

NO GOOD AT GRUNWICK

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'This book is a *critical* introduction to political theology, not an enthusiastic initiation into it' (p 37). Such was the intention of Alfredo Fierro in making his own sizeable contribution to the subject. Drawing together a great variety of sources he tries to sketch the development of 'political theology', and suggests some directions for the future. This not without a sense of his own relative position: from the outset he states that 'this book was written in Madrid, Spain, and finished in the summer of 1974 (xii). (*The Militant Gospel*, SCM Press 1977 xv + pp. 453 £4.50).

The book divides into three parts, Situation, Programme and Theory, eight chapters in all. In the first part, changes in the climate of thinking are described which have brought political theology into being; the second goes through the formulation of the new theology; while the third reflects on the significance of it and challenges the presuppositions of several authors.

First, though, some general comments about method. The term 'political theology' is used rather too frequently—I've already used it twice—and moreover as if one was always clear what is meant by it. Then, related to this, is Fierro's tendency to put together several ideas about a concept without contrasting them very accurately or stating a clear view of his own. Often this makes no difference, and one appreciates the breadth of reference; but there are times when some distinctions have to be made (notably the discussion of ideology, pp 243-7), and a failure to do so is unhelpful.

I think that this is actually an important part of the Fierro exercise, and the rest of the review should make this clear. Detecting similar trends in different traditions is by its nature almost impossible to do with precision, and yet this is the task that Fierro has set himself with the category of 'political theology'. It is an interesting and worthwhile endeavour, but the methodical reader should be warned in advance.

A Situation

In the opening chapter Fierro picks 1965 as a key date in the transition from humanist 'I - thou' to political theology. In that year appeared works by Cox, Moltmann, Metz and Gutierrez which made a significant break with existentialist and denominational preoccupations. They presented a theology that was public,

practical, critical and above all, politically mediated: it is the last of these that is seen as the decisive break with the past (p 30).

The issue of continuity or discontinuity with earlier traditions is raised at several points, and is probably the best one to follow in the discussion. As you might expect there is a tension between the two which makes it unprofitable to try to settle it one way or the other. As he says in one of the book's many personal touches, Fierro was writing in fashionable humanist vein before 1965, and has since felt compelled to change his approach radically (pp 42-3). And yet some energy is also given to showing that a political setting is the consequence of a critical theology, and even of the narrowest anthropocentrism that seeks to be effective (pp 30-3).

Perhaps the best indication of the change is when he says 'the weight of reflection (of the new theology) lay not in the Churches but in society as a whole' (p 19). In other words, one is not just altering the applications of given standards within the Church, but developing a different theology as well. In fact, this is the main (and polemical) thrust of the book, that political theology does not involve just a new and improved understanding of age-old truths. And therefore, because it does not rest on quite the same presuppositions as past traditions, it is legitimate to treat it as a separate discipline.

The 'critical' element is one of the centres of the controversy, and it is developed in chapter 2, 'The Rejection of Christendom'. Here Fierro marks a gradual trend towards secularization, in which Constantinianism, where Church and State are presumed to be the same, was superseded by 'New Christendom' theology, in which society was agreed to be secular, but Christians were still supposed to be the main agents within it.

Some pages are devoted to the history of the 'New Christendom' concept, in both theological and political terms. Despite the recognition of a 'secular sphere', the idea persisted that Christianity had something distinctive to offer, the practical outcome of accepted theological principles. Actually, I think Fierro is over-philosophical here: he could have said more straightforwardly that as monarchies gave way to the world of opposing political parties, the notion of the Christian order was forced to change correspondingly, since only a part of the governing machinery could be seen as embodying the divine purpose.

It was however, with these philosophical assumptions that there were attempts to find a (Christian) 'third way', distinct from both the secular tendencies of capitalism and socialism. To this end arose such bodies as Christian Democrat parties, Catholic Action and the Lay Apostolate, armed with the conviction that Christian principles would triumph (or at least, as they demonstrably failed to do so, that a 'leaven-process' was in operation—pp56-7).

The disappointing failure of such organizations to find any third way, and their even more disappointing allegiance to capitalism in consequence, has been at least one of the reasons for a theological re-think. Political theology now rejects all notions of Christendom old and new, and has 'a critical and polemical relationship not only with existing society, but also with any and every socio-political ideal that presents something fixed and finished once and for all' (p 25). The Kingdom is no longer set out as a particular social formation: if you like, the theology of the lawgiver has been replaced by that of the critic of authority.

Another criticism of previous theologies that political theology makes is that theory and practice are not to be separated. Rather, if a theology is to be politically mediated, the praxis must be a part of the development of the theory. We have thus a single process, namely the public and critical praxis of Christians.

Chapter 3, 'The Era of Dialectical Thinking' gives the required philosophical backing. Knowledge is no longer seen as the result of detached observation, but as coming out of practical experience of the object. The observer is thus implicated, and because of this involvement criticism becomes a part of the learning process. Hence as an important example Marcuse's notion of the 'subversive power of reason' (p 93): knowledge becomes more creative and capable of throwing up new alternatives.

In this chapter Fierro also considers the possibility of theology in a Marxist context, and exposes a few frauds and bandwaggoners. Dialectical thinking deals with totalities and as such places all facts and events within an overall framework. Consequently, the previous tendency to fragment the sciences is now being reversed, and so there is the chance of encounter between a critical Marxism and a scientific discipline that is aware of its economic and social conditioning. This Fierro sees as the place open for political theology.

As a summary of twentieth-century philosophy this chapter is bound to have its weak points. For example, I find the use of Marcuse and his 'subversive knowing' rather disproportionate. Moreover, in talking of knowledge naturally bringing *realistic* proposals for change (pp 93-4), Fierro sounds a note of utopianism which is slightly out of place.¹ But some sketch of this kind is necessary, since one of his central points is that political theology draws not only on Christian tradition but also on contemporary trends outside the Church. It coincides with the development of revolutionary approaches to art, science, professions, etc. and should not be taken in isolation from these,

This actually answers something of the 'continuity' question raised earlier. Fierro's thesis is that theologies—all theologies—are

¹ This utopian tendency has been a fault of his in previous writings, as he admits later (p. 273).

connected both diachronically (with past Christian tradition) and synchronically (with contemporary culture) [pp 122-3]. So political theology is not novel in the fact that it draws on outside sources: it is rather the nature of its source that makes it distinctive. Just as the scholastics were related to Aristotelianism, and liberal Protestants to Kant, so political theology links up with Marx; nay, is 'thoughts produced by faith on the humus of Marxism' (p 80).

This may be the moment to make a slightly crude distinction which may nonetheless be useful. This is between talking of 'theology' as a separate discipline with its own sources of inspiration and initiative, and treating it as a concomitant of other actions. Thus with 'political theology', you may be active because Church and/or Bible tells you to be, or you may be active for no specifiable reason, and then formulate a theology which makes sense under those conditions.

Fierro is unmistakably in the second category, and much of this book is written in reaction against the first. In speaking of political theology as the theology of those who are politically active, he treats the politics as the principal influence, and not just as a 'consequence' of an independently worked-out doctrinal system. Some of the case (mainly about 'discontinuity') is over-stated as he lays into those claiming the complete sanction of tradition, and there is an aversion to the term 'dogmatic' that verges on paranoia. But in the remarks about the synchronous and diachronous relations of theology you have probably the most balanced statement of the Fierro line. Contemporary reality is part of the make-up of any theology; and political theology is unique inasmuch as its involvement, even on the theoretical level, has had to be with the whole of society and not simply with its Christian or philosophical sector.

B Programme

The following three chapters comprise the 'Programme' section. Fierro divides the themes used into those relating to past, present and future; and it is here that his technique of weaving similar trends together is most apparent. This is done, as he says, 'on the hypothesis that they do possess substantive continuity and homogeneity' (p 305), but that does not make this a mere exercise in collation. The hypothesis itself is a substantial theological premiss; while the themes are so arranged and discussed that Fierro's own preferences become clear.

Chapter 4: 'Looking at the past: Liberative memories', is the best of the three, and deals principally with the interpretation of traditional imagery. Three main themes are selected as most frequently used nowadays: Exodus, the prophets and Jesus in conflict. The general line is that while these are not normative for Christians today, they are nevertheless of use as sources of inspira-

tion.

The argument is this: first, against Moltmann, Exodus is not primarily a theological *image*, but a matter of fact: 'It must be considered in terms of its historical reality before one attempts to speculate on its symbolic import' (p. 145). So because event comes first and interpretation later, there is room for bypassing previous apolitical readings of the Bible and asserting a more political view.

The second argument comes towards the end, and goes further. Any account which spotlights certain events at the expense of others—i.e. any history—begins to create myth or 'Mythistory' (pp. 168-70). So with a political reading you are not taking the same history and 'reinterpreting' it, but adopting a different view of the events themselves and their relative importance; in fact, making a different history. So for example, if an emphasis on Jesus in conflict is novel, and has led to different parts of his life being given greater prominence. Equally, previous 'apolitical' views were not wrong, but began from different starting-points.²

In this chapter is also a very good discourse on how the past affects the present, by no means a simple process. The discussion on whether Jesus was a zealot comes to the conclusion that even if he was, that wouldn't of itself be an excuse for being one now (p. 165), and this is part of the general thesis. Prophetic actions do not give norms for the present, but have a paradigmatic value, providing an example. So Exodus and the disruption of the Temple market should be used in the same way as Cable Street and Saltley Gates: it is noteworthy that 'Babylon' has already been adopted by young black British people.³ The Bible contains not oracles but 'liberative pronouncements' (p. 149).

The following chapter on the present, 'Political praxis and theological representations', focusses on the themes used in a theology that opts for revolution rather than evolution or development. Liberation and Revolution are the first two, and in theologies of these a seemingly denominational split is noticeable.

Liberation theology is prevalent in Catholic countries, and links the historical ideas of liberation from US imperialism with the theological one of salvation through Christ as parts of 'one single complex process' (p. 190). Revolution theology, however,

² Incidentally, once this role of the historian is realised, the term 'materialist reading' becomes somewhat less mysterious. It designates the straightforward exercise of using source-material which reflects a different bias from the present-day reader, and trying despite that to make sense of the facts it purports to record.

³ 'Babylon' is used to denounce British (white) capitalist society in general and often the police in particular, and its use as a part of the struggle corresponds to what Fierro is recommending. I would strongly suggest that here is a theology of liberation emerging exactly where on all Marxist theories it ought to emerge, but where (white) Marxist theologians have never troubled to look.

comes from more developed countries, mainly Protestant, and apparently from a more general view of revolutionary change, centring if anywhere around 1968. Important for Fierro, it makes a sharper break with tradition by including a revolutionary ecclesiology; and although this is open to criticism for introversion, it is at least more honest about the Church's failings.

A crucial passage is p. 198-9, where Fierro assesses the success of liberation as against revolution theology. He claims that the main reason is its ability to be absorbed by the hierarchy and tradition rather than in its being more solidly grounded politically (although he agrees this is often the case). This criticism has some truth; but the political context is played down at just the wrong moment. If revolution theology has drawn more on the optimism for change of 1968 than on the conflict necessary to achieve it, it is hardly surprising that it has been eclipsed: with the excesses of capitalism becoming ever more apparent, and the obstinate refusal of 1868 to repeat itself, the Latin American-type analysis holds increasingly good for Europe too. The point is not an ecclesiastical one at all: you just have to see which political theology is better suited to a polarised situation.

Fierro now deals with how these themes are employed, and stresses first of all the transitory nature of a theology that has them (p. 207). Although liberation theology is used as target, the point is general: we cannot claim to be establishing the 'essence' of theology in the sense of discovering immutable truths, but only a 'provisional identity'. For example, if God sides with the oppressed, what will happen when everyone has been liberated? Theology will presumably have a different role to play when socialism is achieved.

He continues by outlining how certain theological concepts have been reinterpreted by political theology. As examples, charity comprises not only the curing of specific ills, but the prevention of more widespread ones by political means; while the Kingdom of God is seen more as a social institution than a vision of the believer. And in general, substitute 'class' for 'individual' in any given Christian precept, and you will be on the right lines.

The chapter ends with discussion of the function of political theology, where the value or otherwise of ideology is rather inconclusively debated. Bound up with this is the issue of whether there is a 'specifically Christian' praxis. Fierro's thesis is that there is not, but that nonetheless Christianity has its own specific contribution to make; this in apparent agreement with the Althusser view of ideology as a positive influence (p. 243). Theology, he says, provides not models for action, but guiding ideas: 'the Gospel command of love . . . is the general horizon for all human actions, including those associated with class strife and violence: it is the initial option in favour of human beings and their fulfilment'

(p. 255). So if we can avoid the pejorative sound of 'ideology', that is the role of political theology. As with the view of the past, theological reflection on the present gives a general direction, but offers no specific prescriptions.

'Utopia and the Advent of God' is the least satisfying chapter, not least thanks to the current state of theological thinking on the subject. Eschatology, it begins, has ceased to be a matter of the personal decision of the existentialist, and is now concerned with a historical and collective future; while God himself is less the interlocutor of humanity than the guarantor of the promise made to it. Several critical remarks are made about the current emphasis on the future in theology. Although Fierro agrees that it can bring with it a liberating approach, he queries whether the God 'before us' is any better an image than the one 'above us' (p. 264). It is quite as capable of giving rise to myths of the kind that theologians have criticised, except that they will now be 'eschatological myths' (p. 270).

Moreover, he continues, such an approach is only suited to an optimistic humanity; indeed this image of God functions as 'the culminating sign of a gilt-edged future'. However, in his view there are several signs that this mood has altered. Many political examples might spring to mind, but Fierro can only think of the call by Marcuse for a society based on the maternal principle, and various calls by the ecologically minded (p.270 still). There is no harm in agreeing with him that theology must deal with all past, present *and* future, and I have myself thought that to stress only the future is a little naive. But to make Marcuse and the ecologists the reason for thinking otherwise does not exactly inspire confidence.⁴

As you would expect, however, the main substance of the chapter is working through the various hang-ups about relating the unfolding of history—especially in the light of Marxist thought—to the coming of the Kingdom of God, traditionally seen as a supernatural event of sorts. Metz is clearly on to something when he says that an emphasis on the future makes less important the distinction between natural and supernatural (p. 265): Fierro rejects this, however, saying that this distinction is disappearing anyway for other reasons (secularization I suppose), and that you still have to define 'future' more closely.

This seems to focus on the problem. It is in general a trivial point to say that the future is uncertain, but this has had its effect on theological speculation about it. Is the Parousia the same as the fulfilment of history, or is there 'something more' besides? Is there any need, for example, to follow Rahner in distinguishing between

⁴ To avoid any misunderstanding: I have nothing necessarily against the maternal principle, and do not intend this as a sexist jibe! I'm more concerned with the lack of political examples that ring true, which I regard as characteristic of the book as a whole.

'future' and 'advent'?

Fierro's question of what one imagines by 'future' is to the point: if it is only the playing-out of potential, then one requires some innovating force 'to free us from melancholy repetition of the past and cyclic time' (p. 267). And if this initiative is reserved for God alone, is this not an outdatedly mechanistic view of the world? Doesn't it require the same kind of supernaturalism as has been criticised before?

This charge tells against those who require 'something else' to usher in the Kingdom; but the thesis is not complete. Miranda's attempt to explain the resurrection of the dead as a piece of straight dialectical materialism is viewed as 'highly problematical' (p. 296), and his bland assertion that on this point Marx was not sufficiently dialectical is countered with an equally forthright statement that hope in the resurrection is alien to any kind of logic. This point is taken up again at the end of the book.

I think Moltmann comes off best with his view that 'emancipation is the immanent side of redemption: redemption is the transcendent side of emancipation' (p. 268). Another parallel to this is Teilhard's view (p. 292) that creation and evolution are two aspects of the same reality. In both cases the theological term does not denote any distinctive supernatural object, but is a theological reflection of what can be sufficiently described in other words.

This would fit in with the arguments of the two preceding chapters, where to point to the agency of God was quite obviously not to refer to anything other than ordinary history. But a problem with argument here is that the future is by definition unverifiable, so there is still room to insist on a separate agency without being challenged to point it out. So although it would be in his view consistent to talk of the eschatological future as simply a different characterisation of the material future, Fierro concedes that such consistency is no guarantee of truth, and leaves it up to faith and hope, rather than theology, to make the decision.

Most of the 'Programme' section is quite familiar, and in tune with anyone's expectations of a book on political theology. The themes discussed, however, are used with a wide variety of presuppositions by different authors, and it is in the 'Theory' section that Fierro attempts to narrow down the field. The seventh chapter, 'Theological Specifications', is the most difficult, and it would help to keep an eye on the concluding summary as you go along (p. 360-1).

First, political theology is not confined to ethics, i.e. to application of already-accepted principles. The notion of praxis breaks the customary distinction between theory and practice, or faith and works. 'If theology is in a logical and consistent relationship with praxis, then it is a theology *from within* praxis, not about it' (p. 313-14).

This was the tenor of the three previous chapters: that traditional images such as Exodus do not present us with ethical norms but with inspirations. But the converse effect of praxis on theology is equally important. I understand Fierro to be saying that your action determines the kind of images you use to speak about God, and the way that you assume him to be acting. Thus enforcers of law and order appeal to Christ the Pantokrator, while their opponents trust in Christ the Liberator: the difference originates in their political standpoint.

Secondly, theology is distinguishable from theological language: there is the spontaneous expression of faith and there is 'second-stage, critical, reflexive language', which is theology proper. Two sections are devoted to showing how much of both revolution and liberation theology are in the former category, and how they are therefore 'pre-critical', merely stating the faith without reflecting on it. Theology proper, by contrast, must deal with 'the relationship between two empirical and social realities: the profession of faith espoused by Christians, and their political praxis' (p. 317). This can claim to be an objective and scientific study, and although it looks like an invitation to tedious sociologists, the point is still of importance.

Third is a distinction between dogmatic and fundamental theology. Gutierrez is taken as the dogmatic archetype: Fierro says that his writings can only be effective within the Church because they presuppose Catholic dogma, and are of little use if that is called into question. They have no intention of converting the non-Christian, as is attempted by fundamental theology, but only of stating the consequences of the faith, assuming that the reader requires no further persuasion.

I think that this misunderstands a little the position of a Catholic writer slaving away for his imprimatur, the more so if his work is aimed at the Church itself, attacking its complicity with existing powers and trying to prove it wrong on its own terms. Although Fierro does observe that Gutierrez's lectures are different, he draws no conclusion from this. Nevertheless, it is right to say that outside the Church the problem is not the consequences but the *possibility* of faith, and this, Fierro argues, requires a more fundamental approach. He does not admittedly say much about what form such an approach should take; but it is still significant to say that one should be doing more than politicize people who are already Christians.

Fourthly, political theology should not be seeking to strengthen the 'sacred element' in society. I have long seen secularization as non-subject in theology, that uses Church-attendance as the index of a period's religiosity and does little more. But here the issue is more attractively put, with Gutierrez yet again as the principal target. He is quoted as placing the challenge of the non-

believer second to that of the non-human human being whom existing society refuses to recognize. But Fierro queries whether the reaffirmation and liberation of human beings will necessarily lead to a revival of traditional theology.

Gutierrez clearly regards his work as strengthening the Church and egging it on to combat imperialism: secularization he equates with privatizing the faith and reducing it to an ineffective individualism. Metz by contrast sees secularization and political theology as mutually complementary and corrective' (p. 349), and Fierro reckons that as action progresses, the populist beliefs on which Gutierrez and Comblin rely will come to be held more critically.

To some extent there are political criteria involved here. Gutierrez' line would obviously be more effective in mobilizing an institution with all its forces; but in perpetuating an authoritarian Church structure it would make less allowance for the politicization that accompanied any resulting action. Fierro argues that Christian faith can have a public impact even if its formulation and means of expression is not ecclesiastical: secularization may deprive the faith of some of its relevance, but without necessarily making it ineffective.

Finally, theology is negative, critical and symbolic: this sums up much of the chapter. A distinction is roughly this: a positive theology is one that claims to speak directly about God, and accepts tradition as divine revelation without question. Once accepted, such a belief can be developed systematically (dogmatics), have consequences (ethics) and increase its distinctive impact on the world (sacralization).

Negative theology by contrast presupposes that there is no direct language about God, but 'theological language is indirect, speaking of human beings rather than God' (p. 313). It lays no claim to any higher form of knowledge, but uses symbols as suggestions rather than definite pronouncements. It is critical in that it still challenges attempts to explain human beings exclusively in terms of the polis, or 'to close the political realm in on itself'.

Taken together, these specifications point to two very different understandings of political theology. The first assumes Christian tradition to be something distinctive, the leaven that acts independently of the lump of society. Theologies of this kind are concerned to present their findings as 'the Christian view', and give expressly theological reasons for them. The other claims no such status for Christianity, but sees faith as operative in a secular context. However, it says that there are within the themes images of religious tradition, parts with which people identify and which they then use symbolically; not because they feel they ought to but because the correspondence makes sense. This is just the same division as the 'crude distinction' I offered at the conclusion

of section A, and Fierro is again in the second category. It is not so much 'Christian praxis' that he claims political theology deals with, but 'the praxis of Christians' (p. 313), and the difference is considerable.

The final chapter, 'The Hypothesis of Historical Materialism', begins to spell out Fierro's view of the direction of political theology. His avowed purpose is not as he says to portray Marx as a Christian in disguise (a two-page hatchet-job on Miranda about this is well worth a read – pp. 373-4), but to ask what kind of faith is possible once the Marxist base-structure model of society is accepted. In other words, not 'Can a Christian be a Marxist?' but 'Can one be a Christian nowadays?'

Much of the answer comes from a discussion of Marxist thinking, partly taken from chapter 3. There Fierro lined up political theology in the space of encounter between a critical Marxism and a science that appreciated its social conditioning: here he claims that within Marxism material base and ideological superstructure are seen increasingly as acting on each other rather than the process being only one-way.⁵ Theology therefore as part of the superstructure has some part to play in the transformation of society.

But it is not that simple, because as has been pointed out throughout the book, theology contains no imperatives but only suggestion: it is not announcing the Christian view but the view of Christians. And Christians are not united: there is a theology for the reactionary as well as the revolutionary. Fierro is emphatic on this point: 'The God of the white overlord is not the same as the God of the Indian labourers (quoting Gutierrez) . . . our image of God is conditioned by our class outlook' (p. 385).⁶

In some ways this is not enough. In fact, it almost falls into a theological category that I am thinking of initiating, namely NGG: No Good at Grunwick. The fact is that when you are on the picket line and the SPG move in, it isn't much consolation to know that 'some particular image of God is operating in a liberative way to bring about greater justice' (p.410); you've got to be convinced that God actually *is on your side*, no matter how unlikely it may

⁵ Certainly at last year's Communist University of London the concept of 'relative autonomy' was being elaborated on by all and sundry; but it wasn't clear whether it allowed for ideology actually influencing the material base. (This uncertainty doubtless due to my inexperience of Marxist thinking: but also maybe to the state of the CP).

⁶ I think the degree of voluntarism that Fierro is prepared to allow is of some interest. It is apparent here from 'conditioned' (not 'determined' – and significantly this difference was noted in the ideology discussion on p. 244) and 'outlook' (not position) that choice is allowed in somewhere. It is part of the fairly open brand of Marxism adopted, and it would have been interesting to see how he would treat a more determinist variety; but since Fierro is not going to try to harmonize Christianity and Marxism I don't think this damages the discourse.

seem at the time.

However, it has to be admitted that God's patronage is claimed equally strongly by the other side, and with apparently equal sincerity. There is more than one way of coping with this unfortunate state of affairs. One is to out-argue the opposition on theological grounds alone, using Biblical and papal texts to stifle the enemy (But he seeking to justify himself . . .) This is the Miranda technique: e.g. there are two strands in the Old Testament, Exodus and Covenant, and since Exodus is the earlier it must be what God originally meant and therefore is a more proper authority for Christian action. QED.

However, I think we should be clear at this point that if class outlook conditions all theologies, it makes no sense to posit an 'essential Christianity' to which the left-wing view miraculously corresponds. To do so presupposes that Christian doctrine is somehow free from the cultural context in which it was formed, an idealist view to say the least. What is legitimate is to continue to develop a left-wing theology (first-stage discourse), but with the (second stage) realization that the opposition will likewise be justifying itself, and that it will not be defeated on exclusively theological grounds.⁷

We might also note that this position ties in with Fierro's view that there is no direct and immediate language about God. Theology is not positive, a knowledge of higher things, but 'a silence qualified by symbols' (p. 411). No one therefore can claim knowledge of God: what we have is images of God held by different groups of Christians, all of them in different ways flatfooting it down 'the rigorous pathway of negativity' (p. 411 again). Second-stage theological discourse concerns the relationships between those who find them attractive: it is a scientific process which mentions not God at all but only human beings who believe.

If theology does not give us straight political answers of itself, we have to take our direction from outside the Church (which might not be a bad idea anyway). Here Fierro is not impartial: 'one must choose the partisanship that is destined for universality' (p. 386), which on the Marxist hypothesis means that of the working-class. Note that this is not a jazzed-up version of 'Blessed are the poor', but the argument is still a theological one: that only an identification with the party destined to be the whole will eventually allow a language about God that is less sectarian. Those interested in a non-alienated theology should adopt the cause that will lead to a non-alienated society, since only that can guarantee their

⁷ This admittedly smacks of 'making the theology fit the crime', a standard charge against left-wing Christians. But at least there is not here the claim to be (re)discovering original Christianity, which is what makes such an exercise hypocritical. And if it is any consolation, your opponents are open to exactly the same accusation.

objective.

While stressing that praxis is and will be the validation or otherwise of theology, Fierro allows for theology itself having a part to play in the revolutionary process. This takes us back to the beginning of the chapter, where ideology was attributed some powers to change the material base of society. The value of altering language is highly rated (e.g. 'speech is praxis'), and although the amount of emphasis placed on this role makes me suspect idealism, it is clear that Fierro is on to something.

We must, however, remember the oppositions between Christianity and Marxism as well as the overlap. Fierro states their incompatibility and consciously makes no attempt to harmonize them. There are two points of opposition. First, because talk of God is negative and symbolic, it prevents any closing in of the world on itself, and criticizes any attempt to present a fixed and final system. It therefore challenges not only the idiocy of the right but also the atheism regarded as essential to Marxism.

So long as the profession of faith is accompanied by action against an unjust social order, this challenge is maintained. Note that this is not just a challenge to normal assumptions about Christians being idealistic and so forth, although that is the first barrier. There is also a more positive challenge to atheism, that comes back to a refusal to allow the closing-in of human life within a fixed system, and Christian symbols play an important part in this. Fierro is not clear how anyone might actually be converted by this fundamental approach, but this is the beginning of it.

The second relates to the claim that the establishment of socialism will remove all alienation and any notion of God will become superfluous. Some play is made here of the problem of death, not only because socialism is unlikely to remove the alienation it causes, but because even now the question has to be asked why people occasionally choose death freely on behalf of others. Which, as Miguez Bonino has pointed out, brings us to the question posed by the cross of Christ.

To his credit Fierro does not take this as proof of the superiority of Christianity over atheistic Marxism. Instead he makes it the subject of a wager in which the two are opposed. The issue is the resurrection of the dead: is it possible to be wholly free from alienation without it? And will it happen? Needless to say, no definite answer is possible, which is why the disagreement remains: it is left to history to make the decision between the two, and meanwhile there is plenty of room for co-operation between them.

Conclusion

As should be evident, any summary appraisal of this book is impossible: it covers a wide range of topics and contains not a

few passages of interest in their own right.⁸ But the central question that it aims to answer is what kind of theology is possible once a Marxist view is accepted; and what treatment of traditional symbols is compatible with a base-superstructure model of society.

Fierro to my mind succeeds and fails. The main success is in expressing how one can genuinely be inspired by tradition and use its symbols without giving them a moral and imperative status: this gives a different slant to words like 'continuity' and 'developing tradition' that I find attractive. The principal failures are not pointing out where there are tensions, but putting several differing ideas together and leaving it to the reader to sort them out; also in not showing how this kind of theology will actually *convert* the unbeliever any more than the dogmatic variety.

I would also point to some confusions of terminology. 'Ideology' is one instance; this goes more generally for the term 'theology' itself. You have to get this first- and second-stage distinction rather early on to follow the argument if the last two chapters, and even then it isn't always clear which one Fierro is referring to. It is a fairly new line of thinking, so there is some excuse; but some way should be found of clearing this up.

And finally, I am somewhat sceptical of Fierro's actual political experience. The illustrations given are normally either philosophical or out of touch: there is far too much recall of Marcuse, 1968 and ecologists for one to rate his own contribution very highly. If we are serious about theology coming out of praxis, then this should surely be borne in mind.⁹ Still, I think it is possible to avoid most of the ill effects of this, seeing the book if you like as a guide to criticizing theology rather than evolving it. And if that can be done, it can be seen as a very valuable contribution to theology.

⁸ I would point out particularly the passage on sects (pp. 135-8), in which Fierro recommends the positioning of 'the Christian community' midway between the responsibility of 'Church' and the dissenting power of 'sect'. It fits well with the general theme of the book, and a reviewer more interested in ecclesiology might have seen it as a central passage.

⁹ It is this observation that makes it seem quite relevant that the book comes out of Spain, and was written prior to 1974. And I think the same goes for the rather archaic view of much of Catholicism Fierro often seems to have: although he has read widely, you would expect the home country's practices to leave their mark.