SUMMARY

Keeping The Window Open: The Theological Method of Clodovis Boff and the Problem of the Alterity of the Poor

The question underlining this study is as follows:

What in the methodology of liberation theology, especially as developed and spelt out by Clodovis Boff, enables the poor to remain other and hence iconic?

Therefore, I have sought over the course of this work to examine how liberation theology portrays the unique and irreducible giftedness of the other poor. I have undertaken to ascertain to what extent liberation theology allows this other to be iconic, to be revelatory of Christ, and if it can offer any safeguards against the idolizing of the poor. I have, therefore, asked how the method of liberation theology can allow the poor to remain other and to what extent it prevents the poor from being made into an ideal and ultimately into idols.

The structure of the work is as follows. The first chapter begins with a consideration of how the poor have in fact been treated in liberation theology. It is clear that there have been a wide variety of approaches and emphases. Some socio-anthropological research will then be examined, to see how the poor seem to have responded to liberation theology, both on its own terms and in comparison with what is offered by neo-Pentecostal groups. One sample theological criticism of liberation theology’s concept of the poor will then be discussed. This chapter both presents and questions liberation theology’s use of the category of the poor, noting its strengths and actual or at least potential weaknesses.

The second chapter narrows the focus. It deals first with liberation theology’s retrieval of the notion of idolatry as a language to describe the current global capitalist economy. Thus, idolatry is first viewed in relation to the economy and economics. Alternatives are considered in the form of different utopias which liberation theology has developed. At the same time, the risks and dangers of utopic thinking are also examined. This leads me on to a discussion of ideology, which I link with idolatry. I discuss how liberation theology itself has understood ideology, and some other relevant contributions to the debate concerning ideology. I address the fairly frequent accusations that liberation theology is itself ideological. I conclude the chapter with an examination of one of liberation theology’s responses to the problem of idolatry and ideology, its insistence on the presence and transforming power of the God of Life.

My third chapter interrupts the direct treatment of liberation theology. I begin with a historical excursion. The Iconoclast controversy, culminating in the Second Council of Nicaea, marks the one time the church in
council has seriously considered what it is that makes something iconic. Thus I present the issues at stake in the controversy, and the conciliar response. My point here is twofold. I applaud the Council for its recognition of the transcendent possibilities inherent in the material, thus opening the way for the claim that the poor can indeed be iconic. On the other hand, I note that the phrasing of the council’s documents is such that in practice it creates a new form of totality, thus effectively denying the transcendence it seeks to defend by its ideological approach. At this point, I introduce Emmanuel Levinas. To talk about the alterity of the poor necessitates a more general discussion of alterity, which Levinas made a central plank of his philosophy. But in order for there to be room for justice, it is necessary also, Levinas argues, to introduce the figure of the third, the other of my other. This, I point out in a brief return to liberation theology, is a facet of Levinas’ thought that has been largely ignored by Enrique Dussel, one of the major points of encounter between liberation theology and Levinas.

The use of the word ‘totality’ above refers not only to Levinas, but also to one possible way of describing idols. Jean-Luc Marion has developed a carefully thought-out body of work examining the nature of conceptual icons and idols, and I turn to him finally in Chapter Three. He gives me, in the first place, a language to discuss the problem which has been hovering over the previous chapters and is implicit in my title, *Keeping the Window Open*, concerning icons and idols. Second, in his discussion of the phenomenon of givenness and the figure of l’adonné he offers a further contribution to understanding the role of the liberation theologian in encounter with the other poor.

In the fourth chapter, having established the nature of the problem – how the transcendence (the mystery) of the other is made possible – and some potential responses from elsewhere, I turn to the theological method of Clodovis Boff to see whether this method can protect the poor from becoming idols and allow them to remain icons. This chapter presents a careful reading of Boff’s work over the past thirty years. I finish with a Conclusion that brings Levinas, Marion and Boff together, to suggest a way in which liberation theology can proceed that will help it to avoid the idolising of the poor.

Thus, the poor are allowed to be what liberation theology has always claimed they are, a sacrament of Christ, a privileged place of encounter with the God of the poor, who has heard the cry of his people and come down to set them free.