

Sandinista régime, which many Nicaraguans have found increasingly disillusioning. There is no easy way out of the problems raised by Solentiname.

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A VISION OF HOPE. The Churches and Change in Latin America, by Trevor Beeson and Jenny Pearce. Fount Paperbacks. pp. 290. £2.95.

Books on Latin America sell notoriously badly, and Fount are to be congratulated on having dared to bring out this timely response by an ecumenical working party to the British Council of Churches' request for a study project.

An initial overview of Latin American history, both drawing out the common threads in the continent's development and emphasizing the immense diversity of each republic, is followed by an introduction to the context and formative elements of the Liberation Theology stance. The various elements — base communities, conscientization, popular religiosity, the influence and demythification of Marx in the works of some of the theologians, orthopraxis — are introduced with unavoidable simplification. Official Church documents are quoted extensively, and the attitudes of different, non-Catholic, Christian groups are elucidated.

There then follows a chapter each on seven of the major republics and a combined chapter on Central America. Two thirds of each chapter is dedicated to an historical, economic and social survey of the country in question, and the remainder to the Churches. The Chapter on Argentina is very well nuanced, and that on Paraguay is fascinating, given the near complete lack of readily accessible news about it. Cuba, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Mexico are the other republics described. The last, much longer, chapter, which skilfully knits together the Central American republics, is an undisguised plea for support for Nicaraguan and indigenous interests against military and United States intervention.

Although in general (and unexpectedly, given the collective nature of the research and authorship), the style of writing is readable, consistent and clear. There are some ambiguities of attitude owing (I suspect) to the "varying degrees" with which the authors "share the perspective of Liberation Theology" (Preface). This leads: to greater magnanimity being displayed towards the *sectas* in some chapters than in others (cf. Paraguay and Chile); to the assertion that "liberation theologians are in no sense heretical, rather do they express a somewhat cautious orthodoxy" (p. 50) (surely out of place in an informative book directed to a mixed ecumenical readership); and to the remark "This does not mean that the Roman Catholic Church has become a political force. It has however begun to play a new political role,..." (p. 40), when, from the perspective of the rest of the book, unconditional ecclesiastical support for a régime is at least as political as an option for the poor.

The authors are right to balance their emphasis on the progressive factors in the churches by pointing out that these (and any ecumenical ventures) are definitely minority concerns at the moment, and they are justly sanguine as to the 'arduous' nature of any hopes for change. The correctness of detail is an impressive tribute to the experts who were consulted (though Dussel (page 221) who teaches in Mexico is not a Mexican), and the (quite complex) explanations of economic history, while clearly by nature partisan, are extremely lucid and will carry the least initiated reader.

While delighted by the range and actuality of the information and the clarity of its presentation I could not help but be slightly disappointed by the overall focus of the book. The British do not in fact look on Latin America from the viewpoint of impartial observers, but from that of a long tradition of military adventurers, entrepreneurs, immigrants, mercenaries, exploiters and educators, their view coloured by a deep-seated hostility to things Hispanic. Thus a vision of Latin America, and particularly one by and for Christians, is surely not about "them", neatly described, but about "us" and how those of us who are not indigenous to the Americas have participated and failed to

participate in the venture of the New World. In this sense a chapter on the Churches in the U.S.A., and a formal description of the U.S. presence and influence in the area was conspicuous by its absence, for there alone can changes of popular opinion lead to political pressure which might indeed be a source of hope for those south of the River Bravo (for instance, the visit of some U.S. bishops to Central America and the widely publicized controversy which ensued). Without a wider focus, the book, an excellent read, and the most readily accessible source of information on the subject, remains a survey of a situation rather than a Vision of Hope.

A final word (of congratulation) to Fount, who have produced this book very finely—attractive cover, well-spaced lines, readable print, well priced. They have even, though not always accurately, accentuated the Spanish and Portuguese words which appear in the text, a quality leap which I hope other publishers will follow.

JAMES ALISON OP

OWNERSHIP: EARLY CHRISTIAN TEACHING by Charles Avila. *Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York and Sheed and Ward, London, 1983*

Charles Avila's book is a mixture of modern political tract and learned patristic treatise. The political tract element arises from the author's anger at the injustice he sees in the theory and practice of the ownership of private property in land which prevailed in the Philippines during his time as a seminarian in the 1960s and still prevails. He argues (page 153) that the teaching of the Fathers of the Church on property was socialistic or communistic but that when Christianity 'decided to accept an alliance of power with the Roman Empire' the essentially socialistic perspective of the teaching of the Fathers was ignored and forgotten. He goes on to suggest that peasants in the Third World and industrial workers in the developed countries alike now see that the obsolete concept of the absolute right of private property which the West inherited from Roman Law must be rejected and *autarkeia* (self-sufficiency) to foster *koinonia* (or fellowship), the ideal of the Fathers is to replace it. Unfortunately he does not develop the idea of self-sufficiency in modern terms but leaves the strong impression that community enforced egalitarianism is to be the order of the day in achieving it.

Such a sweeping thesis raises many questions not least in that it involves what might be called a slapstick theory of history—witness the quotation given about the Church's acceptance by Constantine, witness too the lumping together of the Roman concept of the absolute rights of property with the predicament of the modern industrial worker which is, of course, due to the errors of economic liberalism. A casual way with history implies a more fundamental defect—the failure to appreciate the idea of the development of doctrine. Only a very superficial understanding of the manner in which the Church's teaching is evolved, especially on moral, and especially on social moral issues, would enable the author to assert that the teachings of the Fathers on this matter became one of institutional Christianity's best kept secrets. Likewise only a lopsided scholarship enables the suggestion to creep in that there is an essential discontinuity between the mainstream Catholic thinking and theology of the patristic age with that of its scriptural forebears while there is more than lopsidedness in his accusations concerning later institutional Christianity. The biblical and the Catholic understanding of the right to own and use private property in productive goods is that the right exists and it means that some can be wealthier than others but it is subject to social provisions so that the purposes of the initial gift of the earth to all men in common should be achieved. This is an argument for social responsibility and to call it socialism in any sense is extremely misleading, both in itself and in the context of the controversies in the modern world. It is a teaching which is perfectly compatible with the Fathers here quoted, Clement of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Ambrose, John Chrysostom and Augustine as it is compatible with Aquinas and the modern social Encyclicals. The only differences are in emphasis and in the coherence of the modern