

Liberation Theology

What do you think of Christ?

What do you think of Jesus Christ? This question has haunted Christianity throughout its history. Always and everywhere Christians have referred to Him as Saviour. But He has been given different identities. In recent history, some theologians have portrayed Jesus Christ as a political revolutionary.

The Frenchman, Hugues Felicite Robert de Lamennais (1782-1854) was a Roman Catholic priest and a prophet of the revolution (1830). He was condemned by the Pope and withdrew from formal religion. He died without the last rites of the church.

Lamennais lived in times of dramatic social development. He urged Roman Catholics to promote revolution as the most concrete enactment of their faith. He believed that revolution needed religion. To be a Christian meant to be a revolutionary. Lamennais considered Christ worthy of the allegiance of the masses as He understood their suffering. "His heart did beat with the hearts of the people, and the hearts of the people beat with His heart." Christ was spoken of as "the saving Christ, the liberating Christ, the Christ who pities the poor, the weak, the miserable, and who breaks the sword over their oppressors."

Socialist priests organized a banquet in Paris (in 1849) for workers to hail the Second Republic. The celebrants toasted Jesus as "the father of socialism." Pastor Hermann Kutter (1863-1931), among others, preached a program, that spread into Southern Germany, of identifying movements for social justice as signs of divine activity in the world.

At the World's Student Christian Federation Conference at Peking in 1922, there was a clash between liberal and conservative theologies. The YMCA was the strong force on the liberal side. Its theology was described as "more Confucian than Christian." The conservatives accused it of presenting Jesus as apolitical revolutionary.

Ernst Bloch, the Jewish-Marxist philosopher who influenced Jurgen Moltmann, sees Jesus as the second Moses. As Moses had compassion for the oppressed and resisted the existing order, so Jesus was compassionate. He rebelled against Roman occupation and intended to establish a new Kingdom, and that Kingdom was not meant to be spiritualized.

In Liberation Theology, the gospel accounts of Jesus are stretched to the point of portraying Jesus Christ, in keeping with the developments in theology, as a political revolutionary and tolerant of violence. Jesus Christ Himself is a sign of protest against the unjust order of our times. F. Sionil Jose writes: "What I am trying to say is that those of us who believe in Christianity should not try to dissociate Christianity from revolution. It is a cliché but Christ was a

revolutionary. " Some liberationists have tried to prove that Jesus was really part of the "freedom fighters" of His time - the Zealots. Lesslie Newbigin comments: "That the notice of his charge, fastened to the cross, read 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' makes it clear that there were profound political implications in the trial and execution. However, careful scholarship cannot corroborate the claim that Jesus identified himself with the Zealot movement. Indeed, it is difficult to see what conclusions one would draw if it could be proved that he did. In terms of real politik, the Zealots were a disaster for the cause of Israel, and if Jesus was a Zealot, we seem to have the best possible reason for forgetting him altogether."

Liberation theology reduces the gospel to a message for this world only. In Christ, God sets out to liberate men. Salvation is seen in political terms; the building of a just, fraternal and peaceful humane society. The Gospel proclamation of the church is now the opposition to the present state of social injustice.

So in our twentieth century some theologians have managed to launch Jesus as a fully-fledged freedom fighter. Malcom Muggeridge suggests that the "Sermon on the Mount" has become in our modern times the "Sermon on the Barricades."

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