

Liberation Theology

by Andrew Kirk.

Published by Marshall, Morgan & Scott, price £6.95.

Reviewed by Jim Punton

Andrew Kirk, from 1966-1978, was in theological education in Argentina. From a deep respect for Latin America's own theologians and a love for 'their suffering and yet ever-expectant continent' (p.V) he has entered into 'critical dialogue with the theology of liberation' (p. 185). It is a major analysis and critique by an evangelical whose appreciation of its exponents is genuine and informed. Liberation Theology, widely misunderstood among conservative Christians here, has needed an introduction such as this. The bibliography is excellent and the indexing very competent.

Kirk sketches the history behind the current concern for revolution and shows the changing political commitment of the church. Liberation Theology he dates from 1965, after the Second Vatican Council. 'Development' has been rejected as incapable of eliminating the appalling poverty throughout the continent. Helder Camara and Paulo Freire had helped develop the awareness that poverty was caused by exploitation. Theologians moved beyond the Christian-Marxist dialogue of Europe to theologies of total liberation of man and society.

Basic themes are next outlined, such as the church as prophetic, its relation to the masses, the reality of the categories of oppressors and oppressed, the rightness of violence to counter violence, the refusal to see the political sphere as autonomous, the denial of a 'third' position between capitalism and socialism.

Then we have a most useful chapter on methodology. 'It would not be false to liberation theology's basic concern to summarise it as a "theology of the event" . . . the "event" being Latin American reality' (p. 38). It is 'critical reflection on historical practice in the light of faith' and begins with commitment to the exploited.

Part 2 is devoted to the thinking of five theologians — Assmann, Gutierrez, Segundo, Croatto and Miranda. Each thinker has done creative work. Kirk takes us through their hermeneutical procedure and shows us how each handles the bible.

In Part 3 he turns to some biblical themes that figure large in Liberation Theology. He gives a fascinating chapter on the Exodus, on their playing down of the significance of Abraham, of creation as the first act of liberation, of salvation as holistic, of man and alienation (where the differing views of sin held by Croatto and Miranda are evaluated).

Kirk moves to explore their Christology and agrees with Assmann that this is one of the most significant gaps in Liberation Theology. He considers Jesus' political attitudes towards, for example, the Zealots, political/religious leaders, and his own death, and looks at liberation as taken up by Jesus. The parable of the Last Judgment is explored, and the eschaton seen as present, not future, for Liberation Theology.

Part 4 is the longest section in which Kirk assesses the hermeneutic approach to the bible and proposes an alternative. He returns to the Exodus to challenge the basic assumptions; how they relate the New Testament to the Old Testament and if there is a new kerygma. Marxism is considered as pre-understanding for biblical interpretation. 'The theology of liberation, rightly in our judgment, considers that the kind of oppression experienced by the Third World peoples is a unique position from which to hear and understand the biblical doctrine of salvation . . . Insights into the nature and causes of this oppression . . . have shed new light on key biblical passages and concepts' (p. 170). The important question of how to determine which hermeneutical keys are needed to interpret scripture is carefully met.

In the last three chapters he argues his thesis that 'it is necessary to reverse the methodological procedure of the

theology of liberation, so that theology becomes critical reflection on the message of revelation in the light of praxis and the challenge of actual historical reality' (p. 185). He then shows difficulties within Liberation Theology over the finality of Christ and is surely right in maintaining that ' . . . the biblical revelation of the Cross will determine the *means* of being obedient rather than just freeing us for obedience' (p. 198).

The 'Conclusions' emphasise again his basic concern about how the bible is used in Liberation Theology.

This book has been needed and should be widely read. It is rich in ideas. And the very absence of central themes such as the cross, resurrection, the Spirit of God, the people of God makes the reader want to know more. It may send us directly to the work of our brothers in Christ in Latin America. A popular study covering the same ground as Kirk is still awaited. This one makes demands of those who don't share its language, and of those to whom £6.95 doesn't come readily. But our thanks to Marshall, Morgan & Scott for a beautifully produced book.

Recently Myrtle Langley has written: 'A shift has occurred in the axis of Christianity, a shift from Europe to the so-called Third World. The heartlands of the church are no longer in Europe, decreasingly in North America, but rather in South America, in certain parts of Asia and, above all, in Africa.' This is surely true. We must listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches in Latin America and elsewhere. Are we not, for example, needing this challenge from Gutierrez: 'In a continent like Latin America the challenge does not come in the first place from the non-believer but from the *non-man* . . . The non-man does not question so much our religious world as our *economic, social, political and cultural world* . . . The question, then, will not be how to speak about God in an adult world, but how to announce Him as Father in a non-human world.' (Gutierrez)