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Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology

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Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology. Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, eds. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993, 1996. Bibliography, index. 302 pages.

In the last decade, Latin American liberation theologies have grown in popularity within academic circles in North America, providing a

radical theological critique of oppressive structures from the underside of history. Some scholars who are still unfamiliar with the methodology, locus of reflection, and practical concerns of these theologies might still dismiss them as political theologies with little to say to North American and European theological circles. However, their impact upon theology cannot be denied, and their growing acceptance within academic circles is opening new venues for these theologies to impact religion in North America. Nevertheless, with the demise of socialism and with the changing context of the nineties, new questions are emerging regarding the present status and relevance of liberation theologies.

Since these theologies reflect critically upon concrete historical situations and processes of liberation, they can only retain their relevance by addressing their changing context. As a result of their concrete concern with human experience, it is difficult to create simple categories for expressing how they are relevant within the broader spectrum of Christian traditions. If Latin American liberation theologies are to continue making an impact upon scholarly circles in North America, they must provide a means for addressing their relevance to different aspects of the Christian traditions. On the other hand, if it is to make an impact beyond the academy, it must be taught in theological classrooms and be accessible to a wider audience. Currently, scholars and students need accessible texts that can present students with a solid overview of liberation theology while continuing to address the questions raised by the ever-changing historical realities. This volume, originally edited by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, provides this needed tool for the teaching and dissemination of liberation theology to a larger audience. Originally published in Spanish as *Mysterium Liberationis: Conceptos Fundamentales de la Teología de liberación* in 1990, it was later translated and published by Orbis Books as *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology* in 1993. The current volume is an abridged edition that aims at making liberation theology more accessible to a wider audience. In many respects, the editors have achieved their goal.

The book overcomes several of the major challenges faced in presenting a systematic overview of liberation theology. It retains a sense of the diversity of experiences and perspectives found in liberation theologies by weaving together essays from several sources. Some essays, such as Sobrino's essay on the centrality of the kingdom of God in liberation theology, are exhaustive and detailed in the development of their arguments. Others are more accessible to general audiences. These different levels of theological depth make it a versatile book that can be used at different levels of theological education. In addition, the contributors to this volume are able to engage in a profitable dialogue with the main doctrines of the Christian tradition with-

out losing their active connections to the social location of the poor in Latin America. The concrete reality of liberation theology undergirds this book in both its content and history. In the preface of the book, Jon Sobrino recounts how the 1989 murder of his co-editor, Ignacio Ellacuría, and the subsequent burning of their offices by the military, almost prevented the publication of the original book from becoming a reality. This concrete reality of oppression, injustice, torture, and murder faced by many of the people of Latin America demands a theological response that the contributors to this volume provide.

Unlike many multi-author anthologies, there is a clear continuity between the particular themes of each contributor and the whole of the book. Two factors contribute to this continuity. First, the systematic approach taken by the book provides it with a coherent structure that follows the traditional doctrinal division of most systematic theologies. However, unlike other systematic approaches, there are unique interpretations of certain doctrines. For instance, Ignacio Ellacuría's article "The Crucified People" reinterprets the death of Jesus from the perspective of those who suffer oppression, persecution, and death. The salvific nature of the crucifixion takes on a more active reinterpretation that connects the historical acts and proclamations of Jesus with a demand for his followers to repeat his liberative activity in history—a demand that Ellacuría exemplified in his own life and death. As a result of the contributors' concern for active liberation in history, the structure of the doctrines covered varies from other systematics. At the same time, the relevance of liberation theology to the reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine becomes evident through each segment.

The second factor contributing to the book's continuity are its central themes. These themes are set out in the first three chapters, which serve as the prolegomena of the book. The first theme is its pastoral methodology of seeing, judging, and acting through socioanalytic, hermeneutical, and practical mediation (11). Clodovis Boff makes a crucial distinction between the political critiques of theologies of hope and liberation theology in this first chapter. Liberation theologies begin their theological reflection by "seeing" the condition of the oppressed, not through abstract notions of hope (6). Liberation theologies "see" the situation of the people through social analysis, "judge" the situation through a hermeneutics of suspicion from the perspective of the poor, and provide active responses to the situations encountered as a result of their interpretations of Scripture, tradition, and theology. As a result of this distinctive methodology, all the authors join theoretical reflection to concrete praxis.

A second theme that pervades the book is the locus of theological reflection of liberation theologies: the poor. Following the methodol-

ogy of liberation theologies, Gustavo Gutiérrez provides an argument for God's preferential option for the poor that characterizes Latin American liberation theologies. As a result, the social condition of the poor is a central theme in the text, serving as both the basis for theological reflection and for the demand to act in solidarity with them. The third theme that joins the different contributors throughout the text is the centrality of the reign of God as both a hope and a demand for the historical transformation and liberation of people from oppressive structures.

The continuity and accessibility of *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology* make it a suitable text for use in the classroom. Its approach can be incorporated into a theological curriculum in classes on liberation theology or as a text in systematic theology classes. In addition, it provides a valuable tool for exposing scholars, ministers, and students to some of the basic themes of Latin American liberation theologies while also providing a promising connection to the different doctrinal themes of Christian theology.

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