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Tabb's "Churches in Struggle: Liberation Theologies and Social Change in North America" - Book Review

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The review of *Churches in Struggle* for OPREE will be done exclusively from the perspective of OPREE's interest in the religious situation of Eastern Europe. Twenty-five essays, many of which were originally published in diverse journals, including a number of them in the Marxist journal *The Monthly Review*, were ably edited by William Tabb who wrote both a helpful introduction to the entire volume and shorter interpretative pieces to each of the five parts of the book. The five parts are: I. Theologies of Liberation, II. Reclaiming the Christian Message for the North American Churches, III. Marxism and Religion, IV. Theology Rooted in the Community, and V. Political Activism and the Mission of the Church. The original stimulus was to put together a book on "religion and the left" but the project developed into a multi-author attempt to introduce "the religious left to the secular left, and ... to overcome the suspicion and even hostility which exists between two groups of people who should be allies . .." (p. xvi) but even those who belong to neither category can profit from the book. The essays in the book are of uneven quality, which is not entirely due to the fact that some of the essays were written by some well-known authors and others by obscure authors. Rather surprisingly the less well-known authors wrote, by and large, better essays than the well-known did. I found the essays by Robert MacAfee Brown, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Marc Ellis, Charles Yerkes, Donald Dayton, Gayraud Wilmore, Norman Fong, William Tabb, and Sheila Collins informative and challenging. Disappointing were essays by James Cone, Beverly W. Harrison, Norman Gottwald, Dorothee Sölle, Mary Magdoff and Paul Sweezy, Cornel West, and Gil Dawes. The others I found satisfactory. Somewhat annoying was the insistence of a few authors that serious analysis is needed since presumably no one from among those whom they critiqued has engaged in serious analysis, only to find serious analysis almost entirely missing in their own piece (notably Beverly Harrison and Norman Gottwald, perhaps not surprisingly, because each of their essays is only 10 pages long, which is hardly enough for such a task!).

What troubled me most was that a book which wants to encourage interaction between religion and socialism has practically no reference to situations where such interaction has already taken place. The authors all seem to be saying that this interaction is to take
place in the future, they being pioneers of such interaction for which there is seemingly no precedent except in Latin America. References to countries in which socialism and religion co-exist are all but missing. Only a few authors explicitly mention the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe only to dismiss them as totalitarian and tragic rather than socialist. (E.g., Philip Berryman in "How Christians Become Socialist" brushes away the issue in one sentence suggesting on p. 161 that fear of Marxism is due partially to the experience of the church under Marxist regimes. Magdoff and Sweezy devote two paragraphs on pp. 195-96 to handling of religion in Russia declaring it "a one-sided view."

It strikes me as unforgivable negligence on the part of scholars who wish to be taken seriously to dismiss the history of the encounter of institutionalized Marxism with religion in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Likewise it is arrogant to presume that they would know how to handle this encounter differently when some of the finest Marxist and Christian minds in Eastern Europe failed to come up with very constructive solutions. It is presumptuous that some isolated scholars or clergy believe they could arrange relations better than it happened in diverse countries where the entire state and church apparatus during decades of work did not resolve the dilemma creatively.

There is another major folly associated with the work of a number of these well-meaning writers. Some of them dream of the radical reworking of U.S. society and the capitalist system which they indict for injustice, exploitation, imperialism, and other assorted evils. They argue for the need for social change; some express hope that the churches can affect it. But none say concretely how this may be accomplished. Since the electoral process and the approach of both liberal or conservative theologians is criticized in favor of a radical theological approach, one is left wondering how they envision the toppling of the mighty and stable economic apparatus of the superpower which is the United States. Most of them resort to cliches about the "ruling class" versus the masses rather than discerning the more accurate notion of a dominant class which has successfully enlisted general support due to people's confidence in political democracy. In my opinion, this mistaken Marxian analysis leads to error on how to accomplish social change in the U.S. After all, those who think that communities of the base and the aspirations of the poor can threaten the U.S. regime as they do to regimes in Latin America, must, indeed, be the victims of an illusion.

So, do I recommend the book? Yes, but with mixed feelings. The appeals and aspirations are sometimes noble and the intentions good.
Some of the essays provide descriptions of little known religious and social experiences, but the book is not high on my list of significant works.

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