

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Religious Themes in Liberation Theology

THE TOPIC of this essay, 'religious themes in liberation theology', is general enough to be treated in any number of different ways. I shall begin then with a few prenotes that will define the particular perspective that will govern these remarks.

First of all, the major sources in what follows will be the liberation theologians who have been writing theology in Latin America over the past two decades. But my intention here is not simply to re-present or restate their theologies, but to interpret and transpose them into a more general theological language. I will not try to address the concrete problems that Christians and generally all the people in Latin America are facing, since in fact the audience intended here is more general. I will thus try to formulate my remarks in a language that is applicable to the work of teachers and those engaged in practical ministry in an English-speaking environment.

Secondly, what is a 'religious issue?'. Sometimes the religious is defined objectively as anything having to do with the absolute, with the infinite, with the transcendent order, with God. And sometimes the religious is looked upon existentially and functionally from an anthropological point of view as the human phenomenon of being ultimately concerned or as any human surrender and commitment with an infinite passion. In this discussion I will not distinguish rigidly between these two approaches to the religious, but will rather try to hold them closely together by the device of question and answer. In general, by the religious I mean the sphere of transcendence, that which is experienced as the realm of ultimate reality and truth that surrounds us and in which we live. In these remarks religious themes are themes that involve our experience of God.

The general theme of the discussion, then, is transcendence and the experience of transcendence in liberation theology. But I wish to define and limit the discussion further to three particular issues or questions which will form the basic outline of what follows. These three questions are really very simple, but their simplicity is in direct proportion to their profound and inexhaustible nature. Thus one cannot expect an adequate answer to them here, nor a complete representation of liberation theology in their regard. But something can be said on a very basic level about the following issues. The first question concerns the nature of God: what is God like? The second concerns the relation of God to us: what does God do? How does God act? How are we affected by God? And the

third question concerns our relationship to God: how should we respond to God?

These very elementary religious issues suffuse liberation theology. As I read it, liberation theology is always and completely about these religious issues, even when it is addressing the concrete social problems that dominate life in that southern continent. It is true that liberation theology also deals with social theory and interpretation of the social, political and economic situations that prevail in Latin America; liberation theology seeks to change society. But it is an error which results in misinterpretation to view what is being said by liberation theologians on these issues independently or in isolation from a religious perspective and motivation. Liberation theology is theology, and all of its positions are a reflection of religious issues. And since liberation theology is Christian theology, its responses to basic religious themes and issues are in terms of Christian faith and belief. Therefore I propose to respond to these three religious questions by means of three basic Christian doctrines or symbols, namely, Jesus who is the Christ of God, the Spirit of God, and the idea of Christian spirituality.

Finally, a last introductory prenote has to do with a method of approach to these three religious issues. In what follows I will address the religious issues of God, God's relation to us and our response to God by means of a strategy of question and answer. That is, I will first raise the question and then give what I take to be in outline form the answer which liberation theology gives to the question. This method is useful for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, liberation theology is often misinterpreted simply because interpreters are not aware of the problems to which it is responding. And on the other hand, more generally, theological positions or statements make no sense at all unless one appreciates the question to which it is a response. One cannot meaningfully communicate theological answers to people who have never experienced the question to which they are the response. One must raise the question to which liberation theology is responding in order to understand its position.

GOD

The question of God

As liberation theologians like to point out, the problem of God is more of a question for northern theology than it is for themselves. This is in some measure true, depending on how the problem is conceived. Certainly in our culture we are aware of severe cultural shifts relative to the past. In Europe and North America it is perfectly acceptable socially to be an atheist. As theologians we know we cannot prove or demonstrate the existence of God, not to one convinced that God is not, and even less to one who does not care one way or the other. As Newman said, all

apologetics for God really depends on moral openness towards and a quest for God.¹ And William James is correct when he insists that every argument that purports to prove God's existence merely thematizes what one already experiences in some way to be the case.²

The real crisis undermining every objective approach to the existence of God lies in the fact that we have undergone a radical cultural change relative to the past. If we experience anything it is a real sense of the absence of God from our world.³ And this experience has been so deep and wrenching that modern thinkers have even tried to develop cogent arguments for why God should not and cannot exist. Because God has been conceived as over against and in competition with human existence, it is argued that God is incompatible with a real sense of human autonomy and responsibility. If all being, all that is really real, is recapitulated and already contained in the infinite being of God, then quite literally there would be nothing for human freedom to accomplish, except perhaps its own damnation, and the exercise of human freedom and history itself would be pointless. From this point of view the gospel of atheism appears to be a limited but real liberation. In sum, many objective approaches to God of the past generated concepts and understandings of God that are no longer acceptable to our culture.

Because of the failure of this objective route to God, much of modern theology has shifted to an existential and experiential analysis and solution to the problem. A psychological, or a sociological, or a transcendental analysis of human existence can lead to the conclusion that all people need and actually posit some centre and over-riding meaning and goal to their lives.⁴ All people respond, at least implicitly by their action, to the problem of their ultimate destiny.⁵ In effect they surrender their freedom and direct their lives according to some ultimate concern. In this sense all people posit some absolute in their lives and live by some faith. This approach is a reasonable one that opens up the question of God in a realistic way by appealing to human experience of an ultimate concern.

But this route too is plagued with problems. First of all, an existential point of view is also an historically conscious point of view. Historical consciousness, and our culture is conscious of the relativity of history, implies that human beings are bound to history and this world for their knowledge of everything, so that God must be revealed to us in and through history. But when one turns to history what one finds is not a scarcity of revelation, but a bewildering array of different revelations of God, all saying something different and in a competition with each other that cancels out the final relevance of them all. For those willing to pursue the issue, not with a merely objective and fascinated curiosity in the religious phenomenon, but with existential concern for truth, the question of God becomes that of which God one chooses.

More and more today, then, at least on the cultural level if not also on the theological, the question of God concerns first of all where God is to be found. Where do we look in order to find God and understand God. And even prior to that is the question of the kind of God for which one is looking. This is the question on which I wish to focus. What is one's notion of God or concept of God? More importantly, what is the Christian view of God? What view of God does the Church present to the world? What kind of God is presented to the world today by Christianity in the face of today's culture and its questions? What conception of God responds to and makes sense of our history with its massive suffering of the innocent, especially the suffering imposed on human beings by other human beings. It is this form of the question to which liberation theology offers some response.

The response of liberation theology

Liberation theology, as far as I am aware, does not have a systematically developed theology of God.⁶ Rather the view of God in liberation theology is for the most part based on biblical theology and is developed especially in its christology, at least implicitly. And this christology finds its most fruitful insights by focusing on the historical person of Jesus. Although this approach has sometimes been judged naive by the critics of liberation theology, there is another way of looking at it. The more deeply theology becomes aware of historical consciousness, of the historicity of all our thinking, the more convinced it will become that the only way of coming into contact with God is through the events of history. There is no other way of forming a doctrine of God than through some revelation, through an appeal to some historical experience of God or some manifestation of God in history. And for Christian faith and theology, the event that most fully reveals who God is is the event of Jesus in history.

It can be said, I think, that this is part of the significance of the first and most central doctrinal decision of Christianity at Nicaea. In affirming that 'the Son' was consubstantial with the Father against the Arians, these bishops were saying that no less than God was present to and at work in this Jesus. And that implies a first response that Christians give to the question of God: if you wish to know who and what God is, if you wish to understand God or form a notion of what God is like, you must turn to and focus your attention on Jesus of Nazareth.⁷ In Rahnerian language, Jesus is the real symbol that makes God present in the world. The answer to the question of where God is to be found in a public historical way is in the life of the man Jesus.

What does liberation theology find out about God by focusing on Jesus as God's revelation? What is the image or notion or concept of God that emerges from allowing attention to Jesus to mediate what God is like?

Here I wish to enumerate some aspects of the theology of God from liberation theology without being exhaustive.

First of all the transcendent and powerful God of Jewish tradition is also radically immanent in the world and especially human existence. The symbols of the *Logos* of God being incarnate in Jesus, or of Jesus acting under the influence of God's Spirit, give expression to the experience of God come close and being really present to us within human life in the world. As Bonhoeffer put it, God is not found at the periphery; God is personally present at the centre of human life in the world.⁸ This means that transcendence or the realm of God is not found by striving to move outside this world by an escape from it, but is encountered precisely within human life itself. As in the case of Jesus, transcendence is a part of every aspect of human life and is encountered within the ordinary exercises of our freedom. As a consequence of this, it appears that God's immanence to human history is such that God bestows on the exercise of human freedom a transcendent value, a value that shares in God's immanence to it and God's own absoluteness.⁹

Secondly if one allows one's image of God to be shaped by Jesus, God appears as personal and affectively concerned about human life in this world. Negatively, God is not objective or impersonal being, but subjective and personal; the creator is engaged, involved and attentive, a lover of what God has created. This love of God is both egalitarian and partial. As revealed in the ministry of Jesus, it is a love for all, for each one as if there were no others. Thus this love of God constitutes all human beings in a radical equality of absolute worth in God's eyes. This absoluteness of God's love, and the absolute value that it bestows on human life, are confirmed in the experience of Jesus's resurrection. The author of life who created out of absolute love ratifies the absoluteness of that love by drawing all things back into itself. But precisely because of this egalitarian love, God is concerned in a special way for those whom we human beings disvalue, demean, injure and dehumanize by prejudice, hatred, sin and injustice. There is hardly a memory of Jesus preserved in the New Testament stories about him that does not radiate this message. God as communicated by Jesus is a God who is radically for human life and against human suffering. God is a God of judgment and mercy, but God's judgment is not first; rather it flows from God's love and mercy. Because God is a God of love for all, God's anger flares at the human injustices that demean God's own people. The Christian God is a God of love and a God bent on the cause of human life; therefore God must be thought of 'as the contradiction of the wretched condition of real life'.¹⁰

In sum, the logic of Christian faith is that it allows Jesus to be the central mediating symbol for its idea or notion of God. Liberation theologians, by allowing their imagination to be informed and structured

by Jesus and his life, have recaptured for our time essential qualities of the Christian God, especially as they respond to our social and historical situation.

GOD'S SPIRIT OR GRACE

The question of what God does in history

A second basic religious question is this: what does God do? And it can be approached from a couple of different angles. It can be seen as the question of the unbeliever for whom the hypothesis of God is meaningless, for God does not do anything. The world is the same with or without God. Or it can be the question of the seeker after God, the one who looks for God but cannot find God because God does not appear in the world. Or it can be viewed as the question of the traditional Christian for whom the classical symbols and doctrines have broken down because they do not correspond to experience. The doctrine of providence says that God is provident; God foresees, guides and directs history according to God's will. But all one has to do is assume a concrete existential and historical point of view, and then take a look, and suddenly the doctrine appears as not only incredible but scandalous. Is this God's will? The language of redemption and salvation is equally ambiguous. Easter talk is the talk of victory, of the overcoming of the power of darkness, of the conquering of sin. But what does this mean? No one today imagines that there is less sin today than before Christ, not certainly in Christian cultures. If anything, the damage of sin to human life is continually augmented through technology. Are we willing in the face of this to say that this salvation really only refers to eternal life? But this projection of salvation into an absolute future in another world leaves this one pretty much the same as it was, with an absence of God and without a concrete meaning for salvation in and for this world.

One of the deepest problems for all religion is human suffering. And today we witness this human suffering in huge unprecedented social proportions. As the population of this planet increases, so too does the actual inequality and degradation of human life, and even worse, our ability to live with and accept this situation. In liberation theology the category, 'the poor' is a religious symbol because encounter with poor people is a mediation of God. But to make sense out of this, the logic and epistemology of it, one must first experience the scandal of the poor. This symbolic mediation and encounter must pass through negativity. In the first place the poor of this world are a religious scandal because they embody the question for us: what does God do for them in this world?

The response of liberation theology

I will formulate my interpretation of how liberation theology responds to this question in terms of the Spirit of God or grace. And in this

terminology grace and God's Spirit are synonymous. The symbol of God's Spirit refers to God as immanent in the world and experienced in human lives. And many theologies of grace, though not all, identify the referent of the word grace with God's Spirit. An answer to the question of what God does in the world, then, can be formulated in terms of the theology of grace.

Liberation theology understands that God does not act in the world overtly, or, in the language of scholasticism, by taking the place of and acting as a secondary cause. God does not intervene objectively, that is, as an object, in history. The response of liberation theology to the question of what God does in relation to human suffering is not that Christians should pray for a miracle. For liberation theology, as for modern theology in general, the idea that God acts in history means that God is present to and an empowering force in human subjects. God acts within people.¹¹ God is present and active in the whole of creation by God's creative power that holds all that is in being. But God does not intervene and disrupt the order of the very processes that God established. If we wish to think of God intervening in creation and history it should be in terms of God's personal self-communication to human beings in a way that this Spirit of God within us moves us from within. As Aquinas said, God acts on creatures according to their natures. But since human beings are free, God acts in human history within and through human freedom.¹² To put this very bluntly, the only way God acts in human history, beyond sustaining creation in existence, is through human freedom.

But what exactly does God's Spirit do within human freedom? The long tradition of the theologies of grace respond to this question quite clearly. I mention just two of the effects of grace that are important here. First of all, God's gracious love accepts human freedom. As Luther put it most strongly, God's loving presence accepts human freedom as it is, as sinful, with an absolute acceptance that gives human freedom, the person, an absolute value. And secondly, God's Spirit is not only an accepting presence, it is also a power. As Augustine understood it, God's grace converts, it opens up human freedom out of itself in love for others. God's Spirit is the constant source of human empowerment that is responsible for self-transcending love of other human beings in the world.

Two things flow from this conception of how God acts in history and what God does in the world. The first is the absolute importance of human freedom in itself. The absolute value of human lives in the world is constituted by God's love for them. The second is the absolute value of the exercise of human freedom. The classical doctrine of co-operative grace, begun with Augustine and continued in Aquinas and the whole Catholic tradition, is supremely important here. God is not in competition with human freedom. Quite the opposite, God's Spirit makes human

freedom free; God empowers human freedom. And God acts in the world through human freedom. To put this another way, human freedom is the vehicle of the instrument of God's action in the world. God's values, and that which we consider good and meaningful for human life in the world in the light of our conception of God, will be established by God in this world only in so far as they are established by human freedom impelled by God's Spirit. In this view, it is the activity of God's Spirit that gives human freedom its absolute importance.

In this light one can see the logic of the religious mediation of those who suffer, of the poor. The very negativity of their condition in contrast to what it should be, their very suffering and the diminishment of their freedom, call forth or summon the effective power of God's Spirit in their own lives and in the lives of the more fortunate who encounter them.¹³ The poor of the whole world and those close at hand are human beings like us and we are in solidarity with them as human beings. Their dehumanization is our dehumanization. Their condition and our solidarity with them are a sacrament that tells us what should be and can be by human freedom precisely by the logic of scandal. Our very scandal is an impulse to resist and to reverse their situation. Their suffering and our solidarity with them are a sacrament that mediates the power of God's Spirit within our own freedom and through it into public social history. God acts in history in and through the poor insofar as human beings respond to the power of God's Spirit in aggressive action against their poverty and suffering.

SPIRITUALITY

The question of how to respond to God

The third religious theme in liberation theology which I shall discuss concerns spirituality. And the approach to this issue in terms of a question and an answer becomes crucially important. One must be aware here that in such a method the question one asks has a direct influence on the answer one receives. In a sense, the question determines the form of the response. It does not determine the response itself, since this comes from revelation and the symbols of our tradition. But it does determine the form or the shape in which the answer appears. This is important for the area of spirituality because this term in Catholic theology is almost hopelessly ambiguous. What does spirituality mean? What does the word refer to? Does spirituality refer to an area within theology, or does all theology come to bear on spirituality? Is spirituality concerned only with prayer, contemplation and forms of mysticism? Is spirituality a form of Christian psychology? Is it a special discipline with reference to a special area of human life, or to the Christian life cut off from our daily routine of activities?

No matter how spirituality is defined and approached, it seems to me, there is a single set of questions to which thought about spirituality and practical spiritualities respond. The central question can be stated very simply: how is a person united to or with God? This question is absolutely basic since it expresses the whole purpose of religion generally and Christianity in particular. For the Christian, God has taken an initiative in human affairs by revelation; thus the question of how one should respond to God arises. What does God want of the Christian? In the light of God's revelation in Jesus, what is the most worthy purpose to which the Christian might surrender and commit his or her freedom? To what should we as Christians give our lives? What is the essence of the Christian vocation? In sum, on the most general and basic level, the area of spirituality concerns the way Christians should live their lives, in response to God's revelation and grace, that will in turn unite them with God. What are Christians to do in this life in order to live in the sphere of God's truth and God's will?

The response of liberation theology

I cannot in a brief space develop liberation spirituality in any detail, but I can I think characterize it in a few points which will indicate how it responds to the question implicit in all conceptions of spirituality. First of all, spirituality concerns the whole of the way a person leads his or her life. The core of one's response to God is one's fundamental moral option, and this option is displayed in the concrete actions that make up the whole of one's life. Spirituality is a way of life. Gustavo Gutierrez defined spirituality precisely in his *A theology of liberation* and he has not departed from his view in his latest book on the subject.¹⁴ 'A spirituality', he wrote, 'is a concrete manner, inspired by the Spirit, of living the Gospel; it is a definite way of living "before the Lord", in solidarity with all human beings, "with the Lord", and before humanity'.¹⁵ In other words, one responds to God and is united to God in and through what one does in the course of one's life in the world. And this is supported by the theology of grace which was just outlined.

Secondly, because of this basic conception, liberation spirituality is an integral spirituality. By that I mean it unites dimensions of the spiritual life that are usually separated and isolated from each other. I cannot develop this at length,¹⁶ but I can give an example. Social and political action, action on behalf of groups of people for their liberation, is spiritual activity. It involves transcendence; in it and through it one responds to God and constitutes one's relation to God. This is of course not the only spiritual activity, nor should it be seen as divorced from other forms of spirituality. But this example demonstrates the integrity of liberation spirituality, in contrast to numerous conceptions and forms of spirituality which have no concern for this area of the spiritual life, or reduce spiritual

life to a personal and individual encounter with transcendence, or even lack the fundamental conception of human solidarity without which an integral spirituality is impossible. One cannot be united with God apart from actual relations with other people and other social groups.

Thirdly, liberation spirituality appeals to human freedom, commitment and action, and not simply to the passive, dependent and weak aspects of our human nature. There are analogies here between liberation theology and the insight had by Bonhoeffer during the last months of his life. Christianity does not simply appeal to human passivity; Jesus's message is not simply to the weak and the helpless. The God revealed in Jesus also appeals to those who are strong, to the active and creative person who is looking for ideals and values to which to commit his or her freedom.¹⁷ The will of God does not simply ask for our submission. God also appeals to our freedom and asks human beings to dedicate their freedom to an alternative vision made up of God's values and God's purposes.

Finally, this spirituality of action according to the will of God for human beings in history is creative of the meaning of history itself. When we ask the question of whether there is any ultimate meaning to human life in this world, we cannot be naive in our response. One can only understand the workings of God's salvation within our historical life critically. And a critical evaluation must conclude that for many people in the world today human life is meaningless. The massive suppression of human freedom that we witness, and the degradation of human life that is humanly caused, certainly make life meaningless for many of those who suffer; but they also undermine the value and meaning of our own lives too, since we too are human beings. Once human existence is viewed as the unified historical existence of the race, that is, a common existence in solidarity, one cannot logically salvage a personally meaningful existence in isolation from the multitudes who cannot find any meaning to their lives because of their suffering. Moreover the freedom and activity on the part of the affluent and strong appear equally meaningless when they are dedicated to so many vacuous, selfish and immediate goals. God's revelation to us in Jesus, therefore, is the revelation of a possible but not a necessary meaning for history in general and for our personal histories in it. That possible meaning and possible salvation becomes real when, through the power of God's Spirit, a person dedicates his or her freedom in one way or another for the freedom and liberation of others. Supported by a theology of co-operative grace, a liberation spirituality unfolds a vision in which the human life and behaviour of Christians are constitutive of God's salvation in history.

Conclusion

Let us conclude this all too schematic overview of some fundamental religious themes in liberation theology in terms of the two categories,

illumination and empowerment. We have discussed the religious question of God in terms of the notion of God. What kind of God does one envision when one speaks of God? We looked at the religious theme of what God does actually in the world. Is the God of the gaps as Bonhoeffer said, the God who is relied upon only to solve the problems we cannot solve, being squeezed out of our world by human ingenuity and creativity? What does God really do in the world? And finally we considered the conception of the Christian life, or Christian spirituality, which responds to the question of how human beings are united to God. How do we live our human lives in such a way that they are grounded in and united with ultimate truth and value?

In response to these religious themes and questions, Christianity offers answers which are contained in basic Christian doctrines that come from the revelation of God mediated through Jesus. These doctrines must be interpreted for today's world, for today's culture, for today's societies as they face today's problems. And they must be interpreted in such a way that they illumine and empower. By illumination I mean an understanding of a particular religious symbol or doctrine that correlates with and responds to human experience and questioning. Religious doctrines cannot simply be imposed on people. Rather it must be shown how they illumine human imagination and experience in a way that allows us to understand reality and our world in a new way. And secondly it must be shown how these doctrines empower human freedom, by providing goals and purpose for human life. After critical theological evaluation is done, the ultimate validity of religious interpretation is finally judged by whether or not they empower human life.

These religious themes from liberation theology have shown their intrinsic worth through the power that they have released in countless human lives in Latin America. The question for northern Christians is whether or not we shall allow them to illumine and empower us.

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NOTES

¹ See for example John Henry Newman, 'Sermon IV: the usurpation of reason', *Newman's university sermons*, intro by D. M. MacKinnon and J. D. Holmes (London, 1970), pp 54-74.

² James, William: *The varieties of religious experience: a study in human nature* (New York, 1961), pp 337-341.

³ Even liberation theologians recognize this. See for example Jon Sobrino, *The true Church and the poor*, trans by Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY, 1984), p 59.

- ⁴ Good examples of this are seen in Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of faith* (New York, 1957) and James W. Fowler, *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. (San Francisco, 1981), pp 1-36.
- ⁵ Blondel, Maurice: *Action (1893): essay on a critique of life and a science of practice*, trans by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, 1984) p 3.
- ⁶ Sobrino, Jon: *The true Church and the poor*, p 352, n 5, confirms this view.
- ⁷ Fiorenza, Francis Schüssler: *Foundational theology: Jesus and the Church*, (New York, 1984), pp 222-223.
- ⁸ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Letters and papers from prison*, trans by Reginald H. Fuller, ed by Eberhard Bethge (New York, 1962), pp 165-166.
- ⁹ This is a major theme in the theology of Juan Luis Segundo. For a clear expression of the point, see his 'Capitalism versus Socialism: crux theologica', in *Frontiers of theology in Latin America*, ed by Rosino Gibellini, trans by John Drury, (Maryknoll, NY, 1979), pp 240-259.
- ¹⁰ Sobrino, Jon: *The true Church and the poor*, p 27.
- ¹¹ Bultmann, Rudolf: *Jesus Christ and mythology* (New York, 1958), pp 61-62.
- ¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, 113, 3.
- ¹³ Edward Schillebeeckx describes this 'contrast experience' in *Jesus: an experiment in christology*, trans by Hubert Hoskins (New York, 1979), pp 621-622. The dialectical quality of this experience of God in the poor, the tension between its negativity and positivity, is developed by Jon Sobrino in *The true Church and the poor*, *passim*, but especially in chapter 5, 'The experience of God in the Church of the poor', pp 125-159.
- ¹⁴ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *We drink from our own wells: the spiritual journey of a people*, trans by Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY, 1984).
- ¹⁵ Gutierrez, Gustavo: *A theology of liberation: history, politics and salvation*, trans and ed by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY, 1973), p 204.
- ¹⁶ Cf R. Haight, *An alternative vision: an interpretation of liberation theology* (New York, 1985), pp 234-239.
- ¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich: *Letters and papers from prison*, pp 165-166.