

B O O K R E V I E W S

LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Pérez-Esclarín, Antonio 1980 *Atheism and Liberation*.
 SCM Press. (Original edition in
 Spanish 1974) Price R9.45

The significance of Antonio Pérez-Esclarín's book lies in the formulation of its title, as opposed to 'Atheism versus Liberation' or any alternative which would place these two designations in diametrically opposed categories. Instead, one finds "atheism" and "liberation" set over against phrases such as pallid Christianity, radically debased Christianity, idolatrous civilization; economic, social, political and ideological oppression, a denial of humanity, and the proclamation of self-deprecation, degradation, subjugation and humility.

How does Pérez-Esclarín motivate the apparent affinity between atheism and liberation? What is the content-meaning of each word in the context or contexts in which it functions? Has the writer a specific intent in mind? Who is his audience? Can he be said to have accomplished his purpose when the last page has been turned?

In providing answers to these questions, one must bear in mind that, ultimately, Pérez-Esclarín regards this work as a "profession of faith in the true God". In addition to this, the book also marks his farewell to the intellectual world, and his embarkment on an endeavour to "flesh-out" its contents in a commitment *with* the oppressed. Therefore, in a sense, Pérez-Esclarín is six feet above contradiction, for he answers to no one but himself. However, as an academic voice articulating itself in reaction to the "signs of the times", let his contribution be weighed as he has done with that of those whose brains he has picked.

Broadly speaking, the distinction which Pérez-Esclarín makes is that between a commitment which authenticates its principles in praxis, notwithstanding the fact that it dissociates itself from anything which smacks of religion - let alone Christianity, and that of a system of hollow ideas bearing the right title, but reinforcing the status quo. A similar distinction can be found

in a parable told by Jesus. "A man with two sons told the older boy, 'Son, go out and work on the farm today'. 'I won't', he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father told the youngest, 'You go!', and he said, 'Yes, sir, I will'. But he didn't. Which of the two was obeying his father?" The former commitment is characterized as humanistic atheism which is concerned with equality and love and the liberation of human beings from that which negates their personhood. The latter is a Christianity of the golden calf, delivered over to idols of consumerism, sexual libertinism, technology, science and the machine. In terms of the parable, Pérez-Esclarín is of the conviction that the person who negates this idol-God is nearer the true God than the one who affirms "its" existence.

How does Pérez-Esclarín arrive at this inverted meaning of the words "atheism" and "Christianity"? As an advocate of the Theology of Liberation in Latin America where the Gospel is reinterpreted "in terms of the concrete praxis of human beings committed to the process of human liberation" (p 106), Pérez-Esclarín nevertheless feels responsible to his heritage of European theology and philosophy, and to the post-Christian world in which, it is predicted, modern atheism "seems bound to become as widespread as the air we breathe" (p 53). To this end, in Part One of *Atheism and Liberation*, Pérez-Esclarín endeavours to penetrate the very soul of the people of this our idolatrous civilization "through its literature, its philosophy, and its art - for they reflect the ideas, passions and dreams of a people" (Romain Rolland p 5). He finds that all the various expressions of art are a cry of protest against massification, the loss of values and meaninglessness of man's existence in a hostile world. Humankind viewed in the light of psychology yields the same attitude of despair. Thus the God who sanctions such oppression and alienation by His failure to do anything about the deplorable situation is rejected outrightly. A totally materialistic civilization, then, is also thoroughly atheistic. What, in addition to the above, renders this civilization idolatrous, is the fact that various idols are set up in the place of the negated God. Says Pérez-Esclarín, "Atheism and idolatry are inseparable; a false conception of God leads to atheism, but atheism in turn gives rise to new forms of idolatry" (p 61). What, then, is the existential response to the absurdity of the situation? Either one vegetates passively or one revolts against a meaningless existence (even though one know that one cannot really do anything about the lack of harmony, the suffering of the innocent, and the injustice in the world - Camus p 179).

It is at this point that Pérez-Esclarín introduces the poor of Latin America who, in their hope and faith in an open future and a Liberator-God, stand in marked contrast to the depersonalized masses of Europe. The essential difference between these two groups of equally oppressed and alienated beings, lies in the discovery by the former that faith *is* possible only if one is atheistic with regard to oneself" (p 59). In other words, the nearness of God is experienced in service to others, or, faith is *praxis* that liberates people from oppression. Thus it is that Pérez-Esclarín attributes the word "revolutionary" to Christianity and not to atheism, for authentic liberation is possible only within the precincts of biblical Christianity which affirms existence on earth, and assures one of life after death.

In Part Two of this book the author is concerned with the biblical grounds of liberation. He moves deftly from Creation to Exodus and on to the Prophets and Jesus to indicate that man is a transforming agent (p 79), that violence can be just if it is truly liberative (p 81), that authentic religion works for a more humane world (p 86), and that liberation will come from those suffering oppression (p 89). Pérez-Esclarín points out that "the atheist's cry against God is turning into a cry against humanity itself The dream of atheism to turn human beings into God has already been turned into a reality and a sure promise in Christ" (p 93). Based on this assertion of humanity and the world, the author traces the development of a new theology away from the "rarefied" atmosphere of heaven. He mentions the theologies of Secularization and of Hope as forerunners of Latin American Liberation Theology - a theology which is rooted in Latin American realities, which stresses orthopraxis over orthodoxy, which chooses liberation over developmentalism, which also chooses socialism, which, therefore, affirms the class struggle, and which has a profoundly prophetic thrust.

Finally, in Part Three, Pérez-Esclarín engages in dialogue with atheism in the form of its leading personages. His aim, throughout, is to reveal the fact that the individual exponent rose to rebellion against a lifeless brand of Christianity (Nietzsche), proclaimed the death of God in order to inaugurate a more humane life (Feuerbach), reduced religion to a mere illusion in an attempt to help people to be more authentically human (Freud), replaced God with human society, so that man could be fully realized (Marx). Ironically, these atheists actually emulated and practicalized the ethos of Christianity, but in order to do so, had to negate the existence of the then-prevalent God, and consequently bear the title "atheist" - a label which Pérez-Esclarín is prepared to wear on similar grounds.

Thus the author can conclude that atheism can serve as a purifying agent for Christianity; it can become an ally of faith. The Christian must be an atheist as far as the gods of modern society are concerned in order to discover the God who is for man. On the other hand, the atheist can be an anonymous Christian; he can serve Christ unwittingly in the service of his neighbour. Atheism and liberation can reciprocally inject one another with a new lease of life as atheism discovers that God *is* actually the Liberator of all man's alienation and oppression, and as liberation experiences a catharsis in the affirmation of authentic religion.

Pérez-Esclarín's book classifies the milieu in which modern man finds himself - in this respect it resembles a Kenneth Clark resumé of civilisation from the Vikings to the Existentialists. For that reason one is left with the feeling that something concrete now needs to be done - the explanations took long enough. What might, therefore, have been regarded as a failure, could well become the challenge to haltingly and experimentally follow God our Liberator in service to our fellow man. On the other hand, the academic world has heard it all before in Ernst Bloch's statement. What merits classification, as far as First World theology is concerned, is a thorough-going exegesis of the premises on which Part Two rests, namely - "God and Human Liberation". The latter section which should actually enjoy the limelight as heralding the answer to modern atheism, finds itself sandwiched between two apologetic harangues on "how" modern man looks and thinks, and "why" he does. And while it is noble and necessary to acknowledge the Church's failure in all of this, Pérez-Esclarín is not justified in applying the same medication to the two different wounds of the First and Third Worlds. A literate Third World brother should find in this oversight a summary of how his First World brother ticks, but it won't provide him with the hermeneutical materials required to construct a new and viable theology.

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GOD AND SUFFERING

Gerstenberger, Erhard S & Wolfgang Schrage 1980 *Suffering*.
Nashville: Abingdon. (Original edition
in German 1977).

Suffering is a topic which has received increasing attention over the last decades. It is often stated that since World War II Christian theology has become 'theology after Auschwitz'. The reason for this being the excessive suffering that occurred during

the war - especially at Auschwitz - in a largely "Christian" part of the world. These events were regarded as a major setback for Christianity and has led to the situation where Christian theology can hardly be done nowadays without seriously taking human suffering into account.

The volume presently under review is the English translation by John E Steely of the original German publication *Leiden* by the Old Testament theologian Erhard S Gerstenberger and the New Testament scholar, Wolfgang Schrage. The book is not a scholarly treatise, but aimed at the general reader. Though both authors have a strong literary critical approach, the result is nevertheless revealing.

Seldom have I found a book so thorough in detail, yet so uncomplicated. One gains the impression that the relevant Biblical material is presented close to exhaustion. No serious study on the subject of suffering can afford to ignore this publication.

Within the limits of this review, only a few major issues will be raised:

1 *Causes of suffering*

Sometimes the pious thought is expressed that one should not ask, "Why, why am I suffering?" In the Bible this question nevertheless does occur (e.g. Pss 13 and 22) (cf p 103), and even on the cross Jesus repeats the cry of Ps 22:2: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

Though the "why" question is present in the Bible, very little speculation or systematizing about the matter is found (pp 132, 229). What is clear is that God is the giver of all good gifts, so that the lack of these is also to be related to Him (pp 27, 61). The Bible, however, makes provision for man's lamentations. It says very little about "suffering without complaining" (p 104). This then means that man does not have reason to turn away from God in his suffering, but can readily flee to Him. Man is obliged to go to God *with* his complaints, to take up the matter with Him. In this way, in fellowship with God, the matter can be handled, although clear-cut answers and explanations may not be found. This also explains the indispensable role of prayer in suffering (cf p 267ff).

Though there is a connection between sin and suffering, the matter cannot be rationalized as though there were a certain

form of punishment for each individual sin (p 229). The book of Job makes this clear (cf p 77ff). Rather, the Bible portrays a world permeated with suffering as a sign of the finitude of reality (p 130), in a world where sin and its consequences are omnipresent.

Under all these circumstances God is still in charge. Although Satan also plays a role in suffering (p 239ff), man can find hope and consolation in fellowship with God. For the believer suffering is not a sign of condemnation, because he has given in to satanic afflictions, but it is a sign of providence and salvation (p 231). It reminds one to turn away one's focus from prevailing conditions and to put one's trust in God Himself.

A pivotal matter regarding suffering is of course the *suffering of Christ*, and the origin of this suffering is God Himself (cf Rom 8:32). In a very real sense this is also God's answer for the suffering of the world. Through the suffering of his Son, God affirms that He does not stand aloof to the suffering world, but that He is deeply involved in it. Jesus was appointed by God to put an end to all suffering, and in doing this He became the sufferer in a unique sense (p 164). By no means does this mean that Jesus' suffering is a refutation of God's promises; rather it is a fulfilment thereof (p 165).

In relation to God's involvement in suffering through Christ, the suffering of those who belong to God (the faithful) also comes into the picture. Much of the suffering by believers in Biblical times (and through the history of the church) is caused by their following of Christ, the sufferer par excellence (cf p 179ff). The role of the law and freedom of the law (p 192ff) plays an important role in this respect.

2 *The meaning and mastery of suffering*

Much of Gerstenberger and Schrage's book deals with the difference between the Stoic and Biblical approaches to suffering. The former clearly played an important role in shaping our Western way of dealing with suffering. This, however, has its basis in the concept of God. The Biblical understanding of God contains no features of Stoic apathy (p 141ff; cf pp 99, 135). In God elements of suffering and passion are also revealed (p 99), which find their highest expression in the suffering of Christ.

In accordance with this Biblical conception of God, man and human well-being are treated comprehensively. Man's bodily and emotional experiences are in no way divorced from the functions

of his mind, as in Stoicism. Therefore the relationship with God is also not only one of the mind. That is why man can take up his sufferings with God and cry out his anguish to Him. In man's suffering God is no spectator. Rather, in his suffering man should look for the unrighteousness in himself and seek God among those who suffer under this unrighteousness (p 135).

This, however, does not mean that God is present in suffering as such, but that where He gives life (through Christ), there He is also present in suffering (p 207). The believer knows that in suffering he does not suffer alone, but in fellowship with Christ (p 242).

In Stoicism suffering was also viewed as a medium of education. Suffering was regarded as that which could give one strength to bear one's burdens and enhance confident living amid the tribulations of life (cf p 211f). Contrary to this the Christian views his suffering as a means of strengthening his faith in God, not his self-confidence. To him suffering is also a means of education, but then not so much to increase his powers of self-confidence; rather, he finds his power in God alone, in the *vis aliena* which runs parallel to the *iustitia aliena* of salvation (p 210ff).

The believer's mastery of suffering in fellowship with God in Christ has further consequences. It enables him to understand the suffering of others and to live in solidarity with them. Even when a Christian himself does not suffer, his fellowship with the suffering Christ paves the way for such solidarity. For the Christian there is no reason to maintain the status quo in a suffering world, but rather to render all possible assistance to the suffering, even on the levels of social and political action (cf pp 81, 216ff, 223f). The Bible opens one's eyes to the social dimensions of suffering (cf p 133), as suffering in the modern world is to a great extent a result of loneliness.

Much more of value can be found in this book, which can be discovered only by reading it!

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