

Title: An Analysis and Critique of Leonardo Boff's Theology and Social Ethics

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Digital full text:

http://www.calvin.edu/library/database/dissertations/Mattos_Luiz_Roberto_Franca_De.pdf

Call Number: BV4070 .C2842 2001 .M3

ABSTRACT

Leonardo Boff wrestles seriously with two challenging questions, namely, the reality of poverty in today's world and the contemporary ecological crisis. His overall project is to offer a Christian response to them. This project has three cornerstones: first, some Marxist axioms underlying his social analysis; second, an ontology appropriated from Teilhard de Chardin and strongly emphasizing the evolution of the universe; third, an epistemological suspicion of the human ability to know reality in itself.

While the importance of Boff's work cannot be denied, the theological price Boff pays for putting his priority on social ethics is considerable. His dismissal of classical theism, and his adoption of panentheism have serious implications which must be faced before one counts the advantages gained. As to his epistemology, Boff suggests that, given the human limits to grasp reality, one should be open to benefit from the dialogue with various and even opposing contributions. The principle which should rule one's understanding of reality, particularly on complex issues, is the principle of complementarity. Nevertheless, when it comes to socio-economic issues, Boff is willing to make universal moral claims which do not seem warranted by that epistemological commitment. A specific illustration showing how Boff could benefit from following his own recommendation is presented through the introduction of a dialogue-partner, Nicholas Wolterstorff, who has offered contributions on epistemology and social-ethics. Even if Boff is not willing to embrace Wolterstorff's commitment to realism in epistemology, consistency with the principle of complementarity demands that the former still has to consider the latter's revised neo-Calvinism in social ethics.

Wolterstorff, while nurturing Boff's concerns, does not depart from the Christian tradition by adopting panentheism. Nor does Wolterstorff appeal to different spiritual traditions in connection with his social ethics. Rather, he appeals to Christianity and argues that Christians have a fundamental role to play in the reform of the social order. His effort toward a synthesis between liberation theology and neo-Calvinism is a promising strategy to reach Boff's ultimate goal, that of human beings dwelling in peace in all their relationships, namely, with God, with self, with fellows, and with nature.