

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION II

AFTER A STUDY, however brief, of the marxist analysis, it becomes clear on every page of the writings of liberation theology how influential Marxism is. Owing to the unfamiliarity of this factor (at least to many of us in Europe), the aim of the previous article was primarily to provide the background. Ideally readers should go and read the sources for themselves. Here I intend to look at two areas: i) liberation theology as 'critical reflection on praxis' (Gutierrez), and ii) the specific manner of incorporating marxist theory.

What place does marxist analysis play in liberation theology?

i) Liberation theology joins with marxist theory in rejecting idealism, and in particular, its concept of truth as applied to christian faith. Bonino describes this aspect of idealism as follows:

There is an absolute christian truth, or christian principles, somehow enshrined in scripture and/or in the pronouncements of the Church. But then, there are more or less imperfect *applications* of that truth. This answer expresses what could be called the classical conception of the relationship between truth and practice. Truth belongs, for this view, to a world of truth, a universe complete in itself, which is copied or reproduced in 'correct' propositions, in a theory (namely, a contemplation of the universe) which corresponds to this truth. Then, in a second moment, as a later step, comes the application in a particular historical situation. Truth is therefore pre-existent to and independent of its historical effectiveness . . .

He then goes on to a criticism:

It is this conception of truth that has come to a crisis in the theology which we are discussing. When Assmann speaks of the rejection of 'any *logos* which is not the *logos* of a *praxis*', or Gutierrez writes about an 'epistemological split', they are not merely saying that truth must be applied, or even that truth is related to its application. They are saying, in fact, that there is no truth (sc. ascertainable human truth) outside or beyond the concrete historical events in which men are involved as agents. There is, therefore, no knowledge except in action itself, in the process of transforming the world through participation in history.¹

These theologians, therefore, take their stand within the tradition of the primacy of *praxis*, but they do so in the 'weak sense' described above (the

¹ Bonino, J. M.: *Revolutionary Theology comes of Age* (London, 1975), p 88.

mutual interaction and conditioning of action and theory), or in the 'intermediate sense' (taken on the level of a scientific but not a metaphysical theory in the way that evolutionary theory is adopted). For Gutierrez, in describing past views of theology which he characterizes as 'wisdom' (the Fathers) and as 'rational knowledge' (the scholastics, including the corruption of their method as mere exegesis of documents of the Church), affirms that the proper claims of these methods must play their part in theology. In other words, thinking has a creative role, but is never timeless and unconditioned. He is making the methodological point outlined above:² every interpretation of bible and tradition must be investigated in relation to the practice, the way of life, out of which it came:

Why is it, for instance, that the obvious political motifs and undertones in the life of Jesus have remained so hidden to liberal interpreters until very recently? Is this merely a regrettable oversight on the part of these scholars, or is it – mostly unconscious, to be sure – the expression of the liberal ideological distinction of levels or spheres which relegates religion to the area of subjectivity and individual privacy?³

The question of verifiability is no longer just a question of comparison of philosophical frameworks which 'make sense' of the world; it is a matter of comparison with meaningful analyses of human social living. For example, Billy Graham or Martin Luther King do not confront us with a system of ideas but as historical agents acting with certain effects which can be analysed by the tools of the social and political sciences. It is no longer a matter of what people say or think they believe (merely), but of what they *do*, and of identifying their 'ideological framework' from their *praxis*. Liberation theology, as a method, adopts as a sociological principle the primacy of practice over theory.

Gutierrez himself situates this method in the stream of modern theology as a whole (on which Marxism has had a considerable influence). He indicates the first vague attempts to 'discern the signs of the times' in Vatican II, and highlights the primacy of charity in the christian life. This enunciates in christian terms the primacy of life as a personal whole over thought in isolation, which appears in marxist analysis. There follow other elements: the shift from a tradition of 'idealist' pure contemplation as the model for all christians to the recognition of the contemplation in action of a genuine lay spirituality; also the development of the new theology of grace (the recognition of God's implicit self-communication in history), of christian anthropocentrism ('man is the measure of all things since God became man'), which is a point of convergence in christian-marxist dialogue. Here, too, comes the influence of Blondel's dynamic philosophy. And within all this, the influence

² Cf *The Way*, vol 17 (July, 1977), pp 219ff.

³ Bonino, *op. cit.*, p 91.

of explicit marxist thought. Gutierrez quotes the summary conclusion of Congar:

If the Church wishes to deal with the real questions of the modern world and to attempt to respond to them . . . instead of using only revelation and tradition as starting points, as classical theology has generally done, it must start with facts and questions derived from the world and from history.⁴

And he concludes:

'The hermeneutics of the kingdom of God', observed Schillebeeckx, 'consists especially in making the world a better place. Only in this way will I be able to discover what the kingdom of God means'. We have here a political hermeneutics of the gospel.⁵

It is here that the divergence from european theology occurs:

It is at this point that the theology of the most history-conscious european and american theologians seems to us to fail. They grant that faith emerges as a historical praxis. Moreover, they grant the political (i.e. public) character of this praxis. But then they want to remain at some neutral or intermediate level in which there is no need to opt for this or that concrete political praxis, i.e., to assume a particular analysis and a particular ideological projection. We have already seen that such an attempt is self-deceptive. The opposite position, which we adopt, brings with it a particular risk. Nobody will claim, in fact, that his analysis of social, political and economic reality is more than a rational exercise, open to revision, correction or rejection. It is in this sense that we incorporate the marxist analysis of society.⁶

The argument is, therefore, that to remain on the level of generality, of philosophical understanding of the world, is, in fact, to endorse the *status quo*, to accept the political system within which one lives without criticism (perhaps for good reasons). Hence there is need for a new style of tool, to be found in the sociological sciences. This leads us to the second point.

ii) Liberation theology incorporates marxist analysis specifically as a sociological tool. This we have seen stated by Bonino. He agrees that confusion is caused by the ambivalence of marxists themselves, who oscillate between dogmatic, atheistic theory and socio-political theory. Hence Christians react differently: some reject the marxist analysis even while taking up the cause of the oppressed, but these tend to end in frustration, lacking a specific method. Others accept marxist ideology and in effect abandon Christianity. But he has offered a third way, and in this context:

⁴ Gutierrez, G.: *A Theology of Liberation* (London, 1974), p 12.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 13.

⁶ Bonino, *op. cit.*, p 95.

The only legitimate question is therefore whether this analysis and this projection do in fact correspond to the facts of human history. If they do, or to the extent that they do, they become *the unavoidable historical mediation* of christian obedience.⁷

But what is the relation of this tool to faith?

Christian obedience, understood to be sure as a historical praxis, and therefore incarnate in a historical (rational, concrete) mediation, does, nevertheless, incorporate a dimension which, using christological language, can never be separated from but neither can it be confused with the historical mediation. In other terms, how are the original events (of salvation history) . . . determinative in this single synthetical fact that we call the historical praxis of a christian? If we are condemned to remain silent on this point, we are really resigning any attempt to speak of such praxis as *christian* obedience.⁸

Bonino is offering us, therefore, a model like the last group of models outlined above: a framework (sociological, this time) which, it is claimed, makes sense of the present experience of Latin Americans, in *open dialogue* with the christian sources. Like the second group of models, he insists that these sources are, in fact, both past and present, making one continuous whole, but stresses that the sources are not primarily conceptual, but practical; not ideas (from bible and dogmatic pronouncements), but the total christian way of life (christian 'obedience'), which the bible and tradition are already interpreting.

Finally, what does this use of marxist analysis mean in particular terms? It is clearly an application of a conflict theory of social relations (in the line of Aristotle, Hobbes, Weber) rather than of a consensus theory (in the steps of Plato, Rousseau, or Adam Smith). This seems an appropriate tool in the circumstances of 'institutionalized violence' and oppression. The analysis sees an increasing polarization leading to revolution under the organic dynamic force of human need. Since we are dealing with a framework of interpretation, we are not asking whether this is true or false, but whether it is a more or less adequate tool for interpreting, for making predictions and guiding action. Only constant observation and testing can prove whether it is so or not. But the question still remains as to *how* one should co-operate with this movement. If revolution there will be, there remains the question of violence, the question raised by Camilo Torres. We shall return to this.

A NEW VIEW OF MAN

This *first* part of this study has attempted to offer an explanatory background to the comparatively new phenomenon of liberation theology and to analyse the sense in which it claims to be a new method of doing theology.

⁷ Bonino, *op. cit.*, p 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*

In so far as it puts the emphasis on commitment and committed reflection, of interpretation, and hence uses sociological frameworks (principally the marxist), it is new and is making a vital contribution to theological method. As Gutierrez puts it:

Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology . . . (it) does not stop with reflection on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed.⁹

The second and main part of this study concerns the central ideas which make up the content of the theology of liberation. The focal point here is the claim to be contributing towards the making of a new man:

It is important to keep in mind that beyond – or rather, through – the struggle against misery, injustice, and exploitation, the goal is the *creation of a new man*. Vatican II has declared, ‘We are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by his responsibility towards his brothers and towards history’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 55). This aspiration to create a new man is the deepest motivation in the struggle which many have undertaken in Latin America.¹⁰

And if it be remarked that it is rather strange that a *theology* should be about man in the first instance, this is precisely the ‘copernican revolution’ which has been taking place in theology over a century and a half: the approach to God through man. To quote Barth again (although perhaps a little unfairly in this context), ‘Man is the measure of all things, since God became man’. And the whole of this section concerns the balance between overcoming an exaggerated *dualism* in the relationship of the gift of God (as grace) to our humanness, and maintaining a proper *duality* in their concrete union. The form this section takes is based on the outline of the ‘second group of methods’ referred to in my previous article:¹¹ first, to look at the interpretative framework used by liberation theology to make sense of the experience of twentieth century mankind (this is principally a sociological and only secondarily a philosophical tool); and then to examine how liberation theology uses this tool to interpret christian sources. This will entail taking up some of the notions already mentioned (e.g., the theology of grace) and exploring them and their consequences further.

*The modern framework: the centrality of man*¹²

It was Kant who likened his system of philosophy to a copernican revolu-

⁹ Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, p 15.

¹⁰ Gutierrez, p 146. Note the *practical* formulation of the goal.

¹¹ Cf *The Way*, vol 17 (July, 1977), p 220.

¹² Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, pp 27ff. The fullest treatment of the content of liberation theology is to be found in the five volumes of Segundo, J.L., *A Theology for the Artisan of a New*

tion, in that it called attention to the creative role of the human mind in the acquisition and ordering of knowledge, and jettisoned a view of the mind's role as merely passive. To the creativity of mind, Hegel contributed a further insight into process: the process or history of mind dialectically reaching its full potentiality. Beyond this point, we have seen already how Marx accepted the notion of the dialectical process, but rejected the idealism of Hegel for a socio-political interpretation of history. And as with all those who lived in the aftermath of the French Revolution, ultimate freedom figured prominently as the goal of history. Many seminal ideas from other sources, like darwinian evolution and freudian psychoanalysis of the unconscious, have helped to create the frameworks of modern thinking. But the creativity of man in society, within the process of history and an evolution towards freedom, marred by the contrary factors caused by the alienation of man from his world: these, for our purposes, are the main ideas which have permeated the fibres of the modern mind.

Liberation theology is deeply imbued with these concepts and develops its interpretative framework accordingly. Here, we can both recapitulate and expand. Starting from the situation of oppression, the initial driving conviction was that it is not possible to be a Christian in the latin-american situation without striving, with the oppressed, to become free and build a just and fully human society. Hence theology itself could not begin with the traditional model of a philosophically based understanding of the meaning of the *status quo* with subsequent 'pastoral' applications. It was the anguish of the circumstances which produced the further insight that, in fact, there never *could* be an abstract analysis detached from the dehumanizing situation. The 'idealist' philosophical model had to give way to a scientific model of observation, collation, hypothesis and testing, all in the interest of liberative, humanizing change. This took the form of the application of the model of the social sciences, especially the marxist sociological analysis of class struggle for liberation. But it is appropriate at this point to underline that this model rests on the ultimate philosophical foundation that process (becoming) is the fundamental mode of created being, and thought is a form of being/becoming, which serves the overall development of man, society and history.

Liberation theology does, however, have a second philosophical string to its interpretative bow; this is, broadly speaking, the 'existentialist' strand of philosophy which has been of such service in european and north-american theology. By this is meant, not the restricted, individualistic approach of some existentialist writers, but the broader analysis of man-in-his-world, based on phenomenology. Because it is based on phenomenology, and reflects on the implications of observed behaviour, it can provide a philosophical backing to sociology. Its principal value has been in directing attention to

Humanity (New York, 1973): vol 1 'The Community called Church', vol 2 'Grace and the Human Condition', vol 3 'Our Idea of God', vol 4 'The Sacraments Today', vol. 5 'Evolution and Guilt'.

whole aspects of reality, especially of man, which a former 'essentialist' and static philosophy was not equipped to consider. In particular, of course, the existential stress has drawn attention to the historical aspect of man, and to the fact that persons are not simply members of a class without remainder, but are irreducibly unique. Nor is a third string of reflection excluded, the metaphysical, if this too is understood, not as descriptive of additional, real being, but as a clarification of the ultimate implications of existence. Not all liberation theologians would accept an ultimate, metaphysical base, but discussion of the role of metaphysics must wait for the final, evaluative part.¹³ Such, then, is the tool for the interpretation of the christian sources, which in turn must deepen and direct the interpretative tool.

The theological framework: graced nature

The key question that an older theology might ask of liberation theology is: *Can* the social sciences, or psychology, or phenomenology be used to interpret the sources of revelation? For they speak only of man and know nothing of God. Crucial, therefore, to the newer theological enterprise is the disclosure and dismantling of the pre-suppositions of this question – namely, that the human exists on a plane which is purely natural, to which is added, on another plane, at certain times and to particular individuals or communities (especially, of course, the Church), the grace of God as an unexperienced mystery. The replacing of this latter theology, of the relationship of the natural to grace (as supernatural), which is a construct of the later middle ages and is by no means traditionally christian, has been a major task of twentieth century thinking, based on an even earlier patristic and biblical revival. The work, in particular of de Lubac and Rahner, laid the foundation for the outlook summed up in the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* of Vatican II and epitomized in the conclusion:

All this (sc. participation in the life of Christ) holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is, in fact, one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.¹⁴

Grace and nature are not two separable areas of human existence, but two dimensions of one concrete graced nature:

Jesus Christ does not come to superimpose a different, transcendent or celestial reality on top of the realm of nature and history, but to reopen for man the will and the power to fulfil his historical vocation.

¹³ Bonino, *op. cit.*, p 92.

¹⁴ See the editions of Vatican II documents, eds. W. Abbott, or A. Flannery.

He has not come to make man into a superhuman being, or a religious creature, but to open him to the will and the power to be man.¹⁵

This theme is by now a familiar one, but liberation theology has uniformly found it necessary to take issue with the 'distinction of planes' model,¹⁶ firstly, because the newer, yet really older, model is crucial for the effectiveness of its method and, secondly, because its opponents in Latin America seem largely to argue – and to act – from within the assumptions of the older model. Old habits die hard. But to return to the first point for a moment: the cutting edge of liberation theology is not found in the assertion that the sociological study of man can provide images, or extrinsic analogies, to illuminate the real sources of revelation, i.e., the bible-in-tradition. If it were merely this, then its opponents could concede that sociology, though strange and newfangled, might provide some illustration for the saving Word of God. But the crux is that human history *now* is a source of revelation, albeit implicit, and God's saving word is being revealed in it, though sometimes darkly. History itself is the place where the plan of God and his self-communication is being worked out. Hence sociology does not offer mere images; it studies a source of God's revelation at its own level, and offers intrinsic, real analogies of salvation (i.e., analogies which participate in the reality they speak of). It is because they remain implicit that the explicit word of God, in the scriptural tradition, is also needed to interpret it.

The theology of one graced nature, therefore, runs through the whole of liberation theology. In fact, the latter can be called the most thorough working out of the implications of that theology to date. Its chief characteristic is the effort to overcome all dualisms (Bonino), but it also strives to keep the duality within the unity which avoids a fusion or purely immanentist model. Gutierrez, for example, insists that history is one:

... that there are not two histories, one profane and one sacred, 'juxtaposed' or 'closely linked'. Rather there is only one human destiny, irreversibly assumed by Christ, the Lord of history.¹⁷

But he then goes on to say:

It seems, however, that contemporary theology has not yet fashioned the categories which would allow us to think through and express adequately this unified approach to history. We work, on the one hand, under the fear of falling back again into the old dualities, and, on the other, under the permanent suspicion of not sufficiently safeguarding divine gratuitousness or the unique dimensions of Christ-

¹⁵ Bonino, *op. cit.*, p 166.

¹⁶ E.g., Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, ch 5; Segundo, *op. cit.*, vol 2, ch 1.

¹⁷ Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, p 153.

ianity. Although there may be different approaches to understanding it, however, the fundamental affirmation is clear: there is only one history – a christofinalized history.¹⁸

Gutierrez and Segundo are enabled to keep the tension between the one graced world and the proper 'worldliness' of the world by the insistence on different *levels* of one reality. Gutierrez describes them as levels of meaning and applies them to liberation. For him, they are (i) the political, i.e., the level of particular world events; (ii) the historical, i.e., the level of human meaning and creativity – the human pattern in a whole series of events; and (iii) the christological level, i.e., the level of liberation from sin. Of the relation, for example, between (i) and (iii), he says:

Liberation from sin is at the very root of political liberation. The former reveals what is really involved in the latter.¹⁹

Man, therefore, as a social and political being living in a historically developing graced world, exists in a number of subordinate tensions which flow from the primary one we have been discussing. The principal tensions on this level treated by liberation theology are those between creation and salvation; between history and Kingdom; and between Church and world. Creation and salvation will occupy us for the rest of this section. The other topics will be discussed in my next article.

*Creation and salvation*²⁰

Latin-american theologians interpret the situation in their continent as one of dire and widespread poverty and oppression, of 'institutionalized violence' (Medellin), first and foremost in terms of a socio-political struggle, a class struggle for freedom and for liberation. This then leads them, as Christians, to ask questions of the sources of revelation, to find the christian substance in the actual, historical struggle of oppressed men for liberation. 'What is the meaning of the struggle against an unjust society, and the creation of a new man in the light of the Word?' (Gutierrez) The answer is given in terms of a new insight into the notion of salvation – an insight shared, in its general outlines, with contemporary european and north-american theology – but stated more intensely as a commitment to the struggle for salvation now.²¹

In the first place, if grace is the existential condition of the lives of men, if all men are being drawn to the vision of God's face, in and through their lives in this world, then the extension of saving grace is world-wide, whether

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Gutierrez discusses some of the difficulties in treating of J. B. Metz's political theology, cf pp 220ff.

¹⁹ Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, p 263.

²⁰ Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, ch 9. Segundo, *op. cit.*, vol 2, pp 152ff.

²¹ This specific intensity centres around the notion of class struggle for liberation/salvation, and is examined in the last part.

it is operating implicitly, or is explicitly known as such. Secondly, salvation is not something purely other-worldly, but it is being achieved now in men's efforts to construct fully human conditions for life, to overcome divisions, hatred, oppression and to create brotherhood and love. This implies that sin, too, is a historical reality, and divisions of all kinds between men have a density which also entail alienation from God. Consequently, the present and active grace of God has, *at least*, a double aspect, which is seen in the biblical duality-in-unity of creation and salvation. Creation is foundation, but it is seen as, already, the beginning of Yahweh's salvific work. Creation is a saving action, and salvation is a new creation. This new creation is given, initially, a mythic form in the covenant with Noah, but is centred on the historical act of liberation from Egypt, which is given its full meaning in the covenant of Sinai. The future fulfilment of salvation, which subsequent generations of Israelites looked forward to, was interpreted then as both a new creation and a new exodus/covenant, i.e., a new political liberation from oppression with a divine depth. Throughout the history of Israel the 'religious' aspect of salvation is not set apart as a separate event; it is the deepest meaning of the history itself. The work of Christ is a new creation, the creation of a new man who is saved, who is liberated from sin-in-his-situation. For salvation does not suddenly become an interior, spiritual event: this is a category which is strange to the bible. In Christ, salvation is universalized, but it is the salvation of the whole man and is the transformation of his earthly life in his concrete relationships, begun 'already' though 'not yet' fulfilled. The early communities of the Church are not to be seen as the segregation of esoteric groups seeking inner, spiritual salvation, but as the social organization of a minority in a political setting of oppression, which, at a deeper level, is the gathering of groups expecting the imminent transformation of the world by divine power. But, 'there is no doubt', says Bonino, 'that the ardent expectation of the total transformation of the world and the advent of the Kingdom of God was soon replaced in Christianity by a spiritualized and individualistic hope for immortal, celestial life'.²² What was lost, therefore, with the delay of the parousia, was the opportunity to translate the expectation of the Kingdom into a working towards the transformation of the whole man in his situation – a concept more true to the thrust of biblical insight.

In this way, liberation theology, through its interpretative tool, calls attention to a fundamentally political and historical meaning of salvation in the bible, and sees this as the full depth of, and not as a reality separate from, human, political and social activity when directed by the values of truth, justice and love. Yet this must not lead to a totally immanentist attitude. In the first place, the full depth is a divine, transcendent depth, and the human remains human while being a vehicle for divine grace and the fulfil-

²² Bonino, *op. cit.*, pp 132ff.

ment of man. There is an 'unconfusedness' as well as an 'inseparability' analogous to the relation of the divine and human in Christ, as defined at Chalcedon. Secondly, the historical here-and-now must not be conceived of as a static factor, but as a process of evolution towards a fulfilment which transcends it. This raises the question of the relationship between history and the Kingdom, which will be dealt with in the next section.

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