

## *The Contemporary Theological Project*

# The Option for the Poor in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

Albert Nolan

‘This phrase [the option for the poor] burst upon the ecclesiastical scene only a few years ago. Since then, it has become the most controversial religious term since the Reformers’ cry, “salvation by faith alone”.’

These are the opening words of Donal Dorr’s recent book on the option for the poor and Vatican social teaching.<sup>2</sup> He is not exaggerating. I should say that the challenge to the church, to almost all our churches, represented by this term “option for the poor” goes far beyond anything envisaged by the Reformers. It challenges both Catholic and Protestant, and it challenges us in a very fundamental way.

Here, I should like to do little more than open up the debate about the option for the poor in South Africa. The question has been raised here and there in a variety of forms, mostly without the term “option for the poor”; but in South Africa there has been no systematic Christian practice based upon it and not much research and reflection around this controversial phrase. My intention, then, is to open up the specific approach implied in this new theological term for further research, reflection, debate and practice.

There is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding about the meaning of the phrase itself, and even a measure of deliberate distortion of its meaning. Hence, in the first place, it will be necessary to state quite clearly what we are talking about and even more importantly what we are not talking about. Then we shall have to give some account of how this new theological theme is grounded in the Bible. And finally, we must venture some suggestions about what it may mean in the struggle for liberation in South Africa today.

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2 D. Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, NY, 1983).