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Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence by Leonardo Boff. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990. 212 pages; Hardcover $19.95. Reviewed by Michael Goheen, Instructor in Theology.

After being silenced for a year by the Pope for his views on the institutional church, Leonardo Boff with this book again assumes his former role as a leader in the liberation movement in Latin America. The title *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence* explicates Boff's intention. For Boff theological reflection is an articulate discourse that arises from a particular praxis. Boff self-consciously chooses solidarity with and liberation of the poor and oppressed as the praxis out of which he will do theology. In liberation theology praxis means that all human beings are constituted through some historical-political reality, exist intersubjectively in community, and are agents of social change. His choice for the social situation of the poor provides the hermeneutical locus and key for Boff's theology. For Boff solidarity with the poor provides an epistemologically privileged position in his theology. Liberation theology is the poor thinking out their faith. It is not merely a form of ethics or a social witness but a systematic theology that arises from the grass roots communities of the poor.

Boff gives a brief background of the historical development of liberation theology in the Latin American context and then explicates the methodology and content of liberation theology. He treats such topics as the nature of theology, the role of the church in liberation, the relationship of faith to politics, Jesus Christ as Liberator, the future of the poor and oppressed, and the meaning of liberation. The book is highly readable and provides a good entree into liberation theology. I will touch briefly on two fundamental concerns I have with Boff and will conclude with three challenges that this book has for the North American church.

Boff describes the methodology of liberation theology as a threefold exercise. First, one must see the situation analytically. If one is to understand the system that generates mass poverty one must conduct a critical analysis. Boff suggests that the social sciences offer the necessary tools for such an analysis. Second, one *judges* theologically. The results of the analysis are subjected to the scrutiny of the gospel. What does God say about the problem of the poor that has been grasped through scientific rationality? Third, one acts pastorally. The socio-analytic reading of reality, articulated through the eyes of liberation in Scripture, now leads to practice of liberation. The problem with this approach is that the gospel does not enter the picture until the second step. As one engages in social analysis, the tools of the social sciences—especially Marxist social analysis and interpretation of history—are utilized. Boff claims that only the scientific insights of Marxism are employed while the philosophical concerns are avoided, but I question whether this is possible. Unbelieving science and philosophy is implemented uncritically and then baptized in the second step. Is the methodology of the social sciences and Marxism really neutral as a socio-analytic tool? Boff shores up his proposed methodology by appealing to Thomas Aquinas. As Aquinas could employ Aristotelian philosophy as a tool to construct Christian theology, so Boff can utilize Marxist categories to construct liberation theology. We have a new two-story approach in liberation theology that advocates the neutrality of reason on the first floor, supplemented by Christian theology on the second. This method conflicts with modern philosophical insights that reason always functions within the context of some fiduciary framework, tradition, and worldview. Indeed, Boff himself advocates a social and epistemic locus for theologizing. Boff's wish to do social analysis within a Marxist framework before introducing the gospel strikes me as being a sort of confessional two-mindedness that can lead only to theological schizophrenia.

Using Marxist analysis uninformed by the gospel leads to a related problem. Marxist sociological theory rather than the gospel determines the way in which the church is supposed to be engaged in the struggle of the kingdom. In adopting Marxist sociological analysis Boff chooses a dialectical rather than a functional interpretation of society as a set of forces in tension and conflict owing to their diverse interests. Religion is one part of that social makeup. In fact, religion is identified with the institutional church. Therefore, when Boff asks after the extent to which

religion has the power to transform society, he is asking how the institutional church as a social force can liberate the poor from poverty and oppression. The particular way the church is involved socially is informed not by the unique nature of the gospel, the kingdom, the church, and its mission, but by sociological theory informed by Marxism. The weapons the church uses are identical to the weapons used by any other institution in society. Is this all the gospel brings to society—another social force?

Perhaps the greatest value of this book is the challenge it presents to those of us living in North America. Boff's treatment of the nature of theology is a challenge to those of us who labor under the objectivist illusion of the Enlightenment. In keeping with the tradition of liberation theology he argues that theology is always carried out in a particular social community and context. He says that all discourse, including theological discourse, has a social locus. The role, commitments, and practices of each social locus within society will forge unique insights into Scripture and reality but will block out others. The social locus produces the epistemic locus by shaping worldviews and guiding the formulation of ideas and theories. There is no idea, theory, or worldview, however universal and objective it claims to be, that is not bound up with the social conditions of its location. Theology is an articulate discourse on faith in a particular situation. For his point of departure Boff has opted for the social locus with the poor and oppressed classes. Boff's theology is articulate discourse on the faith of the poor. While Boff will challenge us to take the context of our theology more seriously, it seems to me that he falls into a historicism or contextual*ism* where the gospel is absorbed into and identified with the historical process.

A second challenge of Boff's book is in ecclesiology. In response to the Protestant church and the socioeconomic conditions of Latin America, a new church is emerging, called base ecclesial communities. Boff's work is very closely tied with these grassroots communities. It was his earlier book *Church, Charism and Power,* seeking to articulate an ecclesiology consistent with these communities, that prompted the Pope to summon him to Rome. These base ecclesial communities are a church of the poor and from the poor that takes seriously the priesthood of all believers and its prophetic task in society. These communities meet together frequently for Bible study, fellowship, and prayer. Their new life in Christ is nourished and celebrated and they are equipped for their social task in the world. The heavy institutional machinery and self-serving ritualism evident in many North American churches is absent. These base ecclesial communities are missionary by their very nature. The walls distinguishing the church as institution and church as people of God are very low. All members are involved in the upbuilding and ingathering work of the church, and as a church of the poor they are committed to seeking social justice. Richard Shaull has stated that "this vital religious movement is fast becoming the most powerful political force working for change in Latin America—often to the surprise of its own members" (*Heralds of a New Reformation: The Poor of South and North America.* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. p.126.). These communities have challenged structural injustice and have paid the price as they have become the object of violent governmental and ecclesiastical oppression. The distinguished evangelical theologian Rene Padilla has suggested that this new ecclesiology may well become the most powerful challenge to the church of Jesus Christ over the world in the next few years. Boff's ecclesiology, reflecting the reality of these base ecclesial communities, will be a challenge to churches in the West whose life revolves around the minister, where mission has become a peripheral activity, where the life of the institutional church has become a self-centered fortress of religious activity separated from the life of the church outside the institutional walls, where the church has become ingrown and introverted, and where a social conscience has become numbed.

A final challenge of Boff's book to the North American church is the challenge of the poor. Boff's work calls us to take the poor seriously. His biblical exegesis opens up many fresh insights into the Bible's teaching on the poor that the Western church must learn to take seriously. Are we implicated in an unjust international system that marginalizes the poor? To what extent do our lifestyles create the poverty existing in Latin America? What is our responsibility to the poor? Why are the poor such a prominent concern in Jesus' ministry? Many will not agree with Boff, but it will be more difficult to spiritualize the words of Jesus in Luke 6:20ff and sweep them under the rug of Matthew 5:3ff.

His treatment of the poor, however, leaves me with disturbing questions. Are faith and repentance necessary for the poor or are they the people of God whether or not they respond in faith? Has the Roman Catholic assumption that the people in Latin America are simultaneously poor and Christian become a hindrance to preaching good news to the poor? Are the poor only sinned-against or are they also sinners? Does

not making the poor *the* dominant hermeneutical, ecclesiastical, and missiological category risk politicizing the faith and undermining the uniqueness of the gospel and Christian mission? Is the most basic division in the human race the poor and the rich, the oppressed and the oppressor?

These questions demonstrate that in spite of the progress that has been made by liberation theologians in the last few years to extricate themselves from Marxist accommodation, they have not entirely succeeded. However, with all its problems, liberation theology has left the Western church with profoundly distressing and provocative questions that need to be addressed. They present a distinct challenge to Western theology to deal with these issues. This book is no exception.

Teaching for Christian Hearts, Souls & Minds: A Constructive Holistic Approach to Christian Education, by Locke E. Bowman, Jr. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990). 118 pages, hardcover, $15.95. Reviewed by John Van Dyk, Professor of Education.

Teaching for Christian Hearts, Souls & Minds is an interesting, readable book. Although its subtitle—*A Constructive, Holistic Approach to Christian Education*—suggests a broad range of application, the book is aimed primarily at teachers in church education. One reason for writing the book, Bowman tells us in his introduction, is to focus on the specific "human act of teaching" (ix). This reason merits attention. Bowman is quite right, in my view, when he says: "Professional educators in the field of religion seem easily distracted from the act of teaching" (x). Indeed, not only in the "field of religion," but in Christian education generally, reflection on the concrete practice of teaching is easily neglected.

Another reason for writing the book was Bowman's desire to introduce to a wider audience the thought of the late Rabbi Max Kadushin. Kadushin, a Jewish author of the thirties, resisted Jewish attempts to organize and systematize rabbinic thought. He rejected what he called the "philosophic approach" of the medieval Christian theologians, and preferred to elaborate a more concrete, even mystic approach (cf. note 7, 113).

Written in a chatty, conversational style, the seven somewhat loosely connected chapters call our attention to the importance of knowledge for teaching. The critical question is this: "As teachers, what is it we would like our learners to know?" (1). Bowman believes that this question cannot be answered without considering how we acquire knowledge. According to the author, the acquisition of knowledge is a mysterious process, though it clearly requires language, communication, and interaction with other people. Through such interaction teachers must strive to have their students develop "the mind of Christ" (18).

But what is this thing called "mind"? Critical of intellectual reductionism, Bowman rejects seeing the mind as merely a mental apparatus. On the contrary, he writes, my mind is "my personally adopted framework for acting and being" (20). To the Hebrews, "mind" and "heart" meant much the same thing (66). A teacher, then, cannot simply instill his knowledge into the minds of his students, as if to fill an empty bucket. Rather, the teacher's knowledge is to be offered and shared (23).

Fundamental to Bowman's understanding of the mind is his notion of "concepts." Concepts, he explains, "are ideas, but more than that, they are ideas formed into meaningful constellations of thought" (24). They form "the building blocks of human awareness and knowledge" (24), and are used to construct conceptual frameworks (26).

The question now arises: What kinds of concepts should compose the "Christian mind"? At this point Rabbi Kadushin enters the conversation. At the deepest level, the mind must possess what Kadushin called "value concepts." Again Bowman cautions us against reductionism:

> No single word captures the nature of value-concepts. They collect to themseves through generations a great corpus of faith experience recorded and passed on to others. A value-concept has the power to move us, and it gains in strength and power; it is dynamic and related to process rather than to a static definition. (37)

From Kadushin, Bowman borrows four fundamental "value concepts"—"magni-concepts" he calls them. These are (1) God's love, (2) God's justice, (3) the gospel of Christ, and (4) the Church and Christ's body. These basic concepts are to form the background of all the conceptual frameworks to be developed, the rock bottom foundation from which all Christian learning is to proceed. Thus these magni-concepts must lie behind all of our teaching.

It is of interest to speculate about the "magni-concepts" we, in the Reformed tradition, would posit as "rock bottom." Surely such themes as creation/fall/redemption/eschaton, God's Word for created