

Book review

Tim Noble, **Liberation against Entitlement: Conflicting Theologies of Grace and Clashing Populisms**. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022, 262 p.

Pickwick Publications have recently released a study in the field of theology which focuses on current social and political issues, in particular the experience of division. The author is Tim Noble, a British Catholic theologian living and teaching predominantly in Prague. As in his previous works Noble draws again on his broad knowledge of Latin American liberation theology which forms the main theological framework. Familiarity with the Brazilian and Czech political contexts give him the opportunity to make an unexpected but highly interesting comparison.

The book aspires “to return to the idea of a search for an all-encompassing unity, both on the personal level (the *Gemüt* that Marx speaks of) and on the communal level (here I shall speak more of *shalom*)” (p. 2). Tim Noble identifies two competing political positions, not easily reducible to “right-left” or “conservative-liberal”. Only one of them promotes the above mentioned unity and harmony for the whole human community. The other position serves for individual gains, although the individual can be seen as a group, such as a nation. The author argues that both political positions are backed by different theologies, in particular when it comes to the question of grace. He calls the first type a theology of liberation while the second type is a theology of entitlement. The book leaves no doubt which theology is truly Christian. It unambiguously shows how theologies of entitlement are fundamentally and necessarily idolatrous. Grounded in liberation theology Noble argues that “God does take sides, God has made an irrevocable option for the poor” (p. 8).

The argument of the book develops in seven chapters. The first chapter introduces the causes and nature of social division successively in Brazil and the Czech Republic. The author reveals reasons behind the sense of despair in both countries, desire for fast solutions, and the role religion plays in it. While the first chapter tells the stories, the second one is more theoretical. It brings a particular interpretation of populism using the insights of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Key to Noble’s interpretation is the concept of hegemony: a dominating explanation of the particular contingent relationality. All forms of social organization are hegemonic. Hegemony is closely tied

to the construction of a people. Noble argues that there always is a need to be met that brings people together. A conflict occurs when a partial need or group claims universality. Much more on political theory can be found in this chapter; ultimately, however, Noble aims to show that liberation and entitlement as “theological visions are essentially competing hegemonies in the sense that Laclau and Mouffe use the term” (p. 73). Is there some place for reconciliation and can the competing hegemonies lead to something positive? At this point Noble explicitly turns to the theology of grace.

Grace as entitlement is subject to criticism in chapter three. The author presents in detail prosperity theology and shows its persuasiveness as well as shortcomings. Inherent in this theology is a certain understanding of sacrifice which Noble, using the work of one of its founding fathers, Kenneth Hagin, claims to be in risk of idolatry. A clear manifestation of this practice is tithing: “God is made into at best a banker and at worst a servant, who must do what he is paid to by the believer” (p. 109). The opposite of this transactional “human investment” view of grace is liberation from dis-grace which Noble develops in chapter four. He follows a personalist track from Nikolai Berdyaev and Emmanuel Mounier to Juan Luis Segundo and other Latin American liberation theologians. The move from the ontological to the phenomenological enables one to argue for a social dimension of grace and identify its absence as social sin. A vision of grace is beautifully captured in a parable of a group of people travelling on a train by Leonardo Boff. Noble concludes that “there are a number of human reactions to being enclosed within the [train of the] grace of God, ranging from welcome, through acceptance, to indifference, or attempted rejection” (p. 137). The chapter culminates in a passage on grace and freedom. The reader encounters the broadly personalist approach which assures that “there is no freedom without relationship, and there are no relationships without freedom” (p. 140). This leads the author to this observation, “The question is not whether there is a hegemonic Christian discourse, but over which one is the most faithful to the Good News” (p. 142). In the following two chapters Noble finds inspiration for discernment in the pontificate of Pope Francis.

Chapter five situates Francis’s theology within the Argentinean and Latin American context. Noble pays special attention to the four principles that already appeared in the Pope’s inaugural exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), but goes more deeply into the history of his theological maturation. Both Francis’s theology of the people and the four principles serve Noble well

to show the problem of theologies of entitlement and to promote theologies of responsibility and service. The Pope shares with liberation theologians the conviction that “the poor are not poor because of some natural law or because God wants them to be poor: the poor are poor because they are made poor” (p. 159). In other words, and here Noble believes we cannot do without hegemonic language, “systems are set up in such a way that some are rich and many more are poor; and these same systems lead to the dehumanization of the poor (and ultimately of the rich)” (p. 159). It is the task of the Church to be with the poor and to refuse the existing status quo. Moreover, Noble recalls Guardini with his teaching on *Gegensatzlehre* as the pope’s key source of inspiration. Francis’s reading of Guardini rejects a synthesis of the opposing views and finding some kind of “centrist” position. It allows for the coexistence of both poles viewed as complementary. The Pope sees the diversity of perspectives to be appreciated, for example, in the diversity of cultures.

The next chapter deals with Francis’s encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (2020) which appeared when Noble was about halfway through writing the book and which treats of much the same content (cf. p. vii). It is especially in this chapter where Noble provides illuminating comparisons of translations; his linguistic erudition allows him to do so. Noble contrasts theologies of entitlement with the Pope’s idea that “Christian values can never be defended by behavior that runs contrary to fundamental Christian beliefs” (p. 185). The detailed analysis of *Fratelli tutti* is conducted in dialogue with the theoretical basis developed in previous chapters. It culminates in the section on the role of religion in the construction of shalom. Here Noble recalls Francis’s idea that even though religion is not to be mixed with politics, neither can religious ministers forget “the political dimension of life itself” (p. 212, FT 276). It means making choices based on the criterion of the common good and a concern for integral human development. Commenting on the encyclical’s reference to Charles de Foucauld, Noble concludes, well in line with Christian social teaching as well as liberation theology, that “to be brother or sister of all means first to become brother or sister to the least. The universal is always incarnated in the particular” (p. 213).

In the final chapter the author focuses on the Spirit who gives life, transforms, and liberates. There are two points which illustrate well the overall approach of the author. Reflecting on the interference of religion in politics Noble argues that eschatological overlap allows Christian discourse to see

all political positions as penultimate. In this sense the purpose of politics is not to win the political struggle, but to promote unity. “Political hegemonic discourses will ultimately be judged according to how far they enable or hinder the journey towards that union” (p. 225). Besides, the author believes in small stories rather than grand narratives. Small stories are less inclined to hegemony. As a form of narrative knowledge they discern the presence of God in the world without referring to an overarching discourse that is susceptible to proof or falsification. “The common good is self-legitimizing, through a series of small stories that build up the good of all” (p. 226).

The book contains an extensive bibliography. Conveniently, it includes also a detailed index. As regards factual reliability of the book, I came across confusing information on the membership of the Communist Party in the Czech Republic/Czechoslovakia: seven million people given by the text (p. 61) does not correspond to the membership in 1989 which was slightly over 1.5 million. Perhaps the author meant membership for the entire duration of the party (1921–1990)? Apart from this rather minor detail, the book is generally very clear and well-supported by sources.

The nature of works reflecting specific contexts and events inevitably includes obsolescence from the moment the book reaches the reader. Thus, Tim Noble’s publication could not include Lula’s return to the Brazilian presidency. More importantly, it could not take into account in its migration considerations Ukrainians fleeing the attack by Putin’s Russia after 24 February 2022. It can be presumed that these and other events would rather confirm Noble’s analysis, worries and hopes. While it is true that a professional study must be based on facts that have already taken place, its contribution can be seen in helping us to orient ourselves theologically to the events that are taking place. And for that we can be grateful for Tim Noble’s book.

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