FROM WASTELAND TO PROMISED LAND:
Liberation Theology for a Post-Marxist World

Review by Alanna Harizok

Robert V. Andelson and James M. Dawsey present a penetrating analysis of the root causes of poverty on earth, and extend astute theological insights through a veil that is rarely pierced. Unlike many who look to biblical precepts for solutions to 20th-century problems, Andelson and Dawsey have gone deeply to the source of perennial wisdom and come forth with precise and compelling recommendations for economic policy.

Although the marriage of Marxism and Christian activism was never sanctified by the majority of theologians and laymen in Latin America, the compassionate concern for the conditions of the poor voiced by liberation theologians has received laudable recognition throughout the world. Their movement pointed out that the dilemma of maldistribution of wealth is the Achilles’ heel of current capitalist arrangements. A political democracy cannot survive the divisiveness created by an economic aristocracy.

From Wasteland to Promised Land is infused with this same heartfelt urgency, but offers a true third-way approach by showing how wealth can be fairly distributed within a system of free-market rewards to human effort. Furthermore, the book is startling in its revelation that the increasing economic distress of the American lower and middle classes has the same fundamental cause as the plight of the Third World poor.

Underneath the veneer of market economics lies the old Roman land law of dominium - the legalization of title to land originally obtained by conquest and plunder. By juxtaposing biblical precepts with the current reality that massive amounts of the land and natural resources of the planet are “owned” by the few to the exclusion of the many, From Wasteland to Promised Land irrefutably concludes that solving the “land problem” is the next great challenge to democracy.

Andelson and Dawsey urge the implementation of a highly practical public finance policy which is based on the Judeo-Christian ethic of Koinonia - the spiritual perception that the land and material resources of this earth are to be understood as gifts of God to be carefully used for the benefit of all. A quote (from page 104):

Let those seeking genuine social uplift realize that it takes radical bedrock ethics - not mere poetic fluff - to reaffirm with all the strength that can be mustered the inspiring words from Psalm 24: “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.”

That the “economics of evil” can be redressed by developmental policies that merely increase the GNP is one of the great economic myths of our times. On the other hand, From Wasteland to Promised Land gives a number of encouraging examples of countries which have experienced both an internal regeneration of their economic base and a resultant fairer distribution of wealth. In all cases cited, economic justice in land has played a major role.

Another contribution of this book is to precisely show why Keynesian policies and pump-priming programs must be jettisoned in favor of economic arrangements truly worthy of an advanced democracy.

The policy approach described here will not end all human suffering - but if fully implemented, it can lead us to the promised land of material sufficiency for all. The attainment of this goal is within the grasp of the current world civilization. I must, however, offer one cautionary note to theologians and others who may be interested in this book. Make sure you are ready to take bold action - for once the essence of its message is grasped, there can be no further cause for delay.