Tim Noble

_The Poor in Liberation Theology: Pathway to God or Ideological Construct?_ (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013), xii + 244 pp., US$ 99.00, ISBN 9781845539894.

Noble’s main interest, in this book, is in theological method—ultimately, that of Brazilian theologian, Clodovis Boff, O.F.M.—and its epistemological and anthropological underpinnings. In this light, he addresses the important but complex question as to who the poor are and whether they offer a “pathway to God,” that is, are iconic, a “sacrament of God,” or whether they are an “ideological construct,” that is, idolatrous.

Chapter 1 is an overview of (primarily) Catholic liberation theologies’ thought about the poor (16–37). Noble rejects a reductionist interpretation—an exclusively social and economic, class-based view—of the “preferential option for the poor.” He argues, in Chapter 2, that the poor have been the victims of ideology and idolatry (43–45, 61–62). The notion of Idolatry that stands out, substitutes “the true God with some other god, and attributes to this god the powers of the transcendent God” (45). Especially capitalist interpretations of the market economy are idolatrous.

Furthermore, says Noble, “the poor are at time not only victims of idolatry from the outside,” say, by “modern global capitalism.” But also, “at least potentially, from the inside, from the demands made on them by liberation theology itself to be ‘sacraments of God’” (42). Thus, Noble warns of the ever-present temptation for constructing idols out of the poor in liberation theologies’ interpretation of the “hermeneutical privilege” (97, 147) of the poor as an icon, or privileged pathway to God. Idolizing the poor means (in the words of Clodovis Boff) the “fatal error ... of setting up the poor as the ‘first operative principle of theology’, substituting them for God and Jesus Christ,” which results in the politicization of the Christian faith.

Consequently, the poor is only a secondary principle, and hence the poor _qua_ poor are _not_ a “sacrament of God” (149). Why? In the first place, poverty is not the whole of a person’s identity. A whole person is as such a single, unique, and unrepeatable being, “the one who is set free and saved” (153). Thus, filling out the anthropological foundations here, aided in Chapter 3 by the philosophies of Jean-Luc Marion and Emmanuel Levinas, Noble argues that “precisely and only as other, the poor are also a gift, an authentic gift.” He adds, “I emphasize here that this is as other, and not as poor” (97). Second, the first principle of theology (this could be much clearer in Noble, and it would have been had he given careful attention to the themes of Christian freedom and liberation) is that “liberation is first and foremost liberation from the radical slavery of sin” (in Cardinal Ratzinger’s words).
How, then, asks Noble, “is it possible to focus on the poor as a privileged locus theologicus, icons of God, without turning them eventually into an idol” (101)? Noble holds that the basic principles of Boff’s theological method are helpful here. Three principles stand out in Chapter 4. First, the distinction between Theology 1 and 2: the former takes revelation, the authoritative sources of Scripture, revealed truths (fides quae), and tradition, which includes creeds and councils, their statements and declarations, to be in some sense constitutive of Christian faith (105). Theology 2 deals with non-theological realities, such as the political, culture, education, health-care, and others.

Second, the notion of “mediation” is central to Boff’s theological method. Theology 1 “uses as its principle mediation philosophy,” providing theological discourse with philosophical scaffolding (104). Theology 2, say, a theology of the political will need socio-analytic mediation, a critical theory of society, poverty’s causes and effects. This is followed by a hermeneutical mediation between the normative sources of the Christian faith and a theology of the political in order then to mediate dialectically an open theological synthesis, which is then ordered to agapic praxis. Noble holds that Boff affirms a praxis-oriented theory that has as its telos agapic Christian praxis. But only divine revelation, never praxis, can be used as a criterion of theological truth (117, 138).

Third, although undeveloped in Noble’s book, he does make clear that Boff is a realist about truth, with Christian beliefs being true because of their reference to the real: “the reality of salvation in Jesus cannot be dependent on what people do. It is the action of God that makes it real” (138). In addition, also undeveloped but nevertheless present is the matter of justification, warrants, or tests for the truth of propositions, with “theology’s job [being] to set out an understanding of faith (content) that is coherent to the truth of revelation within the culturally available resources of that time and place” (117).

There remains to ask several questions of this instructive book. First, in their 1985 book, Liberation Theology, the brothers Boff, Leonardo and Clodovis, wrote that, since the 1984 publication of Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation,” by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, there exists a genuine, solidly established, magisterial liberation theology of the Church, and hence anyone proposing to work in that theology must consider this Instruction. Except for a couple of swipes at Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation, Noble not only doesn’t consider the Instruction, but also the subsequent 1986 Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation, and others (1985, 2006). This is a serious lack in a book that limits itself to Roman Catholic theologians of liberations.

Second, liberation theologies criticize the idolizing of the market. Does this mean the market as such is idolatrous? Perhaps not (45), but here, too, Noble’s