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Review: The Preferential Option for the Poor

The Preferential Option for the Poor: a Lonergan Analysis

John Patrick Giddy

Rohan Curnow, *The Preferential Option for the Poor: A short history and a reading based on the thought of Bernard Lonergan*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2012. Paperback. 200 pages. \$23.00

The puzzle arrived in the post. I opened the box: no helpful picture on the front; just the title, about the preferential option for the poor and Bernard Lonergan. I assumed no pieces were missing. The chapter headings allowed me to place the corner pieces, and then the border: the preferential option for the poor, liberation theology, Guitterez and Sobrino, Lonergan's idea of intellectual, moral, religious conversion, the dialectic of history through the lens of Robert Doran and his notion of psychic conversion. I was then completely stuck as to how to continue – I know what liberation theology is, more or less, I've studied Lonergan and read Doran. But how are these things fitted together by this particular author? All the information in the world on these topics simply placed side by side doesn't add up to a picture (the blurb on the back says, unhelpfully, the author demonstrates the "congruence" of the two topics. The material is dense and the footnotes add up to an impressive 622.)

I've been adopting this puzzle metaphor because the author fails to make clear to the reader what his angle is on these topics. But as a reader one really does need an angle, a way *into* the picture, a point of reference to begin to see the pattern – and then build from there. I turned to the three-page conclusion at the end of the book and found what this might be: "for the Magisterium it [the preferential option for the poor] is a matter of religious and moral conversion" whereas for Liberation Theology this is extended "into the realms of intellectual and psychic conversion." This thesis could be interesting. The Magisterium doesn't see the deep significance of this "turn to the poor" (my phrase). The reference is to "Chapters 4 and 5", and the author remarks that "this chapter [sic] provided a means of understanding the difference" between these two ways of thinking about the option for the poor. (197-198) This discussion, presumably originally one chapter, explains how the notions of religious and moral conversion (Ch 4) and intellectual and psychic conversion (Ch 5) can elucidate what is meant by an option for poor. It thus corrects certain understandings of Liberation Theology which would leave out the dimension of conversion (simply overthrow the current social and particularly economic structures and replace them with more convivial ones) and certain understandings of the preferential option for the poor which would simply take this as a moral add-on to an already essentially complete understanding of Christian faith (certain statements of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.)

I thought my educated guess was as good a starting-point as any. Unfortunately in the Introduction one finds the author disclaiming any such intention: the book is *neither* a critique of Liberation Theology *nor* of the Magisterium's understanding of the option for the poor (17). What the...! (It couldn't be that this is one of those tracts of the True Disciples which is written simply to show that everything anyone ever said on these and related matters is already better said and more thoroughly explained in the Text, if only

people would take notice. Joseph Noor, for example, (*Document X*, Cape Town: Feather Communications, 2013) has found already outlined in the Qu'ran, the scientific theories of cosmic expansion, the nature of space-time, Einstein's concept of gravity, DNA, Ryle's critique of mind-body dualism, and much more. But this tendency is not confined to adherents of the Islamic faith.)

I decided I would construct a thesis, from the very generous material provided by Curnow. Perhaps what one has here are two books, on the history of the idea in Catholic theology of the option for the poor, and the way that John-Paul II in particular put the brakes on it (did he?). And on a Lonergan-inspired account of how the way the world's structures fail us demands a response from us of despair and cynicism or else of hope based on the possibility of intelligent self-appropriation; and this would be a way of providing the key to unlock the unity of all Christian doctrines. It "promises (in Curnow's words)... the required methodological unity to account for Liberation Theology's insistence that history and liberation are one." (182)

My approach, learning from Curnow, is to the effect that there might be in the committed writings of Liberation theologians something less than a complete appreciation of how human persons transcend through cultural meanings and how it would be short-sighted to overlook this in favour of focussing only on a political solution (in Lonerganese, overlooking general bias, 128). And quite possibly there is not a fully historical understanding of the Christian faith – understanding salvation as nothing more than the action of transforming history – in the way this is presented by the current teaching authority of the Catholic Church.

My starting point is something from Doran's *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (University of Toronto Press, 1990), the influence of which is central to Curnow's thesis. Doran points to the global problem warranting an orientation of the kind indicated by the "preferential option for the poor". Insight into this global power imbalance would seem key to an appreciation of liberation theology. And without that appreciation there could only be a pronouncement on the "option for the poor" from above, as it were, defeating the purpose of the exercise, as I read it. We need, in other words, to begin with social analysis. Doran repeatedly refers to the global context as one of "escalating imperialisms of centralized state socialisms and transnational corporational capitalism" (1990, 206), making sure to give a strict definition of "imperialism" (in some circles simply a swearword) in terms of "unlimited forcible expansion" (1990, 116). The upshot is that existentially we are faced "by the necessity of choosing between, on the one hand, the anticipation of a post-historic homogeneous State incrementally moved toward by terrorist and counter-terrorist violence, and on the other hand the anticipation of a truth above and beyond divergent points of view, a truth that, while preserving the sharpest sense of subjectivity, provides access to a new organic civilization on a transcultural or world-cultural basis" (1990, 155-6).

Is this also Curnow's starting-point? To answer this I am starting the book not from the first two very interesting chapters on the history of the idea of the option for the poor in Latin America and at the Second Vatican Council, but from the two chapters (4 and 5) on Lonergan's and Doran's explanation of the dialectic (linked but opposing principles) of our lives, calling for a deliberate act of assent to our intelligence, wholeness, and loving transcendence, amounting to a conversion to truth and value.

Curnow explains the importance of taking the option for the poor as more central to our self-understanding than simply a social or ethical implication of our faith. He cites the words of Doran: “Because psychic conversion enables us to attend to the dimensions of our own being that have been victimized by the sin of the world, it establishes a point of solidarity with the most victimized peoples of history... As the situation of the victimized elements of our own being is hermeneutically privileged in the interpretation of our own stories, so the situation of the poor is hermeneutically privileged in the interpretation of history.” (in Curnow, 153-154) Understanding one facilitates understanding the other. We opt for the poor when we are brutally honest about the inhumane structures of the world we find ourselves in.

This is Curnow’s approach. We could also say that the social analysis enables one to see that one’s feeling of being a victim is not simply a subjective affair, but might reflect an objective truth: the economic and power structures are indeed such that certain groups are marginalized, disempowered. One’s desire to work against these structures is vindicated and supported, being part and parcel of the message of the gospel. Some such context reveals the *point* of preferencing the point of view of the poor. At the same time it is clear that the social analysis does not unpack the whole of the situation, nor, fully, the action required from oneself. It would be wrong to apply a social science analysis upon which one then layers the biblical categories – as L. Boff seems to do (181-2). Lonergan’s reformulation of the social sciences so as to include what he calls the dimension of “culture” – remotely that refers to the quality of personhood and of religious authenticity needed in order to attain distributive justice. Character is important. To understand what is meant by this one needs to undergo an intellectual conversion, to find in oneself, and affirm of oneself, the power of transcendence. I don’t think Curnow has really guided us through this process but rather has simply restated its elements in an “objective” way. (Wary of being caught by the Lonergan Associated Police Department (LAPD) to have left out some element?)

This is important stuff. Liberation theology argues that the Reign of God is simply what being saved, or salvation, means. “To work, to transform this world, is to become a man and to build the human community; it is also to save. Likewise, to struggle against misery and exploitation and to build a just society is already to be part of the saving action...; building the temporal city is to become part of a saving process...” (Gutierrez, in Curnow, 171). (But why use the term ‘temporal’, which seems to assume there is another kind of city, not historical?)

But the important point is to be found in the material of the first half of the book – to which I turned to read after making my sense out of Curnow’s hidden thesis. This narrative of the genesis of the idea of the preferential option for the poor, and its fate, is absolutely fascinating, and makes it well worth buying the book. The Council document *Gaudium et Spes* begins to see that the social mission of the church has something to do with its position in society, its prestige; but as Gutierrez says, “the majority of the bishops and experts came from important countries, rich countries... poverty remained a distant question” (in Curnow, 38). Later, Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio* saw, as Curnow notes, the moral relevance of social structures – for which he was accused by *The Wall Street Journal* of dishing up “warmed-over Marxism” – something echoed, of course, more recently in Francis’ pontificate. In 1968 Medellin went further, with the Bishops’ Conference of Latin America (CELAM) speaking of the special vocation of Latin America, to witness to a new synthesis of the spiritual and temporal: to achieve human rights not on

the basis of social ethics but because this is “intimately linked to the history of salvation.” (in Curnow, 43)

The kind of social analysis indicated above with reference to Doran would count as special “signs of the times” which call for a re-think of Christian identity. Presaging (as noted by Curnow) the papal style of the present pontificate the Latin American bishops CELAM ask for a pastoral orientation from church leaders, giving preference of resources and personnel “to the poorest and most needy sectors and to those segregated for any cause whatsoever” (in Curnow, 44). Curnow emphasizes the centrality, in these documents, of the idea of personal conversion, in particular of those in positions of power, in any transformation process that is going to be really effective.

So, here is not a simple history of a social idea in the Church, but rather an exciting reading of it, and I turned with interest to the next chapter in the book, on how this movement was turned back by the powers of the time. Already at the time of Paul VI the forces of reaction are at work – Curnow fingers particular bishops – in combating this understanding of Christian faith. Curnow makes excellent use of the material, which should be better known, the scholarly histories of Ian Linden, Donal Dorr, Gregory Baum and others.

Chapter Two discusses how the option for the poor began to be understood in two radically different ways, as an interpretive key (“hermeneutic”) to grasping Christian faith, or alternatively, as an element of the Christian moral response to the gospel. John XXIII quite clearly saw it in the former way: look, judge, act, he advises in *Mater et Magistra* following the approach of the Young Christian Workers – the “bottom-up methodology” that animates Curnow’s exposition of the idea of the option for the poor (129-130). A succession of popes after John XXIII took the latter path. Begin with “pre-formulated concepts” and from this deduce the appropriate moral principles. But there is more to the Option for the Poor than its role in the moral calculus, as Curnow (64-65) in a footnote quotes one commentator saying, something missed by John-Paul II.

This then is Curnow’s thesis, I take it, one well worth making and backed by the evidence. In terms of criticism I can first make a point concerning terminology. In the light of John XXIII’s remarks (and of course Francis’ recent papal tone), it is misleading to dub the Vatican-originated ideas during the reigns of John-Paul and Benedict as “the Magisterium”. But my main point has already been made above, about the way the thesis is presented. To repeat, I find it strange that Curnow takes pains to distance himself from either of the two interpretations above (82). If there is some error in the Latin American theologians’ approach, why not simply point it out? If not, why not judge it as hitting the mark? If he is neutral between the two, why bother to quote Dom Helder Camara’s complaint about being called a communist when he analyses the causes of poverty, an obviously unjust accusation? If the “See-Judge-Act” method is indeed roughly what Lonergan was trying to promote, why not affirm it as such, and make a judgment about what is in fact going on in this historical struggle in the Catholic Church. Curnow sees, but fails to judge, preferring to stay with the pre-formulated concepts gleaned from Lonergan.

If this sounds a bit harsh, it is because one feels that Curnow’s research is too valuable to be left unread because of the difficulties in the style in which the book is written. The Lonergan/Doran chapters require a familiarity with the specialized terminology: after a page or two explaining the four “realms of meaning”, Curnow thereafter makes his point

by simply referring to, for example, “the second realm of meaning”; not every reader would be happy having to page back to remind themselves of what this actually means. Examples like this abound. In spite of this, a careful study of this text is to be recommended. As I have indicated, I struggled to find a way into the two parts of the text. If Curnow’s approach is to say that a more comprehensive understanding of the global contemporary situation, of group bias (social analysis needed) and general bias (conversion needed), is given by Lonergan and Doran, then we need to hear what their judgment (Curnow’s judgment) is on this situation. Does it resemble more the Liberation theologians’ or else the Vatican approach of the recent past? What does an existentially converted Lonerganian uncover? The reply can’t be simply, “Read Lonergan/Doran and you’ll find out.”