inconsistency in this" (*O Estado de Sao Paulo*, Jan. 8, 1988).

### Lessons Yet to be Learned

The Vatican has not been oblivious to the political foolishness of these Brazilian liberationists. It has sent them various signals of displeasure. In 1985 Leonardo Boff was required to observe a year of public silence. Bishop Casaldaliga has lately been advised to remain at home in his diocese. And Cardinal Ams' see, formerly the largest archdiocese in the world, is now to be subdivided.

But the U.S. church Left has not gotten the message. In reporting on the radical Brazilians' conflicts with the Vatican, many religious publications here seem impervious to Rome's concerns. Instead their sympathies go almost entirely to the extreme liberationists. The *National Catholic Reporter* (Oct. 7, 1988), for example, exalts Casaldaliga as a "prophetic bishop." It portrays him, with Ams and Boff, as victims of "Roman absolutism," subjected to "unproven and sometimes blatantly absurd allegations" by a heartless pope who "emphasizes religious orthodoxy more than social justice."



Religious News Service Photo

**Father Leonardo Boff of Brazil**

There appears here an almost willful naivete, as U.S. enthusiasts blithely affirm liberation theology in its entirety. The church Left strains its credibility by refusing to discriminate among liberationisms. Likewise, some conservatives' blanket denunciations of liberation theology fail to persuade, because they, too, lack discernment.

In responding to proposed theologies of liberation, Christians of all denominations must learn to separate the orthodox from the heretical, the wise from the misguided, and that which has passed the test of experience from that which fails it. They must ask questions such as: Does this theology preach Christ as Lord and Savior? Or does it make humans the center of history, responsible for winning their own salvation? Is the salvation it offers merely a matter of changed political structures? Or does it also proclaim an eternal life which raises up even the individual sinner? Would this theology turn the Church into a partisan political movement? Or would it leave Christians free to make differing political and economic judgments? Would it stimulate class hatred and promote violence as the solution to social conflicts? Or would it seek social reconciliation, allowing warfare only when there is no other redress for injustice? Finally, does this theology aim at the sort of Marxist socialism which has historically repressed the poor as individuals, while failing to overcome their collective poverty? Or does it look to the sort of democracy, human rights, and economic initiative which have historically brought both freedom and prosperity to millions who had been poor?

-- Alan Wisdom

*For Further Study of Liberation Theology:*

Kent Hill's "The Discipline of Discernment: Liberation Theology Reconsidered." *Public Eye*, Summer 1988. Available from IRD for \$1.50.

## Bulgaria Sends Islamic Turks Packing

It should be relatively easy to distinguish a departing tourist from a refugee. Still, Bulgarian officials have stuck to their claim that the thousands of ethnic Turks (primarily Muslim) who fled to Turkey this summer departed voluntarily on tourist visas and are welcome back.

While many of the more than 300,000 ethnic Turks issued passports surely left voluntarily, others were given only hours of notice before being expelled. Of those forced out in May, 4,000 were former political prisoners, human rights activists and educated professionals. Many abandoned possessions or had them taken with no compensation. When Turkey slowed the refugee intake in August, many who had given up everything to leave were trapped in waiting and fear of government reprisals.

Paradoxically, Bulgaria also denies that the 1.5 million Turks actually are Turks. The government alleges that they are Bulgarians who were forced to assimilate into Turkish/Islamic culture during the nearly five centuries of Turkish rule prior to 1878. This denial of religion and ethnic culture provides a clue to why many want to leave, and why some are being required to do so.

No group enjoys freedom under the atheistic Bulgarian government. Because the public propagation of religion is illegal, religious publishing is severely restricted. The appointment of clergy in registered religious groups is controlled in most cases by the state. Sermons and pastoral communications are subject to state approval, and religious instruction is denied to all children. The next generation of Christians, especially the non-Orthodox, will experience a shortage of trained clergy because openings at the only seminary, which is Orthodox, are sharply limited. According to the Puebla Institute, half of the 200 priests serving 60,000 Roman Catholics in Bulgaria are more than 70 years old and only four are younger than 50.

But in contrast to a measure of government toleration for the Christian (especially Orthodox) faith's roots in the Bulgarian identity, Islam is thought to be the source of subversive anti-Bulgarian activities by Turks. The perceived threat is enhanced by Muslim birth rates, which are higher than those of the rest of the population.

In 1984 the Bulgarian government renewed a military-backed campaign to assimilate minorities, particularly Turks, into Bulgarian Slavic culture. Those refusing to give up Islamic names were placed in special camps and some tortured; from 300 to 1,500 protestors are believed to have been killed, according to Human Rights Watch.

The recent expulsion of the Turks followed apparently peaceful Muslim protests against the forced assimilation. Hunger strikes, work stoppages and public demonstrations involved perhaps hundreds of thousands, according to a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty report. Some 100 Turks reportedly were killed in relation to the protests.

Reports of mosque destruction reveal the public side of the repression. Though the government has restored some famous mosques, only about 400 remain. One area with four open mosques before the assimilation program now only has one. And Turks do not attend it "out of fear," according to a refugee testimony reprinted by Keston College.

The prosecution of Muslims who circumcise their sons illustrates repression's private side. Keston College reported a story of a man who spent one year in a labor camp for this "crime." A government prohibition against speaking Turkish and even wearing Turkish pants further demonstrates how thoroughly the state feels threatened by the religion and culture of Turkish Islam.

As often is the case in communist countries, state-authorized religious leaders defend the government. Bulgaria's official Islamic leaders have denied reports that the assimilation campaign was forced upon Muslims. The Bulgarian Orthodox Holy Synod, the Diocesan Council of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Central Jewish Religious Council also declared support for the state's explanation of the recent events involving the Turks.

The protests preceding the Turkish expulsion, however, parallel other new forms of dissent, including the formation of an independent trade union and various human rights groups. In May 1988, an inter-faith group established the Independent Committee for the Defense of Religious Rights, Freedom of Conscience and Spiritual Values. The committee explicitly opposes the forced assimilation and defends the right to practice Islam.

Bulgaria's efforts to deny the existence of minorities and rewrite history to support a pure nationalism contrasts with the Soviet Union's increasing tolerance for wider ethnic and religious diversity. The Turkish refugees highlight again the anti-*glasnost* stranglehold on free association that long has justified Bulgaria's ranking as one of the Eastern Bloc's worst human rights abusers.

*Protests should be sent to the Bulgarian embassy in the U.S., in care of The Honorable Velizhko Velizhkov, 1621 22nd Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.*

**-- Fredrick Jones**



## From the Director's Desk . . .

There is no part of my job which I take more seriously than personnel selection. What is needed at the IRD are people who combine spiritual commitment and maturity with intellectual and professional competence.

During my three years as Director of the IRD, I have been privileged to work with an extremely talented and dedicated staff. In recent months there have been a number of important and exciting staff changes that I am pleased to report to our readers and supporters.

In early July, **Walter Kansteiner**, our Director of Economic Studies and our Africa specialist, joined the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Council as the Africa analyst. We are pleased that his considerable skills will now be channeled directly into long-range planning for U.S. policy regarding Africa. Our readers will be glad to know that, before leaving the IRD, Walter completed a second edition of his very fine book on *South Africa, Revolution or Reconciliation?*, which we will be co-publishing with Bristol Books early this fall.

For the last year, **David Porter** worked with Walter Kansteiner as an editorial assistant for the IRD's *The Religion and Economics Report (TRER)*. In late June he left the IRD to study law at George Mason University.

I have taken over the responsibility of editing TRER and will be directly monitoring our research related to South Africa. **Dana Preush**, a 1986 graduate of Olivet Nazarene College, is now my chief assistant on economics. A participant in the American Studies Program of the Christian College Coalition, she has most recently been a legislative research assistant for a Washington-based insurance trade association.

In April, our fine office manager, **Marilyn White**, resigned in order to take a position as a counselor in a Salvation Army drug rehabilitation center in Virginia. We feel very fortunate to have obtained the services of **Kendrick Smith** as our new office manager. A 1983 graduate of Kenyon College (Gambier, Ohio), Kendrick brings valuable experience in the area of events coordination, public relations, and bookkeeping.

The IRD frequently works with interns for a semester or a summer. In the case of **Richard Sperbeck**, however, his internship in 1986 developed into a full-time position with the IRD. Serving as a research assistant and assistant editor for *Religion and Democracy*, he developed strong expertise on our electronic publisher. Recently he and his wife moved to the Charlottesville, Virginia, area.

Richard's place in research and in the production of *Religion and Democracy* was taken by **Fredrick Jones** -- a very gifted and experienced young man. Fred has a B.A. in Journalism and Religious Studies from Indiana University (1983), and is completing an M.A. in Public and International Affairs from the University of Pittsburgh. An active Episcopalian, he brings to the IRD special knowledge and experience in the areas of newsletter production, communications, journalism, and American religious studies.

As I announced in our June newsletter, **Dr. Lawrence Adams** has joined the IRD staff as an International Affairs and Economics Associate and as the Director of the Episcopal Committee on Religion and Freedom. Since April, **Steve Beard** has ably served Larry as his research assistant. Steve graduated from Oral Roberts University in 1987, worked at the Executive Council on Foreign Diplomats in 1988, and was a research assistant at the Ethics and Public Policy Center during the past year. Steve is the son of a United Methodist pastor.

It is with a real sense of bittersweet emotion that we said good-bye to **Lisa Gibney** at the end of August. Lisa has been my administrative assistant for the past year and was particularly important in providing research and technical

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assistance in the writing of my new book, *The Puzzle of the Soviet Church*. She coordinated at the IRD an Adopt-a-Prisoner program for Soviet prisoners of conscience. Lisa will be going to Holland and Eastern Europe this fall to explore mission opportunities with Christians in communist countries. Our present Research Associate on religious liberty, **Father Stan DeBoe**, now coordinates the activities of the Coalition for Solidarity with Christians in the USSR. The Trinitarian Order, to which Father Stan belongs, is a member of the Coalition.

My new administrative assistant is **Lonni Jackson**, a former history student of mine at Seattle Pacific University. Following an internship at the U.S. Agency for International Development in 1986, Lonni worked for 15 months for Africa Enterprise in South Africa. In addition to being my assistant, Lonni will help coordinate our South Africa research at the IRD and work with our Building a New South Africa (BANSAs) program, which encourages church contributions to organizations in South Africa which seek to promote justice and reconciliation.

We have other key personnel well known to IRD members. **Diane Knippers**, our Deputy Director, has been with us since 1982, while **Alan Wisdom**, our Research Director, came to the IRD in 1985. **Karen Mabeus** serves as our receptionist and Diane's administrative assistant.

Our staff is a dedicated group of men and women who very much care about promoting democracy, human rights, and religious liberty around the world. They join me in thanking you for your faithful support of this work.

*Kent R. Hill*

Kent R. Hill  
Executive Director

## **Guilt by Association**

Just a quick note about the lead article in your May (1989) newsletter. While Miss Sherman cites "Economic Justice and Christian Conscience" in her article, the article does not in any way deal with the focus of that paper: poverty in our prosperous society. For the reader who is unfamiliar with the paper the impression is given that the recommendations she attacks are contained, or at least supported, in all the papers cited. I would hope that a fairer presentation would be given in a newsletter such as yours. Our urban bishops do not deserve to be found guilty by association.

*The Rev. Daniel Weir*

*Episcopal Diocese of Western New York*

Amy Sherman responds:

In one aspect, Rev. Weir has criticized my article at its most vulnerable point: the Episcopal statement is the one most removed from the topic at hand, since it dealt primarily with domestic, as opposed to global, poverty. Nevertheless, he is incorrect to suggest that the Episcopal bishops "do not deserve to be found guilty by association" (I prefer the term "misguided" over "guilty").

The Episcopal statement echoes other oldline documents when it argues that the "gap" between rich and poor is "widening daily at an alarming rate." Moreover, the bishops recommend an increased role for government in "correcting" economic inequities, i.e., engaging in redistribution. I criticized the oldline statements precisely for this emphasis on *redistributionist*, as opposed to *production*, strategies. The Episcopal bishops also mirror their brethren in the other denominations by blaming the West for the "absolute poverty" of the Third World. The bishops' charge that the industrialization of the Western economies was purchased at the price of the "colonialist exploitation" of the underdeveloped states is simply another way of phrasing basic dependency theory, on which all four statements rely. Finally, the Episcopal statement offers the same basic theology of economic justice as do the Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and Methodist documents -- that "Biblical justice" equals an economic system in

which the basic human needs of all people are satisfied. This true, but incomplete, rendering of the concept has led the oldline churches to an unhealthy appreciation for socialist economic systems which do little to advance material well-being and have failed utterly to provide legal security and civil rights that surely ought to be included under the rubric of "Biblical justice."

## **Accurate vs. Pejorative Labeling**

Mr. Theodore L. Agnew of Stillwater, Oklahoma, complains in your June 1989 issue about your use of the term "oldline" to refer to the once-powerful denominations associated with the National Council of Churches. He finds the adjective unpleasant and charges you with a pejorative intent for using it.

In fact, the term is a response to a real problem: how to describe institutions that once enjoyed great influence, but now have fallen into numerical, financial and spiritual decadence. It may be true that the former mainline churches still count millions of Americans as communicants. It is also true, unfortunately, that the NCC-affiliated churches now represent fewer than 25 percent of American churchgoers. There are now more Muslims in the U.S. than Presbyterians, and this fast-shrinking denomination will soon be surpassed in numbers by the fast-growing Assemblies of God denomination, once considered a sect. Mainline, then -- or oldline?

Even Arie Brouwer of the National Council of Churches suggested not long ago that these languishing denominations are as "likely to be known as oldline or even sideline," rather than "mainline". If it is accurate to speak of *any* mainline in the United States today, the term would cover the Roman Catholic Church and/or the rising evangelical Protestant churches.

The term "oldline" strikes me, as it must strike Mr. Agnew, as sad and wistful. It is not a pejorative, however, but a sociologically accurate term to describe the senescence of several once-vibrant denominations.

*Ervin Duggan*

*Washington, D.C.*

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