

## CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

### The Political Economy of Liberation: Thomas Sowell and James Cone on the Black Experience

**Anthony B. Bradley**

New York: Peter Lang, 2012 (199 pages)

Comparing the thought of a world-class secular economist (Thomas Sowell) with that of the most influential American theologian in a specific niche (James Cone, black liberation theology) does not seem promising at first. In fact, the proverbial apples and oranges objection comes to mind. Nothing could be further from the truth; the choice is inspired and the resultant dialogue between political economy and black theology—a rarity—provides one of the most valuable contributions to American Christian social ethics in years.

On second thought, is it not obvious that the claims of liberation theology should be subjected to rigorous economic analysis? After all, that is precisely the challenge that Michael Novak placed before readers in his 1986 book, *Will It Liberate? Questions about Liberation Theology*. Nonetheless, to the best of my knowledge, black liberation theology had not up to this point been subjected to such scrutiny, undoubtedly because it required first a unique combination of researcher and subjects for comparison, which were deeply rooted in the American black experience itself, and second a reviewer who was able to acquire some critical distance. Anthony Bradley grew up in a black Methodist church and was shaped by black liberation theology, but thanks to a solid theological education (MDiv from Covenant Seminary; PhD from Westminster Seminary) and deep immersion into the history of Christian social ethics and political economy he was able to develop an appreciative but critical distance from it.

The strength of this study is that it takes seriously the tragic reality of the black experience from the vantage point of orthodox Christian anthropology and soteriology. Bradley utilizes Sowell's distinction between "constrained" and "unconstrained" visions of the human prospect. He argues that the constrained vision—respecting the limits of human achievement because of our nature that includes "fallenness"—is consistent with Christian anthropology. He argues that the unconstrained vision—human action is determined by external factors, and human nature is thus malleable and perfectible—is at odds with it. This is very important. While liberation theology claims to be the authentic voice of Jesus for the poor, the claim of those with a constrained vision is much more modest: The constrained vision is *compatible* with Christian anthropology.

Liberation theology also involves soteriological claims. The problem from which people need liberation is oppression. Bradley clearly shows how restricted this understanding of the human condition is. Identifying the Christian understanding of redemption as liberation from white oppression not only reduces Christianity to a social movement but also renders its proponents incapable of addressing other issues, including the reality of sin among the oppressed. The greater tragedy is that "then black theology actually needs white racism and black identity conflicts in order to maintain its reason for existence" (35). Furthermore, it requires relegating "the black church and black people to seeing themselves as perpetual and permanent victims.... Racism, oppression, and discrimination become inadvertent desired ends by liberation theologians to define purpose and identity, both for individuals as well as for black institutions, including the black church" (101). By placing the problem outside any personal responsibility, liberation theology does not encourage self-reliance and personal accountability, both of which are essential for black progress.

Bradley not only analyzes and evaluates but he also suggests constructive alternatives. He builds on orthodox Christian doctrines and classic social-ethical wisdom to make a case for a constrained vision of the human person, for emphasizing freedom and equity rather than equality and redistribution, and for serious attention to the sin of envy. He concludes that "the complex issues that plague the liberation and economic empowerment of blacks in America are both moral and economic." Governments can help in providing the *conditions* of freedom and opportunity needed for a prosperous people but "cannot address the complex and interrelated moral associations that keep people from developing into men and women who both display moral agency and self-sufficiency in society" (137). This requires the moral order of mediating institutions rather than the coercive order of the state.

Bradley contends that the rich tradition of Christian social thought (and I find it interesting that a Protestant Calvinist so often cites Roman Catholic social teaching) provides a superior liberation theology for blacks in America than does Cone's. Because it is rooted in *truth* about the human condition—*imago dei*, fallenness, redemption in Christ, and hope—it does set people free and equips them for flourishing.

There is more in this gem of a monograph, including an understandable treatment of basic economics, cultural and ethnic history, and a defense of corporations *as corporations*. With the Catholic social tradition, Bradley insists that "[c]orporations do not need

to justify their existence on the basis that they address social issues and do charitable work.” Rather, “business corporations already enhance the common good ‘by providing needed goods and services, and creating wealth’” (134–35).

This volume is a much-needed corrective to the overwhelming consensus of ecumenical bodies making their pronouncements about “justice, peace, and the integrity of creation” as it comes to expression in such statements as the Belhar and Accra Confessions. At the moment, Bradley’s is only one small clear voice in the midst of a cacophony of noisy, self-proclaimed ecumenical “prophets” who are really only “sounding gongs and clashing cymbals.” The faithful, however, live in hope, knowing that ultimately God’s truth will triumph and that their calling is simply to bear witness to the truth.

—John Bolt

*Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan*

## The Moral Dynamics of Economic Life: An Extension and Critique of *Caritas in Veritate*

**Daniel K. Finn (Editor)**

Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Within the Catholic academic world and among those who share the distinction of being “professional Catholics” (i.e., those whose paychecks come from bishops conferences, diocesan chancelleries, or Catholic nongovernmental organizations), there is a hermeneutical game called “reading the pope to find that he shares my political opinions.” It starts with taking a papal social encyclical and combing through it for sentences that match one’s own way of thinking about politics or economics. When the reader comes across papal statements that are opposed to or cast doubt on his opinions, he can either ignore them or try to explain them away as unimportant or historically contingent—or simply disagree, because, after all, the Church is not “political.” In any case, his opinions remain blessedly intact and may now even have a seal of papal approval, which makes them even less prone to reexamination or revision.

To be sure, this is not the intention behind papal social encyclicals that as manifestations of Jesus Christ’s salvific mission through his Church should have the conversion of hearts and minds as their objective. No one who pays attention to the “professional Catholic” world can deny the existence of this hermeneutic, and there are probably very few people who have changed their political opinions due to an encyclical. Despite the high-minded tone and style of the encyclicals, the partisan rancor surrounding their interpretation can be unedifying, to say the least. Perhaps, though, there is something to be learned from the partisan way of reading about the interaction between religion and politics in general, and especially between Catholicism (with its teaching and doctrinal authority in the office of the papacy), and modern liberal democracy as it exists in the United States.