



Saint Hereticus

**Theological Gamesmanship:
Disposing of
Liberation Theology
in Eight Easy Lessons**

THE INCREASING ATTENTION being given to so-called liberation theology is worrisome. All kinds of people who ought to know better see it as a recovery of the Christian message that is transforming lives, bringing dead churches to life again, making dictators tremble, and indicating that the old faith can still have power. Any time contemporary Christians begin to side with the poor, forsaking Christianity's historic alliance with privilege and affluence, a counter-offensive must be mounted.

Ordinarily I would ignore the movement, fearing that if attention is called to it innocent people will be lured into its embrace by the seductive prose and unassuming lifestyles of its proponents. But a forthcoming meeting of the Latin American bishops this fall in Puebla, Mexico, makes indifference impossible, as liberation theology will be the subject of wide debate and all the world will be watching.

I am not above offering help even to bishops, and when I think in addition of all the ordinary Christians who wish to keep the present order secure, it seems crucial to provide gambits, ploys and arguments to

dispose of the disturbing impact liberation theology has already had. Herewith are eight approaches designed to achieve that desirable goal:

(1) *Dismiss liberation theology as "only a fad." Better yet, dismiss it as "only the latest fad."* Such a characterization dispels the notion that liberation theology need be taken seriously. When the subject is broached, ask, rather eagerly, "What do you suppose will be 'the next fad'?" Recall short-lived "earlier fads," such as the death of God, the secular city, the Zen kick, or whatever else comes to mind.

Take care, however, that your opponents do not internalize the fact that liberation theology is calling for an end to the oppression of the poor, and that since it is not likely to disappear until the oppression of the poor has been overcome, liberation theology is likely to be on the scene a long, long time—surely long enough to render the term "fad" irrelevant.

(2) *Describe liberation theology as "mere reductionism."* (Remember that liberal use of the adjective "mere" is perhaps the most potent weapon in our whole arsenal of tricks.) The reductionism can be to almost anything mere that you choose: (a) mere ethics, (b) mere politics, (c) mere economics, or (d) Marxism/socialism/communism. In the latter instance the adjective is unnecessary since words ending in "-ism" can be discredited almost as easily as words preceded by "mere."

Take care, however, that your opponents do not actually *read* liberation theology, since they will find it studded with biblical exegesis, ecclesiological reflection, theological history, essays on spirituality, specific references to "following Jesus," and so on. Tell them not to waste their time reading liberation theology, but to take your word for it. Otherwise you will be in trouble.

(3) *Accuse liberation theologians of "espousing violence."* Surefire! Who wants to support a position that "espouses violence"? Violence is, after all, unChristian, the antithesis of the Gospel, as we all know so well. Conjure up visions of trigger-happy clerics storing submachine guns in the sacristy, just waiting for orders from the nearest "secular" revolutionary to whom they have sworn fealty.

Take care, however, that your opponents do not discover that liberation theology speaks of violence only as a last resort when all else fails, a position in total accord with about 98.6 percent of the rest of the Christian world, since by this criterion all other theologians and theologies (save only the Quakers, Mennonites and a few stray individuals named Helder Camara, Berrigan, and so forth) would also be discredited. Do not let them reflect on the fact that the structures of our society are already violent and destructive to the poor long before anyone ever gets around to picking up a rock or a gun.

(4) *Point out that liberation theology is "culturally conditioned" and that therefore it does not concern us.* Describe it as a slightly exotic variant on normative theology (i.e., ours), a product of a certain geographical locale ("down there"), able to speak, perhaps, to a few unlettered poor, but not, consequently, of concern to us. This projects a pleasantly tolerant live-and-let-live attitude ("We have our theology, they have theirs") that conveniently, and not so incidentally, gets us off the hook of having to take the position

with any seriousness.

Take care, however, that your opponents do not discover that your own theology is just as culturally conditioned—informed by North American, rather than South American, mores; done out of affluence rather than poverty; employing capitalist rather than socialist assumptions; intended to buttress rather than challenge the status quo. Be particularly careful to suppress any suggestion that South American poverty might be due to North American political, economic and military domination of that continent, since this *would* force us to take it seriously.

(5) *Stress the fact that liberation theology's use of the Bible is "highly selective."* (Note: Do not employ this argument in conjunction with the argument about "reductionism," #2 above, since the two are mutually exclusive—a fact someone might notice and use against you.) Point out how frequently and one-sidedly liberation theologians revert to "the same old passages": the Exodus story, Jeremiah 22:13-16, Isaiah 58:6-7, Luke 1:46-55, Luke 4:16-30 (with an assist from Isaiah 61), Matthew 25:31-46, and so on. Complain, in a voice carefully modulated between wistfulness and bitterness: "Whatever happened to the rest of the canon?"

Take care, however, that your opponents do not discover how typical the above passages are of the *rest* of Scripture. Especially thwart the counter-argument that you yourself employ a collection of verses selected from the whole of Scripture ("The poor you have always with you," is particularly useful here), lest someone turn on you and say, very tellingly if not too originally (in a voice carefully modulated between wistfulness and bitterness): "Whatever happened to the rest of the canon?"

(6) *Accuse liberation theology of demanding that the church "take sides."* It is well known, of course, that the church, in order to minister to *all* of its constituents, must refrain from taking *sides*, lest it seem concerned with only a portion of *humanity* (the poor), and cut itself off from others (us) who *likewise* need to hear the salvific message.

Take care, however, that your opponents do not discover that neutrality is actually impossible. "Not to take sides" is, as liberation theologians have an annoying way of reminding us, to take sides with the status quo. Keep your opponents oblivious of the fact that their restiveness in the face of liberation theology may even be due to the fact that their own well-being is threatened by liberation theology's unambiguous identification with the poor, a strata of society with whom your opponents are unlikely to be closely identified.

(7) *If things are going really badly, resort to the charge that liberation theology is "the product of Marxist analysis."* This retort can pull almost any chestnut out of any fire. Note that the argument is not simply an example of the "reductionism" argument (see #2 above), but can stand on its own; no matter how amply may be the Christian or biblical dimensions of liberation theology, if it can be called "Marxist" that alone will almost always suffice to demolish it. The beauty of the gambit is that one need not define the word "Marxist." One need only utter it.

Take care, however, lest your opponents be confronted by the following response: "Let us first ask

whether the analysis is *true*, rather than ask who propounded it. If it is true, then who propounded it is a matter of secondary importance. If it is not true, then whoever propounded it is already discredited.”

(8) *If all else fails, or there simply isn't enough time, employ the basic principle for dealing with a position difficult to refute: co-opt it.* Suggest that liberation theology is good as far as it goes but that it doesn't go far enough, e.g., “It's all very well to talk about political and economic liberation, but what about *spiritual* liberation? Isn't that the really important thing?” Refer to your own subsequent and more ample statement as “*authentic* liberation theology,” in contrast to “distorted” or “inadequately developed” liberation theology, or even (see the first sentence of this essay) “so-called” liberation theology.

Remind your opponents that poverty is not just a misfortune to those without material possessions; remind them that *all* of us are poor, poor in the things that really count, i.e., the deep spiritual values whose absence renders all human life meaningless. (There is, of course, just enough truth in these observations to enable their opponents to spend a lifetime on them, and never have to deal with issues of economic or political injustice.) The best co-optation, therefore, is to say *as soon as the subject of liberation theology is raised*, “But we're *all* oppressed.”

Take care, however, that your opponents never discover that there is a significant distinction between those who say, “I'm so oppressed by overwork that I compensate by overeating and have this weight problem,” and those who say, “I'm so oppressed by lack of work that I can't buy food for my children to eat and we are all starving to death.”

Keeping that distinction blurred is the surest way to dispose of liberation theology. □