

Consensus

Volume 15

Issue 1 *Mission of the Church*

Article 19

5-1-1989

Grace and Power: Base Communities and Nonviolence in Brazil

C. Arnold Snyder

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Snyder, C. Arnold (1989) "Grace and Power: Base Communities and Nonviolence in Brazil," *Consensus*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 , Article 19.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol15/iss1/19>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

God. "Accordingly, God has provided for the human race another, safe way of knowing, imparting his knowledge to the minds of men through faith."

Thomas goes on to expand upon the principles outlined in this introductory paragraph in his literal commentary on the Boethian text and in the questions which the text raises and which he addresses in the remainder of his work. "Does the human mind need a new illumination by the divine light in order to know truth? Can the human mind arrive at a knowledge of God? Is God what the mind first knows?" Initial questions such as these are strikingly contemporary, as are those later ones which dare to raise the question of the possibility of a science of divine realities (by no means is this a foregone conclusion) which seek to investigate the necessity of faith for humanity, the relationship between faith and "religion", and the issues of plurality and individuation.

Nor will the question form of the commentary or the language unduly distract an intelligent and committed lay reader. Throughout the book, the translator has taken care to follow the admonishment of Thomas himself in the fourth article of Question 2 when he insists that there are truths which everyone should know and that in the case of these "a teacher should so measure his words that they help rather than hinder his hearer".

Peter C. Erb

Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario

Grace and Power: Base Communities and Nonviolence in Brazil

Dominique Barbé

Translated by John P. Brown

Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987

150 pp. U.S. \$12.95

Since the emergence of an indigenous Latin American tradition of theological reflections in the late 1960s there has been a growing interest in, and occasional criticism of, Liberation Theology in North America. Some of this criticism has been openly ideological. To take just one example, the vigorous critiques of Michael Novak clearly owe more to his commitment to capitalism as the appropriate expression of Christianity than they do to serious theological reflection on the meaning of the gospel. At the same time, however, legitimately theological questions have been raised in other quarters concerning basic presuppositions and commitments underlying Liberation Theology. In particular, the emphasis on orthopraxis has resulted in pastoral practice that at times has seemed to extol social activism at the expense of spirituality and prayer life. Likewise, the identification of sin as being primarily social, embodied in unjust structures,

led inevitably to Christian activism in the political arena. On occasion, liberationist Christians in revolutionary political situations have advocated violent solutions to social and economic problems.

Serious theological response in North America has run the gamut from rather uncritical acceptance on the left, to parody and rejection on the right; but between these extremes are found North American Christians who have opened a serious conversation with this new Latin American theology, while continuing to ask fundamental questions. *Grace and Power: Base Communities and Nonviolence in Brazil* is a book to be pondered, meditated on and appreciated by this latter group—indeed, by all who are open to recognizing the working of the Spirit of God in the churches.

Dominique Barbé, a French priest who has worked with the poor of Brazil for over twenty years, provides the reader with a journal that documents the struggles and growing pains of a genuinely spiritual movement. On reading this book, the connection between the life of the poor and the new Latin American theology becomes almost palpable. This is no analytical description of Liberation Theology, although the analytical reader will find much to ponder. From time to time Barbé cannot resist reflecting on the events that surround him in categories more familiar to scholars than to shoeshine boys. One of this reader's favourite points to ponder is Barbé's observation that "If Christians of Latin America are more responsive to the questions of Marx, . . . the Christians of the "rich" countries are trying to respond to the challenge of Nietzsche about the meaning of life" (38). Such observations aside, the great strength of the book lies not so much in philosophical nuggets as in the chronicling of a spiritual journey still in progress.

Barbé is an engaged, but critical participant in the Latin American theological process; he is not afraid to question trends he has witnessed, or to propose new paths and directions. Thus in defense of the spiritual gifts of the laity, Barbé criticizes and disagrees with the pronouncement of Pope Pius X, who considered the laity properly to be "a docile flock" to be led (37; also 93 ff). Some pages later Barbé rejects not only the just war tradition, but also the historical Constantinian solution as such (43–44). At the other end of the spectrum, while Barbé agrees with liberation theologians that the church must take an active option for the poor, and agrees that the gospel is the good news of the victory of life over death which calls for praxis, he nevertheless emphasizes the necessity of spiritual renewal with a clarity rarely seen in the earlier literature: "Salvation, before it is manifested as morally good behavior, is an offering of oneself; it consists in yielding oneself . . . to the great liberating force of the living God" (60).

If in fact spiritual renewal lies at the heart of the liberation spoken of in the gospel, the question follows immediately: what will Christian praxis look like, and how will it relate to social and political power? Barbé answers, "Grace is the only cause of this immense upsurge that . . . convinces people in the depth of their heart to give" (66). Power can be used to coerce, but even if the cause is "good", power remains external; it lacks the ability

to convert the individual in the depth of one's being. Liberation theology, notes Barbé, still lacks an adequate approach to "human interiority".

But Barbé pushes even further, posing a gentle question to those who have felt forced to use violence in their struggles for justice: "When we overcome power by force... could there not have been in this attitude a fatal germ of mistrust with regard to grace?" (73). In fact, argues Barbé, the Latin American people already know how to struggle for justice in a nonviolent way, and in a moving chapter concluding the book, he documents the growth of this spiritually-based nonviolent movement in Brazil.

Grace and Power is a book that reflects the dynamic quality of the theology being developed in Latin America in our time. In the opinion of this reader, it engages the existing discussion in creative and exciting ways; it is a book that deserves to be read and pondered by any who have doubted the spiritual vitality of Liberation Theology. Still, a word of caution: the book is more like a fugue than a ditty; it is possibly too eclectic and nuanced in its approach to serve as a first-time introduction to the subject. The reader must be ready to move at a moment's notice from the gritty slums of Sao Paulo to a discussion of Trinitarian theology, then on to an argument with Marx. While the trip is worth taking by all who have an interest in theology, it would be appreciated best by those with at least a rudimentary introduction to Liberation Theology and the issues it has posed.

Arnold Snyder
Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario

Feet on the Ground Theology: A Brazilian Journey

Clodovis Boff

Translated by Phillip Berryman

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987 (1984)

xv + 185 pp.

The title of Clodovis Boff's diary musings, reflections and appeals has an appropriately double meaning. Quite literally it portrays his mission and pastoral journeys among the base Christian communities in the Brazilian hinterland where the exploited rubber workers toil. Much of his voyage is on foot, and we are treated to this reality even to the point of descriptions of the fatigue and physical hardships endured by Boff himself in these travels. However, the title has another more profound meaning. It is a diary of theological description and reflection in and about the concrete stuff of life. Boff does not serve up an organized, systematic *weltanschauung* disembodied from people's lives. Instead, he speaks of the daily experiences and religious struggles of the marginalized and oppressed people among whom