

FREEDOM, THEOLOGY AND DELIVERANCE

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Introduction

HERE ARE A FEW THOUGHT-PROVOKING LINES in the *Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world* of Vatican Council II which address the issues of freedom. They suggest that it is only in freedom that humankind can turn towards what is good. 'The people of our time', it says 'prize freedom very highly and strive eagerly for it. In this they are right. Yet they often cherish it improperly, as if it gave them leave to do anything they like, even when it is evil.' Why, the Fathers ask, should God bestow the gift of freedom on humankind? The answer is quite simple: so that they might, of their own accord, seek their creator and freely attain their 'full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him'.¹ Freedom is a gift of God and the divine intention is that it should be enjoyed fully by all God's people.

In a short paper such as this, it will not be possible to offer a Christian theology and a spiritual perspective on freedom that will touch all levels of human existence and experience. I have tried, notwithstanding, to focus on the plight of some people, who for one reason or another, can be regarded as 'captives' and direct attention towards the One, who not only has the power to 'set captives free' but who cannot do otherwise. Such is our God.

In this paper I shall take as my starting point the notion that 'what we see depends on where we are standing'.² In other words our own experience affects how we view freedom, and indeed all of reality. I have divided the paper into two parts. In the first part I shall examine three positions from where theologians might look at freedom: the academy, the Church and society.³ Each group wears particular spectacles and that colours how they perceive freedom. This part of the paper is somewhat theoretical, but I hope that it will open up the field for viewing, at least. In the second part of the paper, I look at freedom from a biblical-faith perspective. I will refrain from doing biblical exegesis since that has been ably done by Mark Coleridge in his article. I try to show, nevertheless, how the Exodus event in the Old Testament, and Jesus' freeing of demoniacs in the New Testament, have affected

those who have been kept in thrall and have offered them some comfort and support.

Part one

Freedom and theology in the academy, the Church and society

Theology functions in relation to a number of positions or 'publics': the academy, the Church and society. In the academy theologians take research seriously, so in considering the notion of freedom they use the primary and secondary sources traditionally available to them. Thereafter, they make their findings available to other academics, to the informed public and to students. The value of the academic viewpoint is beyond question for, as Rudolf Bultmann reminds us, 'lack of knowledge is an offence as well as a mistake'.⁴ This perspective also has its limitations. Academics have, on occasion, been dubbed theoreticians, and their position has been seen as too objective and detached. It is interesting, however, that Gustavo Gutiérrez, the liberation theologian, should strongly defend the rational academic position. 'Theological thought not characterized by such rationality and disinterestedness', he wrote, 'would not be faithful to an understanding of the faith.'⁵ In contrast, the feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza refers to 'the value-neutral detached stance of the academician' and believes that 'intellectual neutrality is not possible in a historic world of exploitation and oppression'.⁶

In the Church, theologians have often been seen as the guardians of orthodoxy and the custodians of 'the unfathomable riches of salvation'⁷. Some magnificent documents on freedom have come out of the Church, not least among them Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi*. 'The Church' it says, 'has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings . . . the duty of assisting the birth of liberation, of giving witness to it.'⁸ Church theologians would be the first to proclaim that freedom is a gift of God, given to women and men alike. Yet the ethicist Richard Niebuhr maintains that 'church theology has done little to facilitate meaningful or creative praxis'.⁹ Such an opinion may be open to question, but the Kairos theologians of South Africa echoed the same sentiments when they condemned church theology for its guardedness, its caution and its use of stock-ideas at a time when millions were struggling to reclaim their freedom and autonomy under apartheid.¹⁰ But to regard academics or church theologians as mere theoreticians is to forget that each of them can wear more than one cap. They may be scholars, committed church members and responsible members of society at one and the same time. They are

capable of viewing freedom from a number of perspectives simultaneously, and of being involved intellectually, emotionally and through faith. In other words, each approach can bring to the theology of freedom its own strengths and its own insights, and also benefit from the cumulative effect of their collective inputs.

Theologians who take society as their point of departure inevitably see freedom in the context of people's lives. While they would support the research of purely academic theologians, and commend teaching authorities and 'church' theologians for their concern for orthodoxy, they themselves are particularly concerned to promote ortho-praxis of a diakonic and empowering kind. Moreover, by situating themselves in the midst of society, they show solidarity with, and attempt to identify with those who, for one reason or another, are not free. These theologians are not satisfied with simply *believing* in the principle of freedom, however, nor are they content with merely *preaching* about freedom. They go a step further and become *actively engaged* in the struggle for freedom.

Theologians who adopt this position *vis-à-vis* the disenfranchised, who call themselves, or are called, liberation theologians, have found themselves suspected by the Church and by the academy alike. They have been closely watched by the guardians of orthodoxy and, some might add, not without good reason. Yet liberation theologians have succeeded, in my opinion, where other theologians have failed. Firstly, they have listened attentively to the victims themselves, that is, to those who have been denied their internal and external liberty. Secondly, they have not spoken for the victims; instead, they have been their servants, recording, with compassion and empathy, the injustices perpetrated against them. Thirdly, consciousness-raising has been a central part of their agenda. They have encouraged people to reflect, in faith, on the meaning of freedom from the perspective of both the victor and of the victim, in the hope that through this reflection the oppressed and the oppressor alike might be released from bondage. Fourthly, they have developed strategies for action and have committed themselves to freeing captives, in whatever shape or form they come, just as Jesus did. Fifthly, they have encouraged others to commit themselves to the same course of action. Their theology has unquestionably been grounded in the practical. It is interesting that the British philosopher, John Macmurray, should also take seriously 'the primacy of the practical', and proposes 'that we should substitute the "I do", for the "I think", as our starting point and centre of reference, and do our thinking from the stand-point of action',¹¹ especially when confronted

by those who do not have the freedom to act for themselves. This brings to mind Karl Barth's 'definition' of God as 'the One who acts in history'.¹² This is not to suggest, however, that action on behalf of others is the ultimate good. It is effective only when it enables the disenfranchised to act creatively for themselves.

On naming the victims

Today we live in societies where we can identify ever more clearly certain groups of people on to whom are projected unjustifiable limitations; these projections result in people falling into one of two categories: victims or oppressors. In this way we identify the divisiveness of racism, sexism, ableism and ageism. What is worse, the victimization can be unwitting, with the plight of the victim not being consciously appreciated by those people who are causing or benefiting from the victimization, or, indeed, by the victim in person. In my opinion, we must place racism, sexism, ableism and ageism high on the long list of evils which militate against the capacity of people to enjoy freedom and fullness of life. And if we want to know what kind of theology is appropriate in those situations we must turn for clues to those who have been kept in thrall and are now attempting to break loose the fetters.

An example or two may be helpful: The South African theologian Bonganjalo Goba suggests that black theology may succeed, where white theology has failed, in restoring and healing the brokenness of black women and men who were held in bondage by a tyrannical system called apartheid.¹³ He claims, and with good reason, that not only do the victims themselves understand their own problems better than anyone else, but that they are also capable of finding their own solutions. Furthermore, freedom for them is not primarily an academic question requiring an answer, but something to be understood, acted upon and claimed because it is a basic human right, rooted in biblical faith. Their 'knowing' takes place from within. Furthermore, Rudolf Bultmann reminds us that knowing, as it is understood in the Bible, is 'more than appropriate information; it must realize itself in suitable action'.¹⁴ It is, says John Macquarrie, 'the thinking of the agent who acts in the world'.¹⁵ Moreover, theology, if it is to be relevant, has to take this kind of knowing into account.

Certain feminist theologians too have challenged the academy, the Church and society, for placing inappropriate limits on women's freedom. Women have made known their willingness to serve the needs of Church and society in accordance with their gifts. Meantime

many of them have reacted against their exclusion from church office and against the reduction of their ministry within the Church to subordinate and marginal positions. They take seriously the notions of stewardship and accountability, but doors are often closed against them. Rosemary Radford Ruether refers to women's experience of being 'silenced, excluded, trivialised and marginalised in the Church simply because they are women'.¹⁶ Other feminist theologians focus on the distortion and the impoverishment of the church when patriarchy is seen as the only possibility. A church or a society which cannot find room for a meaningful feminine input is poor indeed. Sheila Collins writes in this respect:

Windows and doors are being slammed shut to keep women out of places churchmen claim they do not belong to . . . but the women who are the perceived danger to the Church are not newcomers, aliens who have just appeared on the scene. Women have been in the Body of Christ, receiving the grace of His Holy Spirit and ministry from the beginning, by virtue of their baptism . . . cultural change and the Spirit of Jesus being revitalised among us have conspired to disrupt that centuries-old control.¹⁷

People of colour and women have been hindered from enjoying fullness of life and freedom from time immemorial but it is only in more recent times that we have put the labels 'racism' and 'sexism' on these expressions of injustice. By the same token we now refer to 'ageism', that is, the practice of devaluing and discriminating against people because of their age, thereby placing unnecessary restraints upon them. We speak too of 'ableism', that is, the oppression of those with physical or mental disabilities by those who consider themselves able-bodied. Children, old people, and the mentally and physically handicapped are often assumed to be helpless and in need of so-called 'protection'. But this 'protection' often means that they become controlled to a degree that severely hinders them and denies them whatever limited freedom is rightly theirs. Again, it is only recently, that these phenomena have come to be written about, and that theologians and spiritual writers have begun to consider ways of restoring freedom to the victims of ageism and ableism.

Helen M. Luke wrote *Old age, journey into spirituality* out of her own experience as a woman who is now growing older. She refers to the 'further crucial step' which older people must take, and emphasizes 'that a point comes in our lives at which we *choose* how we go into our last years, how we approach our death'.¹⁸ She speaks of the 'new'

person who is born in old age, a person whom the older woman or man must be allowed to create, within the greatest possible freedom. In 1967 Barbara Robb wrote *Sans everything: a case to answer*, in which she exposed the plight of elderly patients in some institutions. The picture painted of cruelty and malpractice was considered by some to be an exaggeration. However, highest on the list of sins against aged and geriatric patients were numbered 'petty restrictions and authoritarianism'.¹⁹ To counter this Robb refers to the 'therapeutic community', that is, 'one in which patients and staff work and live together with the fewest regulations and the maximum freedom of expression'.²⁰

The command to honour one's father and mother could be interpreted as a purely domestic matter. To offend against them was, however, a serious matter, according to the Old Testament, for: 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must die' (Lev 20:9). What is at issue here is the divine concern for those whose age or infirmity might make them the victims of the strong. 'You are to rise up before grey hairs, you are to honour old age and fear your God. I am Yahweh' (Lev 19:32). In other words, if you dishonour the aged you will have Yahweh to reckon with. It may seem surprising that these admonitions, referred to in Leviticus 20, are coupled with sanctions and penalties against 'unnatural' sexual acts (Lev 20:8-21), as if to suggest that it is against nature to treat the aged badly. To lead them where they do not want to go is an assault on their God-given freedom. Furthermore, in our own day undue devotion to the work-ethic and the valuing of people because of their 'usefulness' has proved to be very dangerous. As a consequence older people can become the 'undeserving', for example, when it comes to medical care; they can be perceived as an 'inconvenience'. If society is not sensitive to the rights and freedom of the aged they may become marginalized and even be regarded as expendable, as happened in Nazi Germany and elsewhere.

Having very briefly 'opened the field for viewing,' as it were, I shall now focus attention on the God who revealed that the poor and the oppressed are the objects of particular concern, and also reflect on the ministry of Jesus the liberator, who sat down with the broken-hearted, just where they were, and became the instrument of freedom and salvation for them.

Part two

Yahweh frees his people

In the face of human trauma, of personal or global crisis, questions are sometimes asked, not only about the existence of God, but about

God's willingness and capacity to act in a saving and freeing way in human affairs. In response, one has to say that the notion 'Yahweh frees and delivers,' is a constant, recurring theme in the Old Testament. Furthermore, 'the dynamic of bondage, confronted by the call to freedom,' wrote the Jewish theologian Marc Ellis, 'has been appropriated also by struggling peoples throughout the ages right down to the present day.'²¹ The Exodus theme continues to strike a cord in the consciousness of oppressed people. The freedom songs of African slaves in nineteenth-century America calling on God for liberation echo the lamentations of the Hebrews in Egypt and of the Israelites in Babylon. It was the Exodus event, the rescue of God's people from their harsh taskmasters, which was to determine how freedom was to be understood thereafter, not only in Israel but outside it. James Cone, a Black American theologian, points out in his book, *The spirituals and the blues*, that the central concept in black spirituals is the divine liberation of the oppressed from slavery.²² The African people enslaved in America knew, almost instinctively, that the Exodus story was also their story:

O freedom! O freedom! O freedom over me!
 An' befo' I'd be a slave.
 I'll be buried in my grave,
 and go home to my Lord and be free.
 When Israel was in Egypt's land,
 let my people go;
 Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
 let my people go;
 Go down, Moses, 'way down in Egypt's land
 Tell ole Pharaoh
 Let my people go.

In their darkest hour the laments of African slaves resembled the cries of the Hebrew slaves:

They that walked in darkness
 sang songs in the olden days
 Sorrow Songs –
 For they were weary of heart.

At the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellin (August–September 1968), the Exodus model remained as a backdrop throughout the entire conference while the Bishops discussed oppressive structures, land distribution, poor living conditions, the

exploitation of workers and unjust transactions. In 1971 Gustavo Gutiérrez also discussed the Exodus at length in his *A theology of liberation: history, politics and salvation*. He concludes: 'It [the Exodus] remains vital and contemporary due to similar historical experiences which the people of God undergo.'²³

At the National Conference of Black Churchmen in 1976 Alan Boesak wrote: 'The Exodus is not a myth, but the opening up of a history in which God's liberating act was revealed to his people'.²⁴ In 1986 Moon Hee-Suk Cyris, a Korean liberation theologian, wrote about the plight of Korean Christians 'in the midst of an Exodus'. He concluded: 'Like Moses . . . we in Korea must resolve to follow the footsteps of the true prophet living among our oppressed people and standing against political, social and economic oppression'.²⁵

Jesus sets captives free

If Yahweh is seen in the Old Testament as the 'being there' God for the oppressed, in the New Testament all aspects of liberation and freedom are centred round Jesus (Lk 19:5, 8; Jn 5:34). His entire life, and not merely his final agony and death, was an expression of universal solidarity with those who were held captive.

In his inaugural speech in the synagogue at Nazareth he made the words of the prophet Isaiah his own:

He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And to the blind new sight,
to set the downtrodden free
to proclaim the Lord's year of favour. (Isai 61:1-2)

In freeing broken bodies from their infirmities and troubled spirits from their anxiety or disturbed consciences from their guilt, Jesus liberated people who, in one way or another, were bound by their infirmities. Whether he spoke words of comfort, forgave sins or healed the sick, Jesus functioned in a saving way. By his presence among them, he became the instrument by which freedom and hope could be transferred to the outcasts and the marginalized. He had pity on them and loved them. In Jesus God revealed himself as the God of compassion and as the 'man for others', to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer's expression. The experience of the divine concern which Jesus manifested was not abstract or theoretical, it translated into action for the benefit of others.

Perhaps of all the infirm none were more in need of liberation than those who were 'possessed by demons'. They were often completely

disorientated and had no control over their destiny. As slaves of the powers of darkness, they frequently experienced the loss of rational consciousness and of physical and emotional well-being (cf. Mk 5:1–20). W. M. Thompson recalls seeing similar victims in Palestine – ‘furious and dangerous maniacs who wander about the mountains and sleep in caves. In their worst paroxysms’, he writes, ‘they were quite unmanageable and prodigiously strong.’²⁶ According to Rudolf Otto, demon possession reached epidemic proportions in New Testament times and proved to be a serious problem.²⁷ Not only were demons powerful, they were the arch-enemies of humankind for they were anti-life and anti-freedom. In that situation Jesus revealed that the God who was there for the demoniacs was Lord, and, consequently, the source of freedom and power. Moreover, God was creator, so the creature possessed was not Satan’s possession.

T. A. Burkill, in examining the exorcisms which Jesus performed, maintained that these miracles had as much to say about Jesus’ concern, as about his power: ‘Jesus was shown to be as humane as he was awe-inspiring’.²⁸ H. Preisker expressed the same sentiments when he said that the confrontation between Jesus and the demons has to be treated with the seriousness it deserves. Jesus’ willingness to take on ‘a legion’ of demons (taken to mean 3,000–6,000 demons) in order to reclaim one man for God, was no mean undertaking.

But, Preisker went on, ‘Jesus’ fearlessness was matched by the great sympathy he had for one that had that combined evil force directed against him’.²⁹ When Jesus intervened to deliver the demoniac at Gasara from the powers of evil, he summoned God not only as creator, who formed the demoniac in his mother’s womb, but also as God of the Exodus: the God who could free not only an individual, but also a whole nation kept in thrall by a tyrant. The prophets had foretold that the coming of the Messiah would be accompanied by the overthrowing of demonic powers (Enoch 55:4). Whether the demons were aware that Jesus was the Messiah is hard to say. Mark 5:6–7 seems to suggest, however, that in Jesus the demoniac saw someone who had power to make or break him. Jesus clearly demonstrated that in him the reign of God was at hand; consequently the powers of evil would be destroyed and people set free. In the end, what the miracle of the freeing of the demoniac is saying is that the power of divine compassion and love is greater than the power of evil. The demons occupied a body and a soul which was rightly the temple of the Holy Spirit. Jesus challenged their right to be there and drove them out. Jesus did not impose silence on the former demoniac from Gasara; instead he sent him to proclaim the

good news message of God's mercy and God's power to free and to save, 'and all marvelled' (Mk 5:20).

It is not uncommon today to hear the adjective 'sick' applied to our global society and that sociologists, politicians, educators, psychologists and others are searching for a cure. The Christian impulse leads us to want to exorcise one 'demon' after another: to resist the war machine with its insatiable thirst for blood, for example, and to pray with the intensity of the people of God, past and present, that lasting peace might become a reality, for we have been given the world in trust and been made stewards of it. We are obliged to overcome the demon of ignorance which enslaves the minds and hearts of people and cripples their growth and their capacity to enjoy a fuller and freer life. We are compelled to drive out the demon of greed which permits one third of the world to use most of the world's supply of food while two thirds of the world are starving. We are moved to drive out the demons of despair and depression which frequently lay hold of the mentally ill. We struggle to offer healthy spiritual alternatives to those who are addicted to the demons of alcohol and drugs. We endeavour to exorcise the demons of prejudice and injustice so that people of colour, women, gay people, aids patients, so-called 'handicapped' persons and the aged may not be victimized. We must search the intricacies of technology to see whether or not there is a demon or two lurking there with an anti-life tendency, and we are moved to examine closely and critically experiments which put living things at risk. The Church has been given the power to bind and to loose so that the sins which keep us captive can be forgiven and we can be delivered from the power of the evil one.³⁰

In conclusion

It is not enough to know that the cry 'set my people free', is still being heard throughout the world; the Church (and that is all of us who have been baptized in Jesus' name) is obliged to address these problems empathetically. But that does not mean, of course, that the Church has the capacity to loosen every fetter or unlock every prison door, for the Church itself is imperfect and, to this day, resists the prophets, female and male alike, who encourage it to let go certain mind-sets or customs which prevent the Church from enjoying greater legitimate freedom.

This brings me back to *Gaudium et spes* with its question: 'Why should God bestow the gift of freedom on humankind?' And to the answer: 'So that women and men might, of their own accord seek their Creator and freely attain their full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him.'

NOTES

- ¹ Austin Flannery (ed), *Gaudium et spes*, no 17 (Costello Publishing Company, 1975).
- ² Robert MacAfee Brown, *Theology in a new key: responding to liberation themes* (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1978), p 82.
- ³ David Tracy, in his *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and culture of pluralism* (Crossroad, 1981), prefers to use the words 'three publics' rather than three positions.
- ⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Gnosis* (A. and C. Black, 1952), p 17.
- ⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation* (Orbis Press), p 5.
- ⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not stone* (Beacon Press, 1984), p 60.
- ⁷ Pope Paul II at the launching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.
- ⁸ *Evangelii nuntiandi*, no 30. This document was written following the 1974 Synod.
- ⁹ Richard Niebuhr, *The purpose of the church and its ministry* (Harper and Harper, 1982), p 4.
- ¹⁰ The Kairos document: *Challenge to the Church* (South Africa, Kairos theologians, Nov. 1985), pp 8-14.
- ¹¹ John Macmurray, *The self as agent* (Faber and Faber, 1957), p 19.
- ¹² Karl Barth, *Church dogmatics vol 2, part 2, The doctrine of God* (T. and T. Clark, 1957), p 602.
- ¹³ Bonganjalo Goba, 'The problems of racism revisited' in *Faces of Africa* (Unisa, 1984), p 8.
- ¹⁴ Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p 18.
- ¹⁵ Macquarrie, *op. cit.*, p 69.
- ¹⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Prophetic tradition and the liberation of women: promise and betrayal' in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 73 (December 1990), pp 24-33, esp p 25.
- ¹⁷ Sheila D. Collins, *A different heaven and a different earth* (Judson Press, 1974), p 122.
- ¹⁸ Helen M. Luke, *Old age journey into spirituality* (Parabola Books, 1978), p viii.
- ¹⁹ Barbara Robb, *Sans everything: a case to answer* (SCM, 1967), p viii.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p 145.
- ²¹ Marc H. Ellis, *Towards a Jewish theology of liberation*, (Orbis, 1987), p 11.
- ²² James Cone, *The spirituals and the blues* (New York, 1972), p 9.
- ²³ Gutiérrez, *op. cit.*, p 159.
- ²⁴ Allen Boesak, *Farewell to innocence* (Raven Press, 1977), p 20.
- ²⁵ Moon Hee-Suk Cyris, *A Korean Minjung theology* (Orbis, 1986), quoted by Ellis, *op. cit.*, p 73.
- ²⁶ W. M. Thompson, *In the land of the Book* (DLT, 1963), p 148.
- ²⁷ Rudolf Otto, *Reich Gottes und Menschensohn* (EVZ-Verlag, 1967), p 61.
- ²⁸ T. A. Burkill, *Mysterious revelation* (Paulist Press, 1972), p 138.
- ²⁹ H. Preisker, *Neutestamentlike, Testamentlike, vol 4* (Evangelisches Verslagswerk, 1970), p 68.
- ³⁰ *Gaudium et spes, op. cit.*