CONCLUSION

Your most recent reflection also warns of the temptation to make the poor themselves into an idol.

That comes from the romanticism of some. Some people say to me: “I have learned everything from the poor. The poor are so good.” Sometimes I say to them jokingly: “You believe that all poor people are good and generous? Then I would not advise you to go into my neighbourhood at two in the morning because you’ll come out [naked] as the day you were born, only older.” It is a way to make it clear that the option [for the poor] is not made because the poor are good, but because God is good. If the poor are not good, then it’s the same. Many people became disappointed with commitment [to the poor] because they believed the poor were good. If they had committed themselves because God is good, they would still be committed.¹

These are the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez in an interview to mark his 80th birthday on 8th June 2008. I came across them towards the end of my research, when precisely this topic had been of concern to me for some years. It confirmed me in thinking that the question I have been addressing in this work is an important and relevant one. Along with the other anniversaries mentioned in the introduction,² all this suggests that it has been an apt time for the consideration which I have undertaken in this work of one of the key aspects of liberation theology.

This theology arose from an engagement with and in response to the situation of the poor of Latin America and the desire and faith that God had a word of liberation for this situation. It has been rightly noted of liberation theology: “Its starting point was an undeniable social fact, a brutal and massive reality in Latin America: poverty”.³ Poverty, so liberation theologians have argued, is not something to which God is indifferent, and even less is God indifferent to the cry of those whose lives are marked by this poverty, those whom liberation theology has called the poor.

Liberation theologians have seen the poor as their privileged other. The poor is the other who is claimed as a sacrament of God, as the one or the ones who in a special way, because they are the preferred of God, are able to reveal God and God’s loving care for and commitment to his creation. To talk about this sacramental and revelatory power of the poor, I have

¹ In Angel Dario Carrero, “Theology as a love letter: an exclusive interview with the father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, on his 80th birthday”, originally published in the newspaper El Nuevo Día (Puerto Rico) on June 22, 2008. (Trans. Anne Fullerton), and accessed on 28/10/08 at www.opentheology.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=128&Itemid=42
² Namely, the 40th anniversaries in 2008 of the first use of the term “theology of liberation” and of the Medellín conference
³ Michael Löwy, “O Marxismo da Teologia da Libertação”, available online at www.espacoacademico.com.br/017/17clowy.htm (accessed 24/10/05). Löwy is a Brazilian social scientist, long resident in Paris where he has taught at the Sorbonne.
adopted in this work the term “icon”. Liberation theology, I have argued, has seen the poor as iconic, opening a window to heaven, a path to and of transcendence. In this sense, as I noted in my brief discussion of the relation between sacrament, symbol and salvation, the poor can manifest God’s salvific will. As sacrament, this is not through any virtue inherent in them as persons, but precisely through the action of God, the gratuitous self-giving God whose desire is that all should be gathered in Christ. The poor, in this perspective, could be truly iconic, which means always pointing beyond themselves, but at the same time always containing the ambivalence of the symbol, the presence and absence.

Can Liberation Theology Leave the Poor as Iconic?

However, the question has to be asked as to whether liberation theology really succeeds in allowing the poor to remain other and iconic. Does the reliance on the poor as the hermeneutical key for reading the story of God’s interaction with his people not run the risk of producing a new idolatry? Are the poor not asked to bear an interpretative weight which is unsustainable? Arguing that this is not in general the case, I have asked instead if there is something in the methodology of liberation theology which is especially suited to avoiding the risk of idolatry. This is the major question I addressed in this work. What is it about the methodology of liberation theology, especially as developed and spelt out by Clodovis Boff, that enables it to allow the poor to remain other and hence iconic?

Let me return briefly to Clodovis Boff’s three-stage method. This introduced, at each part, safeguards to avoid the idolising of the poor. His use of the socio-analytic mediation stressed the regional nature of theological language, thus avoiding temptations to totality. The hermeneutic mediation, the questioning of the raw material presented by the social sciences, is a judgement which is, however, always two-way. The theologian judges the social according to the light of the Word, but the Word also stands in critical relation, not only to the socio-political reality but also to the theologian, who is not its sole possessor or proclaimer. Finally, the dialectic between theory and praxis means that there can be no simple reductionism. Theory, the production of theology, questions and is questioned by the praxis of Christians, and in the particular case of liberation theology, by the praxis of the poor.

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4 See Chapter 2.4.3
5 Cf. Ephesians 1:10
6 This involved using the socio-analytic mediation in order to achieve information about the socio-political (perhaps also economic) reality, which in the hermeneutic mediation was subjected to the scrutiny of the Scriptures and Christian tradition, before, in the dialectical mediation, this too was brought to encounter with the praxis of engaged Christians.
7 See the discussion above in Chapter 4.
The Advantages of Clodovis Boff’s Methodology

Boff’s methodology, if closely followed, has several advantages. It allows method to remain open-ended. The path which is being followed – *methodos* – always requires an exodus, so that it does not become a totality. In other words, to follow a method closely is always to know how and when to abandon it. The very epistemological rupture which Boff posits between the socio-analytic and hermeneutic mediation can be understood in this sense. Against his critics, who have sought to reduce these two stages into one, he has insisted on the qualitative difference. In other words, theology is not just a marginal gloss on a social sciences reading of the reality of poverty. The poor are not allowed to remain as objects of social scientific research. In this way the possibility of transcendence is kept open. To consider the poor from the point of the view of the Scriptures and Tradition (the hermeneutical mediation) is, for Boff, to try to see them – *per impossibile*, perhaps – from God’s perspective, and that means that they remain irreducible.

Another advantage is brought by the dialectic between theory and praxis. Here the qualitative difference postulated between the socio-analytic and hermeneutic mediations is opened to the challenge of Christian life. It is all very well for the theologian to make this claim, to say that the judgement which she or he passes on the social reading of reality is something which shows the liberative and salvific power of Christ at work in the world. But the Spirit is dynamic and transforming, and it is in the concrete situations of life that the truth of this judgement is to be tested. And yet it is not praxis either that has the final word, since precisely it is a dialectic, one which can admit, it seems to me, of no final synthesis. Orthodoxy and orthopraxis are never absolute terms, but always relative to the unfathomable and infinite mystery of God. Recognising that will also help prevent any form of totality and idolatry.

Limits to Clodovis Boff’s Methodology

Nevertheless, there are limits to Boff’s methodology. It may at times seem too linear, and thus unable to hold the dialectic tension it seeks. Any

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11 This is not a question of whether orthopraxis precedes or follows orthodoxy, a debate which can best be likened to that concerning the chicken and the egg, and which seems to have been equally susceptible to a simple answer.
12 The criticism made, for example, by Luiz Carlos Susin and Érico João Hammes in their article, “A Teologia da Libertação e a Questão de Seus Fundamentos: Em Debate com Clodovis Boff”, *REB* 68/270 (2008), pp.277-299. Clodovis responds to this in Clodovis Boff, “Volta ao fundamento: Réplica”, *REB* 68/272, section entitled *A dialética meramente circular*, but the reply is perhaps less than convincing.
Keeping The Window Open

The method based on an Aristotelian reading of the world is always in danger of placing too much stress on causality, and it is not clear that Boff always manages to avoid this. There is also an insufficiently rich understanding of theory as subversive contemplative gaze. In other words, the exodus which every *methodos* needs is blocked off, and ultimately there is no way of escaping the bounds of the method. The “*exodos*” may be something that Boff tries to incorporate, but does he do so sufficiently strongly? Boff’s insistence on the primacy of the positivity of faith, the *fides quae*, is an example of the problem. To argue for a governing pole of the dialectic is justifiable, but how does one prevent it from becoming a totality which rides roughshod over the other poles? This, it seems to me, is something that Boff’s method cannot sufficiently guarantee.

The deepest problem, however, is not so much with the particular steps of the method. These can be, and have, been subject to criticism, more or less well-founded, but not ultimately strong enough to negate the values of Boff’s approach. Rather, the problem is perhaps in method itself as Boff understands it. There can be no doubt that his work is intended to be normative. He is not merely describing what the best liberation theologians do, but telling them how they should set about achieving what they claim to want to achieve. However, to what extent can any normative method avoid becoming ideological and totalitarian? For, it would seem automatically to exclude anyone who does not follow it and the only way to be included is to be subordinate to it. I have indeed suggested that this path contains exits, ways out, but it is not a stroll in the country on a faintly discernible track. Rather, it is akin to driving on a motorway, where the only exits are the ones planned by the builders of the system, so that I cannot turn off where I want, but only where others want. The method only allows me to move outside it in carefully regulated moments. But can a method which locks its practitioners in really safeguard the freedom of the poor? The method, because it contains much that is good, needs now to be liberated from itself and its own totality.

Some of the problems outlined here were also seen in the Iconoclast controversy. The Second Council of Nicaea offered us a clear statement of the transcendent potential of the material, based on its affirmation of the Incarnation, the transcendent God present as human being in Jesus of Nazareth. This supplied further justification to the claim of liberation since it depends on accepting without question Clodovis’ own definition of dialectics.

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13 The stress on the positivity of faith as the *arché* of theology, for all its power, may not be able to escape the fundamental problem of all foundational approaches, that of becoming ultimately ideological. See on this Ivana Dolejšová, *Accounts of Hope: A Problem of Method in Postmodern Apologia*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2001. Ideology is, in intent, causal.

14 Cf., for example, the presentation by Boff of his work in *Teologia e Prática*, especially p.23 (ET, p.xxiii)

15 See the discussion in Chapter 3.2
theology that the poor can be iconic. Yet at the same time, we saw that the Council could not escape the ideologies which caused it to happen, and did not know how to phrase its insights in non-ideological and thus non-totalitarian language. One is either “thematized” or anathematized.

The Challenge of Alterity

Although chronologically in this work, I examined Levinas and Marion before Boff, my treatment of them was conditioned by a desire to find ways of expanding or relativising his method. I do not want to produce addenda for the method, for that would be simply to increase the problem. Rather, I wanted to see what in their treatments of categories such as the other, the third, the idol, the icon, would allow Boff’s method to include challenges to itself. How, as my subtitle puts it, can the alterity of the poor be guaranteed? Or, to use the words of Hopkins that I quoted in my Introduction, how can liberation theology allow Christ to “play… in ten thousand faces / Lovely in eyes, lovely in limbs not his”? Perhaps it is best to start with humility and acknowledge that it can never ensure that this will happen. As in everything else, here the theologian is dependent first on the grace of God. Nevertheless, humanity can strive to work with God or against God, and there are clearly steps which can be taken to help.

At a very important level, and at the risk of misunderstanding, the poor cannot be part of liberation theology. Liberation theology, or more precisely, liberation theologians, responding to the challenges received from the other poor, may be part of their lives, if so commanded, but it cannot subsume the poor into its own life, as a discrete, already-understood, defined problem to be solved. That way lies totality. This is clearly not to say that liberation theology should ignore the poor, but rather the opposite. Only by refusing to engage in the reduction of the poor can liberation theology ever hope successfully to attend to them, to make the substitution which is demanded.

Liberation theology must create space in which it can be encountered by the poor, not just as individuals, but also always including the other of its other, the third, to rescue its insights into the God of justice who does not want injustice to be committed against his people. This means retaining the insight that theology, at least liberation theology, is above all a pastoral and practical theology – not perhaps in the sense of the traditional Schleiermacherian division of theology,16 but more organically. The theologian is not divorced from the world about which he or she writes about, but is part of it. “The just man justices.”, as Hopkins put it.

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Liberation theology must always remember that the poor are not defined by their poverty, that poor is a partial description, not a total identity. This problem is not resolved, either, by expanding the concept of poverty to include gender, ethnicity, social class or sexual orientation. Though all can contribute, none of these elements in isolation can bear the whole of a person’s identity. Here liberation theology will gain from reiterating one of its founding insights into the holistic nature of liberation and salvation. The whole person is the one who is set free and saved. The theologian must be receptive to the givenness of the other poor, ready to respond, ready to discover herself or himself in this response. The other poor, in as far as they are allowed to be iconic, remain, in Marion’s terms, a saturated phenomenon, always giving more than can be perceived, intuited, understood. This means that the theological task is never complete. God’s revelation, which is also made through the lives of the other poor, continues to be experienced and the journey to God is one which never ends. The givenness of the other poor is a constant reminder of the infinite mystery of God’s saving and loving presence.

Finally, the dialectic between theory and praxis, between the work of theology and the lives of the poor, must not seek synthesis. This does not mean a paralysing inactivity. The dialectic can bring advances without synthesis, as long as every time the pendulum swings too far one way it is open to questioning from the other side. Activism is insufficient without a theological base, but theology which is not in some way contributing to Christian life in its engagement with the God-denying practices of injustice is largely worthless. The relationship between theology and praxis must remain in the precariousness and tension of dialectic, for ultimately it is only God who can have the final word.

Unanswered Questions
There remain a number of questions which I have not been able to address in this work. One is what a liberation theology based on a non-Aristotelian approach would look like. Already this can be glimpsed at times in Leonardo Boff, whose Franciscan background inclines him more to Bonaventure than Aquinas. Perhaps a still more fully developed “Platonic” liberation theology would look very different, introducing the mystic journey into the heart of the encounter with a world marked by poverty. Here I note again what I mentioned in the introduction about the

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17 Recall Clodovis Boff’s statement that there is a world of difference between a black taxi driver and a black football star, “Epistemología y Método de la Teología de la Liberación”, p.105

18 See Leonardo Boff, *Saint Francis: A Model for Human Liberation*, (trans. John Diercksmeier), New York, Crossroad, 1982. In this respect, the quotation I have used from Hopkins is also relevant. It comes in what is perhaps Hopkins’ most Scotist poem, and is governed by his desire to express the “thisness” of each created existence. Hopkins used the terms inscape and instress to talk about this in his analysis of his poetical method and aim.
absence in my work of a proper consideration of women’s contribution to this debate. This needs serious attention. And what would a liberation theology look like that returned to the Church Fathers, who spoke so strongly of the necessity of social justice?\(^{19}\) There is also still more work to be done on the reception of Levinas in liberation theology, though the groundwork for this has already been well-laid.

Further investigation is also called for into the possibility of using Jean-Luc Marion in liberation theologies. Marion is sometimes, though perhaps too simplistically, held to be a rather conservative Catholic, mainly because of his close association with the French version of the international journal *Communio*. In what sense is it possible, not to mention legitimate, to use his thought to support a radical theology like liberation theology? More generally, this asks about the replacement of a generally Aristotelian philosophy (even if mediated by the perhaps unlikely trio of Aquinas, Hegel and Marx) by a more phenomenological approach.

A third question relates to the more general application of what I have suggested here. So far, Marion and Levinas have tended to be adopted in theology to talk about problems of Being and/or to discuss ethical issues. But I have suggested that they can act as a kind of conscience for liberation theology to prevent its falling into idolatry and ideology. Is this true more broadly for other forms of theology, those that follow in some sense the liberation model, such as feminist theology, African or Asian theologies, Black theologies and other theologies whose initial impulse was helped by the development of liberation theology? It may also be the case with theologies that follow other models.

**Two Journeys**

As I come to the end of this work, I want to reflect briefly on my own journey in writing it, since in some ways, to the extent that I try to do theology from a liberation perspective, I am both critic and object of criticism. When I began the research I was more inclined to think that liberation theology was in fact guilty of the sort of idolatry which I have discussed. I gave some reasons for this in the Introduction, and I still think that in some cases the charge is justified. There are many who become disillusioned with work for the poor or leave the church, and this can happen because of what is in effect an idolisation of the poor. I am

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\(^{19}\) See further on this a fascinating article by Victor Codina SJ, “Desecionalizar o cristianismo”, *PerspTeol* 40 (2008), pp.9-23. Codina refers here to Agenor Brighenti, “Algumas coordenadas teológicas em torno do discipulado e a missão na América Latina hoje”, unpublished notes, Ameríndia, 2006), who, he says, puts over against the dominant Western Augustinian tradition that of Irenaeus which Brighenti thinks is more appropriate for Latin America. Codina goes on to discuss what a Christianity for Latin America might look like. It would, among other things, be more biblically based and more communitarian and committed to the poor.
convinced that some liberation theologians have not always been fully aware of the extent to which their ideas about poverty run the risk of being naïve and even ideological. Here again a greater attention to the symbolic and iconic character of the poor as sacraments of God might have helped. At the same time, though, I am also convinced that for many liberation theologians, whilst they have not perhaps always been able to name the problem, they have sensed it, and drawn back from too general assertions about the nature of and response to poverty.  

This has happened not necessarily through adherence to a conscious methodology, but much more simply through pastoral contact. Just about all the liberation theologians I have considered, including the lay ones like Maria Clara Bingemer or Jung Mo Sung, are engaged in some form of pastoral work which leads to contact with the poor. In this contact, they do allow themselves to be challenged, questioned and ultimately commanded. As every academic’s favourite Italian proverb has it, though, traduttore traditore. In other words, the struggle is in the translation of the praxic command of the encounter into the necessarily theoretical concepts of theology. This is where the challenge lies and will always lie. However, because liberation theology is a theology of hope, the challenge can be and mostly is met. Earlier in this work I mentioned that the telephone directory cannot be a work of theology. But in a way, of course, it can. Those names and addresses are people with all the complications and marvels that includes. It is these names and faces in Latin America who have sustained many of the theologians whose work I have used, and it is names and faces in Brazil who have accompanied me in my thoughts as I have worked on this thesis. Perhaps then, the final question which remains unanswered is whether this is what they wanted. 

Earlier on in my introduction, I considered the vexed question as to whether liberation theology has any future. Having considered one aspect of liberation theology, a key one of its relationship to the poor, I want to argue that the answer to that question is most definitely yes. But, equally, the question is badly-phrased. Most things have a future, but what matters is whether it is as a living, growing, changing organism or as a petrified museum piece. Liberation theology has a role as a part of theology. It is not, nor should it desire to be, all of theology. But theology needs that small, challenging, annoying, provoking voice which will ask it what its endeavours are bringing to the transformation of a world in which too
many people continue to be made poor. Liberation theology will be the voice commanded by these other poor to speak for it, to reflect theologically for it, to work to establish justice, for

the just man justices;
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—
Chríst