

Lene Sjørup, Pinochets Gud og de fattiges teologiske modstand, Museum Tusulanums forlag, Københavns universitet 2009.

Lene Sjørup's latest publication, *Pinochets Gud og de fattiges teologiske modstand* (Pinochet's God and the Theological Opposition of the Poor), analyses the role that the Christian faith – both Catholic and Protestant – has played in the development and self-esteem of 34 Chilean women who were interviewed by Sjørup between 1991 and 1998. This study pursues the line of research of this Danish pastor and scholar, who in the past twenty-five years has published a number of works on subjects related, i.a., to Liberation Theology, Feminist Theology and women's religious experiences.

The book revolves around four thematical axes, namely Nationalism, Liberation Theology, Pentecostalism and Feminist Theology, the aim being to place all of these in their historic and theological contexts and to focus on how matters such as opposition, opponents and reconciliation are viewed. Three theoretical angles are adopted: nationalism, gender and reconciliation. As regards methodology, Sjørup outlines a process beginning with diary entries made during her field studies, followed by interviews, analyses and finally theoretical considerations.

Following the introductory section, Sjørup discusses Pinochet's nationalistic theology, particularly his conviction of having been chosen by God for the mission of saving the country. The days surrounding the *coup* on 11 September 1973 are recounted, after which Sjørup explains the assumption of the Chilean military forces, led by Pinochet, that they were fighting a war of religion against "materialistic atheists". Pinochet's discourse, Sjørup argues, was more a religious than a political one in that it was full of soteriological aspects, one of which was that the people of Chile had begged the armed forces to save the nation, *la patria*. Thus, the mission of the military was one of salvation as the word is understood in religious contexts. Pinochet spoke of the threat against the spiritual and moral values of the nation making himself the spokesman of *todos nosotros los chilenos* ("all we Chileans") as a true patriarch and patriot. Opponents were excluded as "non-Chileans" and referred to as enemies, assailants, terrorists etc.

According to Sjørup, three categories of citizens designated by Pinochet had the right moral qualities to resist the onslaught; these were the

armed forces, women and youth. The armed forces led over the others as they had courage and a spirit of sacrifice, but women were also held in high esteem as they were considered to keep families together by defending spiritual values and tradition. As regards youth, only young people who opposed communism and decadence were included. Pinochet thus constituted a family-like image of value defenders in which man represented the armed forces, woman the nation and their offspring the youth of Chile. Embedded in a discourse of nationalistic and militarised theology, they were to pursue warfare against the assailants by all and any means.

How did this type of discourse communicate with the Christian discourse of the Catholic and Evangelical churches? Sjörup briefly outlines the development of Latin American Liberation Theology, which included some Marxist-inspired organizations of priests and religious, and the growth of Protestant churches, particularly the Pentecostal churches, suggesting that a variety of theological tendencies co-existed until Pinochet took power. At that time, conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy welcomed the *coup* while radical priests, religious and lay people who did not comply were forced to work underground. The Protestant churches were the first to denounce the violence and injustices of Pinochet's governance. It was only years after the *coup* that the Catholic Church began to oppose some of his actions.

Since the rhetoric of Pinochet was based on nationalist and religious assumptions, and since all who opposed his regime were seen as enemies of the nation, it follows that women who belonged to oppositional groups were particularly exposed to persecution. Sjörup asserts that "women who belonged to the enemy" were used as targets to break down entire structures of opposition. By torturing them mentally and physically (*i.e.* sexually), Pinochet's armed forces not only shattered these women's sense of dignity and identity, they also aimed to break down the masculinity of their men and to destroy their families. As antitheses to these oppositional women the regime presented submissive, obedient and silent role models such as the Virgin Mary and the young Carmelite nun, Teresa de los Andes, whose canonization in 1993, according to Sjörup, was explicitly carried through in order to enhance the nationalistic religious discourse and values of Pinochet.

Having presented this ideological and historical background, Sjörup exhibits the results of her field studies, *i.e.* the interviews with 34 Chilean women. A remarkable number of these women, the vast majority in fact, voice negative experiences of Catholic religious belief and practices. They speak of a God to be feared, an uncompassionate and authoritarian God

ever ready to punish them for their shortcomings, the very opposite of a merciful, loving and divine saviour. As many of these women eventually joined Pentecostal churches, their image of God changed radically. They felt comforted and strengthened by their emotional experiences of a pardoning and caring God and they ascended socially thanks to the way of life that they adopted. Although empowered by the Pentecostal communities to which they belonged, they never spoke of Pinochet's dictatorship, this being due, says Sjörup, to some of the churches' reluctance to have politically or intellectually active members in their communities.

The theological opposition to the regime was therefore to be found among the members of base communities, most of which worked underground as they subscribed to Liberation Theology. These basic communities, which consisted of men and women belonging to the clergy and the laity, focused on social matters, on poverty, on hands-on help to the needy and persecuted. Sjörup maintains that the women who were inspired by Liberation Theology opposed both the masculine, authoritarian image of God proposed by the regime and the individual religiosity of Pentecostalism, thus creating a new theology that aimed at settling accounts with gender issues within theological discourses.

Sjörup concludes her study with a chapter that discusses the attempts to reconcile Chileans following Pinochet's dictatorship. Again, a difference is perceived between Pentecostal and Liberation Theology women, the former stressing the importance of reconciliation through prayer and the church's work among the needy, the latter advocating that sacrifice is central to the efforts to achieve justice on a broader scale.

The last part of Sjörup's book deals with her research methods. It would have been appropriate to place the methodological discussion within the introductory section instead of inserting it at the end of the book, partly because it throws light on how Sjörup did her research, and partly because it accounts for the apparent lack of a developed and connecting thought. Indeed, the theoretical angles are vague and treated in an arbitrary way. For instance, Sjörup explains regarding nationalistic theories that she began by studying Danish democracy only to discover that it was not compatible with Latin American reality, and that she therefore decided to focus her interest on Chilean military culture and its understanding of gender at a time when Pinochet's use of nationalistic religious rhetoric was in vogue. In other words, there is no systematic approach to nationalist phenomena as something typical of military dictatorships.

Nonetheless, Sjörup presents an interesting study of the political, social and religious dynamics of contemporary Chile. As feminist theology

to some extent is based on individual feelings, emotions and experiences, this book reveals the discourse of Chilean women, mainly within the poorer social classes, as they express the image they have or have had of God and their own self-image in a theological context. As such, it gives food for thought and for more profound research into ideological discourses, be they political, religious or both, in Latin America today.

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