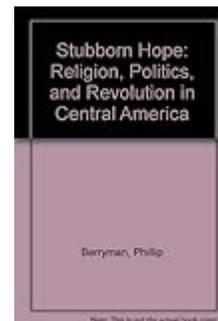


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Phillip Berryman. *Stubborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America.* S.I.: Orbis Books, 1994. \$13.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56584-136-9; \$14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57075-025-0.



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Chapter Headings: 1. Wager of Faith 2. Nicaragua: Vicissitudes of Revolution 3. El Salvador: God's Patience Exhausted 4. Guatemala: Persecuted but Not Defeated 5. Making Disciples: Evangelical Growth and What it Means 6. Acompañamiento: Standing by the People 7. Contending Visions 8. Shrinking Revolution, Stubborn Hope

Karl Marx claimed that religion is the opiate of the masses; Berryman's contention is that religion is the engine which impels Central America's history. "The war in Central America is a religious and theological war, a struggle between gods situated on both sides of the conflict" (p.206). The conflict is not portrayed as the religionists against the secularists nor even Roman Catholicism versus Protestantism, rather it is the "powerful (who) seek to prevent God's realm from arriving... (and) the poor (who) have discovered that 'the God of Western Christian Society was not the God of Jesus, but rather an idol of the Empire'" (pp.205-206).

Berryman's Theology of Liberation presuppositions dictate the usual protagonists and antagonists within this postmodernist historical narrative. [1] Those who work for "justice for the poor" are to be revered for bringing in "God's realm;" whereas, anyone (including poor church people) who does not work for the revolutionary, utopian "social justice" by thwarting the influence

of American capitalism, opposing American government intervention, and questioning the Roman Catholic Church's hierarchical ordering is to be condemned for promoting repression and promoting the "idol of the Empire."

Berryman's stated purpose is presented in a catchy introduction which is neatly packaged by a reference to that introduction toward the end of the text. "One day in Guatemala during that brief season when revolutionary change seemed on the horizon I had a kind of flash: When the change comes here an Indian - maybe an Indian woman - will sit on the junta." (p.3). "This book has been about what happened to that dream [about the Indian woman], and how church people were involved in the struggles as they have evolved since then" (p.219). Berryman then mentions the ascendancy of a former human rights activist to the Guatemalan presidency and the role played by Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu (an Indian woman) who has countered the activities of the Guatemalan military.

Amidst thinly-veiled ontological and epistemological assumptions based on the theology of liberation, overt sympathies for the FSLN (Nicaraguan Sandinistas) and the FMLN (Salvadoran Marxists), and his personal commitment to revolutionary praxis, Berryman presents a highly subjective, but nevertheless significant, overview

of the pivotal role of religion in the recent history of three Central American countries: Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

“Wager of Faith” emphasizes key developments in Central America during the 1940s-1980s. Foci include, but aren’t limited to: changes within Roman Catholicism (Vatican II, Medellin conference), the affects of the Central American Common Market, influences of Protestant missionaries, and the intervention of the United States government in the activities of the dictatorships. The latter part of the chapter presents a brief overview of the history of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua since the 1950s. Highlights include: the installation and assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador and the activities which preceded Somoza’s fall from power on July 19, 1979 in Nicaragua. This chapter’s all-too-brief overview of the backgrounds of these three countries either assumes that the reader needs no more detail than this to understand the ensuing events, the reader already knows the history, or that the reader would care little about it. Few suggested readings are offered to supplement the brevity of the historical overview.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four are updates of what has happened in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, respectively, since the mid-to-late 1970s. Emphasis is placed on the role Roman Catholic clergy (those for and against revolution) and on narratives of those individuals and groups with whom the author implies he had personal interactions.

The chapter on Nicaragua emphasizes the overthrow of Somoza, the rise of the Sandinista (FSLN) government and the dethroning of the Sandinistas in 1990 by UNO. Indictments are pronounced against the Vatican, the Reagan-Bush administrations, the Contras, and Bishop Obando y Bravo for bringing about the 1990 demise of the FSLN. The FSLN, and Daniel Ortega specifically, are portrayed as well-meaning, if maybe a bit naive and inexperienced, deeply-religious people who were misunderstood by conservative Catholics and evangelicals, maligned by the press, and directly opposed by the U.S. Government. Berryman is careful to note Daniel Ortega’s involvement in religious activities and refers to several incidents in which Nicaraguans’ perceive Ortega as a holyman. Bishop Obando and the members of the “Contras,” though, are depicted as lackeys of the American government who are willing to lie, deceive, kill, maim, and rape in order to disrupt the Sandinista utopia. No mention is made of the religious activities or convictions of the members or the leaders of the “Contras.” Berryman em-

ploy a genre of writing typical of Central American revolutionary sympathizers: oppositional groups are objectified and demonized through multiple narratives about self-sacrificing, well-intentioned revolutionary supporters who are martyred.

Berryman continues this genre of revolutionary APOLOGIA in the chapters about El Salvador and Guatemala. The chapter on El Salvador details the life of Oscar Romero as leader of the Salvadoran Roman Church, his assassination, the ensuing activities of his successor, and activities by the FMLN and others who worked for the unsuccessful overthrow of the Salvadoran government. Similar emphasis is placed on the activities of Roman Catholic clergy in the attempted overthrow of Guatemala’s government. The antagonists in Guatemala are given an additional characteristic: they are Protestant, or Protestant-influenced, dupes of the American government and American capitalism.

In “Making Disciples” Berryman combines the results of Church pollsters along with personal interviews and observations to understand the rapid Protestant evangelization of these countries which have had a long-standing cultural alignment with Roman Catholicism. Berryman interviews several pastors and members of rapidly-growing evangelical groups, describes typical worship services and intersperses these descriptions with data from church-growth pollsters. Berryman denounces the so-called “inflated figures” concerning the increase of Protestants within Central American countries but is quick to acknowledge the depth and permanence of the Protestant increases. Berryman offers keen insight into the multiplicity of forces which attract non-believers and Catholics to the folds of the neopentecostals, charismatics, and conservative evangelicals. The final section of this chapter describes the increased evangelical-like activities and the growing influence of the Roman Catholic charismatic renewal movement.

This chapter highlights, unwittingly, the degree of the Roman Catholic disdain for the rising Protestantization of the Ladinos and Indians. Protestant pastors and members of neopentecostal and charismatic groups are routinely depicted as poorly trained, lacking the cognitive abilities of the Roman priests, numb to social injustices and more easily duped by televangelist hype. Special disdain is directed at North American televangelists Pat Robertson’s “Proyecto Luz” and Jimmy Swaggart’s last Central American revival tour because of their cultural insensitivity and ignorance of Central American lifestyles.

“Acompanamiento: Standing by the People” returns to the personal narratives and heightened desire for self-justification of previous chapters. This chapter presents several vignettes from the lives of several priests, nuns, lay workers, and members of base communities who gave their lives for “the peoples movement.” Revolutionary activities by Roman Catholics are downplayed while idealistic dreams, “ministry” to revolutionary groups, and abuses by government troops are emphasized. Berryman contends that the main concern of Roman Catholic clergy and lay workers was to “accompany” the poor and disenfranchised. Any social/revolutionary activities are presented as justified reactions to human suffering.

“Contending Visions” delineates Berryman’s distinctions between conservative theologies/groups which emphasize traditional Western Christianity and the radical theology/groups which emphasize “social justice” through a “preferential option for the poor.” Berryman cites Kenneth Mahler in order to contend that the story of the church “(Is) two stories, ... divided between those involved in radical change and those who are resisting - for different reasons” (p. 201). Berryman’s reaction to those who view humanity’s basic problems as spiritual, rather than as a lack of social justice, is to accuse them of “not really understand(ing) the questions” (p.208) and of having a theology which consisted of “a kind of mental astrodome protecting its members from actually confronting such questions” (209).

Berryman’s disdain is consistent. He indicts both Protestants and Roman Catholics who maintain a conservative theology and praises both Protestants and Roman Catholics who place “social justice” as their basis for Biblical hermeneutics. Nevertheless, Berryman contends that there is change on both ends of the theological-political activist spectrum. The move, as per Berryman, is toward the center - theological conservatives who admit to social responsibilities and radical theologians who admit their lack of theological consistency.

In “Shrinking Revolution, Stubborn Hope” Berryman acknowledges that several goals of the revolutionaries have been achieved through a market economy, a growing Protestantization of religious activities and as a result of the decline in revolutionary activities. First, Central America has received greater worldwide attention and acclaim because of the activities during the 1980s. This distinctiveness is currently being lost as these countries become “normal” Latin American countries once more. Second, the freemarket emphasis has stabilized previously fluctuating economies and increased their invest-

ment attractiveness. This stabilization, claims Berryman, has only come about by placing an undue economic burden on the poor - increasing the gap between rich and poor. Third, there is a growing democratization with an increased representation for indigenous people and a decrease in military dictatorships. Berryman doesn’t want to concede that American market and democratization forces have brought about the utopia desired by socialist revolutionaries but he concedes that several of the desires for economic/political reform have been achieved through non-revolutionary activities. Of note were the 1993 activities in Guatemala “A human rights advocate was now president (Ramiro de Leon) and the once all-powerful military was being constrained by an Indian woman (Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu)” (p.237).

Berryman’s text is consistent with most Orbis publications: it does not adhere to academic guidelines for evidence (use of multiple sources for supporting evidence, validation of sources, direct endnoting or footnoting, and responding to counter evidence/positions), it is predisposed to advocacy and self-justification. It is not always clear where Berryman’s personal pronouncements end and his supported observations begin. As an historical text, Berryman’s work should be consumed with an understanding that its emphasis is on the passionate narrative and not necessarily on presenting sound, well-supported claims in order to convince a critical reader of the narrative fidelity or the verity of the judgments.

Students without much exposure to recent Central American history will find an accessible overview of recent historical events from a perspective which major media outlets tend to ignore. Researchers of contemporary Latin America will find that this book offers glimpses of possible reference material. An example of this is Berryman claim that “Researchers later counted 6,500 items dealing with religion in the three daily papers during the first three and a half years of the (Nicaraguan) revolution” (p.29). Only a vague reference to ENVIO magazine is given in support.

The greatest benefit of this text, in this reviewer’s opinion, is the acknowledgement of the integral role of religion in the sociopolitical activities in Central America. Berryman, to his credit, does not presume a false church-state dichotomy and for this and his continued dedication to a small, but vitally important, peninsula called Central America he is to be commended.

ENDNOTES

[1] Note the heated discussion generated on H-LatAm in February 1995 about the effects of postmodernism on the study of history and the methods used to understand historical events.

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