Theology of Promise: The Dynamics of Self-Reliance *By C.S. Banana.* Harare, College Press, 1982, 156 pp., Z$4.25.

This book by the Revd Canaan Banana challenges the Church, in the words of the Foreword which has been written by the Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe, 'to identify itself with the cause of social justice, equality and the development of the poor . . . through joint purposeful action with the state'. Its central theme, expressed in one way and another throughout the book, is that 'Christianity is Socialism'. It is argued with vigour, conviction and a wide range of example. It is clearly of considerable importance that the author is, in fact, the President of Zimbabwe. Neither he, nor his readers, can possibly be forgetful of that fact. He is at once a recognized minister of the Church and the formal head of the State. So any call for 'joint purposeful action' of Church and State in a book written by him clearly carries a special weight. Nevertheless he does not write as president. It is his personal approach which he is putting forward here and it is to be reviewed as such.

The sources of Banana's thought are explicitly Marxist socialist upon the one hand, Christian upon the other. The Marxism, however, is much modified by Zimbabwean experience. Equally, the Christian tradition here represented is a special one, that of liberation theology and Black theology—the theological thinking of Assmann, Fierro, Cone and Segundo. Despite a good deal of criticism of academic theology, it is still in large part two essentially academic, indeed literary, traditions which are coming together here; yet both traditions are profoundly concerned with *praxis*. Both Christianity and Socialism are concerned to change the world rather than to understand it; but practitioners of both know that it is not possible to change very much unless one understands a good deal.

There has been little liberation theology written in Africa hitherto, at least north of the Limpopo, and Banana's contribution to it both now and in his earlier book *The Gospel according to the Ghetto* will be widely welcomed. It remains, it can be argued, a selective approach to Christianity, to the gospels, indeed to Christ himself. All theologies are, however, necessarily selective. It is no condemnation to say that this quite short book is selective too. It is focused on an exceedingly important aspect of the Christian message; it is relevant and practical in purpose; it is forceful in it appeal. That is surely sufficient. For Banana the most basic Christian commitment is to justice, the revolutionary struggle for a better world, the building up of an equitable society. Christ challenged the powerful and the oppressive, but too often the Church has become instead a part of a system of oppression and privilege. Banana's theology is explicitly a theology of revolution. The Church he wants is a 'Proletarian Church'. He believes that the true Christian should be committed to a ceaseless struggle for socialism and against neo-colonialism.

For many people Banana's message must be an irrelevant one because they do not believe in Christianity—or any religion. Such people would, of course, include, Marx, Engels, Lenin and all old-fashioned Marxists. For them it is a pointless attempt to salvage religion in a secular age and within a Marxist context where it can have no abiding home. For many Christians, on the other hand, the traditional Christian concern for the spiritual rather than the material, for another world rather than this one, the belief that original sin is pervasive in every human society and must make every vision of Banana's type essentially utopian, all this remains Christianity's true message. For them liberation theology is too one-sided

in its use of scripture. The traditional church was wrong in some things but its basic message was not as misleading as Banana would have it.

Personally I write as one who belongs to neither of these two groups but who shares the author's basic stance and does believe that Christianity is, or should be, far more 'materialist' and this-worldly than has often seemed to be the case. If I still want to offer some criticism it is from a position of considerable underlying agreement. The great danger with liberation theology is over-simplification: the past is blackened, the Marxist analysis accepted uncritically, the post-revolutionary situation idealized.

'Since the great revolutions man has come to realize that politics and daily life go together' (p. 41). Is this not a progressive realization which goes back at least as far as ancient Greece? The generalizations that one reads here about something called 'western culture' or 'western capitalist society' do not commend the author's sense of cultural understanding. We read, for instance, that 'in western capitalist society . . . personal critical insight and alertness is never encouraged' (p. 48), or 'western culture . . . perceives man as naturally deformed, basically sinful' (p. 47) or again that 'in most western societies' political awareness 'is completely neglected. The system is designed in such a way that the public remain completely unconscious of and alienated from the political and decision-making processes' (p. 42). Such assertions are so far from the reality that they can throw doubt upon the reliability of the author in his wider assessment of the contemporary world.

'To be married to patterns of the past is all that foreign ideologies intend to do by imposing their own solutions on us' (p. 84). I am not sure that an 'ideology' can *intend* anything, but if this warning is true, why does it not apply to Marxism, which is certainly a 'foreign ideology' devised by a gentleman living in London over one hundred years ago and later developed by various other Europeans? Why is this one expression of European intellectual history to be treated so entirely differently from all the rest?

The principal weakness of Christianity in the recent past was, as I see it, that 'the kingdom of God' came far too close to being identified with a certain temporary pattern of Western power and civilization. The danger that I sense in this book is a strangely comparable one: to identify God's kingdom with a certain post-revolutionary state based upon a particular historic ideology. Liberation theology needs to stand free of every state and, ultimately, every ideology in a stance of prophetic independence. Banana's message seems near to being that in post-revolutionary Zimbabwe, and a few other comparable countries, salvation has as good as arrived. He takes the text of Luke 7: 10–23 and adapts it to here and now in a way that is genuinely moving: 'Go back and tell your masters in Europe and the United States what you have seen and heard: land is given to peasants . . . the sick are looked after and the ignorant are educated; co-operatives are formed . . . the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent away empty' (p. 119).

Personally, I can recognize that picture in post-independence Zimbabwe without difficulty. So many good things have happened. It is indeed exciting. But the task of the prophet is less to underline the failings of the past than to point a finger at the present, to cry out that the hungry are very much still with us, that the rich are doing pretty well, that many a squatter would not recognize Banana's picture at all. There are, of course, plenty of complex reasons why the new Jerusalem has not yet arrived, but then there always were, and one of the reasons is that old-fashioned Christian one labelled 'original sin': it continues to thrive even in

post-revolutionary society. Denying it will not help matters. A book published in 1982, only three years after the coming of Independence, may legitimately be concerned more with the castigation of the past than with the moral ambiguity of the on-going struggle. Nevertheless it is the latter that now matters and, in a way, the author seems too confidently sure that in an avowedly socialist society all manner of things will be well to be, for this reviewer at least, a wholly safe guide for tomorrow's Christian.

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