consequences suggests this.) But the theory does, of course, build on a Josicic 'Ur-Deutenonomy, and suggests that certain parts of the book (especially chs. 1-11) are exilic in language, and its large parts of the ancient Near East, and spanning long periods of time. In particular the motif of threatened loss of land is widespread and conventional in the treaties, and therefore is a poor guide to the dating of any document.60

Concluding observations

It is impossible in the space available to treat every aspect of Pentateuchal study. The present remarks are, therefore, necessarily selective. It is time to turn to the standard introductory literature, not least in preceding issues of this journal (and its predecessors). Much important modern literature has not been mentioned. The character of the patriarchal narratives of the OT is not one that requires special attention to the work of those scholars who, in dating P, have had a deliverance to the traditional documentary hypothesis. Watch for further volumes in the NICOT series, and for a new series by Word books.


Kitchen, ibid., pp. 107-112.

For a full-scale and very new treatment see V. P. Hamilton, Handbook on the Pentateuch (Grand Rapids, Baker: 1983).


See Kitchen, op. cit. for a convenient summary.


And what is the relationship between these two doctrines? The relationship is a complex one and there are many factors involved. For example, the relationship between the two doctrines is affected by the dates of their discovery to Deuteronomy was made by M. G. Kline, Treaty of the Great King (Grand Rapids: Erdmanns, 1963), and by K. A. Kitchen, Ancient Orient and Old Testament (London: IVP, 1966), pp. 90-102.


See Kitchen, op. cit., op. cit., op. cit., pp. 228f, for an account of the controversy.

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50 See Kitchen, op. cit., for a convenient summary.


52 G. Cracoe on Deuteronomy, op. cit., Westen on Numbers (Lancaster: IVP, 1981), and on Leviticus, op. cit. This last work is notable for its interpretation of clean and unclean food and other analogies between the two narratives.


54 Kitchen, ibid., pp. 107-112.

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Doing and interpreting: an examination of the relationship between theory and practice in Latin American liberation theology

Miroslav Volf

This paper was presented to the conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians in 1983. The author comes from Yugoslavia and taught at the Biblical-Theological Institute in Zagreb before beginning his doctoral studies at Tubingen University.

As is well known, Latin American liberation theology understands itself not as another 'genuine theological tradition, but as a new way of doing theology in general. The new definition of theology as a 'critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word' suggests that in Latin American liberation theology we have to do with a 'Copernican change in theology.' The hermeneutical-methodological novum of this theology from which one can explain most of its special characteristics is that it proposes to invert the traditional relationship between theory and practice.

Unlike theology till recently, liberation theology puts practice — in particular, the practice of liberation — in the centre of theological work. It is from this centre that theological reflection should originate, and towards this centre that it should lead. To return to the metaphor of a Copernican change, after theologizing had proved to be unfruitful when practiced around the centre of theology, theologians decided to try to reverse the process and make theory rotate around practice.

This Copernican change in theology has its prehistory in philosophy. I am not referring to Kant as the metaphor may suggest. Rather, I am thinking of a new conception of philosophy which has developed in modern times. At least in some circles, philosophers have come to believe that the proper task of

philosophy is not to operate in a field of abstract thinking and ask, for instance, questions about pre-suppositions of philosophical concepts. Philosophy should be seen as a means of changing the world. The idea that the results of philosophical inquiry should be of benefit to the society is, of course, not new. One has only to think of Plato's Republic. Nevertheless, Plato would have been amazed by this, an understanding that the new understanding of philosophy. For it satisfied Plato if philosophy directed itself to changing society. His modern colleagues, however, can justify the pursuit of philosophy to the extent that it accomplishes its goal of changing society. Indeed, that goal is its primary purpose.

The new understanding of the relation between theory and practice finds its classical and most influential expression in the thinking of Karl Marx. His (and his teacher, Hegel's) view on that problem are still influential in the philosophical discussion on the theory-practice problem today. Liberation theologians' reflections on this problem are deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition mentioned and cannot be understood apart from it.

In the first part of my paper I will discuss the philosophical background of liberation theologians' understanding of the relation between theory and practice. I will elaborate on Marx's theory, whose name recurs often in the publications of liberation theologians. This background will set the stage for the second part of my paper in which I will discuss the adoption and theological adaptation in liberation theology of the understanding of the relation between theory and practice. In the third and last part I will attempt to give a critical assessment of the important hermeneutical-theological suggestion offered by liberation theologians.

The conditions (reality) in the 1830s, however, were anything but reasonable. It was in the context of 'a perfect unphilosophy' (einer vollendeten Unphilosophie), that Marx together with other young Hegelians developed his programme of the actualization of philosophy. The methodological framework of his Dissertations is present in his Dissertation. What was an inner light [Hegel's philosophy] becomes a consuming flame that turns outwards. The consequence is that the world's becoming philosophical is at the same time philosophy's 'becoming worldly' (daß das Philosophische-Weltweise der Welt zugleich ein Weltlich-Werden der Philosophie...). Philosophy must direct itself to the miserable and contradictory world outside and become a 'practical person' (Mensch). As a critique of the existing state of affairs that philosophers had to deal with the whole liberal practice. Once the world has become 'theoretical' (corresponding to theory) theory loses its reason for being. In this way the unity of theory and practice will be realized.

The malicious sometimes told about Hegel holds true for his pupil. When confronted with the facts (of the world) contradicting the proposed theory Marx indeed said: So much the worse for the facts. The world had to be changed. The whole process of the actualization of philosophy is expressed in nuce by Marx's famous — and for the methodology of liberation theology very important — eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. The philosophers have only divided interpretations of the world; the critical thing is to change it.10

The reasons why reality itself, not merely the ideas about it, had to be changed are developed in Marx's book German Ideology. Marx had come to believe that consciousness can never be anything other than conditioned by and conditioned by being of man in his real life-process (das Sein der Menschen ist ihr wirklich Lebensprozeß). For this reason the starting-point of Marx's new view of history is not thought but material production. From the standpoint of material production he tries to explain the various forms of consciousness (religion, morality, etc.).11 The autonomy of theoretical products is only a sham. They are mere 'ideological reflexes and echoes.' The idea cannot be derived from ideas, but vice versa: the formation of ideas should be explained from material production. As a result of the division of labour, however, theory has a tendency to become self-sufficient and secondarily live according to, and dependent from, practice. Marx calls such theory ideology because it is not aware of its own presuppositions in the real world. Moreover, it serves to justify the world of which it is a reflex.

Marx wrote German Ideology in order to show that because consciousness is conscious existence it is impossible to blame it for its material causes, by mere intellectual critique, as young Hegelians claimed. Only when reality is changed do ideas change too. Marx's main point of criticism of Feuerbach and the young Hegelians was, however, that for them philosophy was an attempt only to interpret the existing world differently does not produce only an additional interpretation. By merely interpreting the world one actually confirms it as it presently exists. Interpretation then is not an act that corresponds to its reality. They are ideologies — a designation liberation theology associates with much of western theology.

Marx calls ideology a false consciousness. He does not locate its falsity in its failure to correspond to reality. Its falsity lies rather in its failure to be emancipatory. Obviously, Marx is working with a new notion of truth which had profound influence on liberation theology. In the second thesis on Feuerbach Marx criticizes the traditional concept of truth as adequatio intellectus cum re. The question as to whether there is any objective truth in human thinking is not a question of theory, but a practical question; it is the question of how to make philosophy practical, i.e. reality and power, this worldliness of his thinking. (In the Praxis muß der Mensch die Wahrheit, i.e. Wirklichkeit und Macht, Dasein selbst gegeben.) The debate about the reality or unreality of thinking that is isolated from praxis is a purely academic and abstruse one.

The truth is not arrived at by making theory correspond to reality. In Marx's opinion, this attempt would be only an interpretative approval of the existing situation. Mere interpretations are, in deepest sense of the word, misinterpretations because they simply acknowledge that 'the being of a thing or of a person is at the same time its essence' (das Sein eines Dinges oder Menschen zugleich sein Wesen ist). But for Marx the essence is the world as the 'truth of the here and now' (Wahrheit des Daseins) must first be established. True thinking as opposed to false consciousness is for

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2 Arndt, op. cit., p. 28.
3 G. W. F. Hegel, Werke, XX (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 76. Here, as elsewhere below in citations from German works, an English translation has been used.
4 On the topic, see M. Riedel, Theorie und Praxis im Denken Hegels (Koln: Historische Verlagsanstalt, 1974).
6 Hegel, op. cit., VI, p. 20.
10 Gellhorn, op. cit., p. 199.
14 Duth, op. cit., p. 20.
19 ibid., p. 38.
21 ibid., p. 5. 'The new philosophy,' writes Feuerbach two years before Marx's Thesis on Feuerbach: 'bases itself upon the truth of the immediate experience of being — the denial of the conscientious and objective entity of truth and reality. Where there is no love, there is no truth also.' I. Feuerbach, Sozialistische Weltanschauung, II (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1959), p. 299.
22 Marx, MWE, III, p. 42.
23 ibid., p. 379.
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Nevertheless, Plato would have been amazed by this, if it were associated with a new understanding of philosophy. For it satisfied Plato if philosophy directed itself to changing society. His modern colleagues, however, can justify the pursuit of philosophy as well to the extent that it accomplishes its goal of changing society. Indeed, that goal is its primary purpose. 

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1 Cf. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, X, 1177b.

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4 On the topic, see M. Riedel, Theorie und Praxis im Denken Hegels und Marx (Koln, 1972), p. 42. 


6 Hegel, op. cit., VIII, p. 20.


9 Marx, MEW, E11, p. 21.


14 Ibid., p. 37-38.


Marx thinking which reveals its power to establish the criterion of truth. Revolutionary practice is the criterion of truth. This means that the question whether a theory is true (in traditional sense) loses significance because it is clear whether a theory serves the development of man’s human potentialities.22

If in Greek philosophy theory was an end in itself, with Marx it loses its independence and becomes completely subordinate to revolutionary practice.

2. Liberation theology

A brief look at the situation in Latin America will help us to ask what is the need for liberation theologians to work with what they like to call ‘Marx’s epistemological revolution.’23 Latin Americans perceive their own economic-political situation in the following way:

The sociopolitical, political, and cultural situation of the Latin American peoples challenges our Christian conscience. Unemployment, malnutrition, alcoholism, infant mortality, illiteracy, prostitution, an ever-increasing inequality between the rich and the poor, racial and cultural discrimination, exploitation, and so forth are the facts that define a situation of institutionalized violence in Latin America. Moreover, the relation of Latin America to the countries of the so-called First World cannot be adequately described by such neutral terms as underdevelopment and development. It is rather a relation of domination and dominance. The suffering of the majority of Latin American people is not due to some natural cause, but results from unjust structures.

What is the task of theology in this situation? Should it be possible to ask the traditional theological questions such as ‘What should we believe?’ or ‘How should we speak about our faith so that the unbeliever can understand us?’ As Gutierrez has pointed out, theology in Latin America is faced not with the non-believer but with the non-person who is not interested in a new interpretation but in a new way of life. In this situation the theological question will not be how to speak of God in a world come of age, but how to proclaim him as a Father in a world that is not human.24 A mere theological justification of God in terms of understanding how to understand the relationship between a good God and a situation of oppression will not suffice. It is not, suggests liberation theology, that our thinking about God has to be reconciled with reality. It is reality that must be reconciled with the Kingdom of God, and the quandary of theodicy must be resolved in praxis rather than in theory.25 The central question which theology must answer is thus: ‘What is to be done?’26

From the central theological question, what is to be done?, follows the central hermeneutical question, What method should theology use? The first step must not lose sight of the Word of God, and at the same time be true to the necessity of liberation? In other words, what structure should the hermeneutical procedure have that is defined by a particular kind of liberation, a liberation theology? In order to give a proper answer to its basic theological and hermeneutical questions, liberation theology finds it necessary to make a radical change in traditional theological methodology. The first step in theological work should be to go to the biblical documents and only after that try to apply a thereby acquired theory to a concrete situation as was traditionally done.27 Such a procedure presupposes the existence of a historical absolute, pre-existing truth. For liberation theology (drawing here from Marx) truth lies not in the realm of ideas but on the plane of history.28 Along these lines, Assmann argues for the necessity of overcoming the ‘word-action’ schema of the ‘text’ in the ‘two-way’ process from theory to practice is often never taken so that it becomes simply a ‘word-word’ scheme. Following the modern understanding of the relation between theory and practice, liberation theology sees a need to renew the process of the question raised from the text of the biblical text the ‘text-world’ scheme of theological thinking. Praxis ought to be the centre of gravity around which which theological work rotates. As Sobrino puts it, liberation theology is a ‘by-product of a concrete faith that is pondered and developed in terms of the situation from which the word is to be heard in the praxis of liberation. Its aim is to make that involvement more critically-minded and creative.29 Theology should arise from a particular kind of praxis and aim.

The most crucial insight of liberation theology is, however, not that theology which is true to its task should be done out of a particular praxis and for


25 Gutierrez, Liberation Theology and Proclamation, Concilium, 10 (1974), n. 6, p. 69.


27 Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, p. 249. As Marnham points out, the term ‘orthopraxis’ (as in: "orthopraxis") is not exactly fitting because it turns out that there is no generally not conscious of the connection between their theologizing and their life and practice. They are thus unaware of the real origin and function of their theologizing. When theology limits itself to the task of mere interpretation, it actually leaves the reality to the status quo and justifies it at least indirectly.30 Western theology, allegedly merely interpretative, functions in reality as an ideology. It serves the function of preserving the established order.

28 From this general supposition that, to a large extent, practice influences theory both in its origin and in its goal, follows, according to liberation theologians, an imperative to do theology from a praxis which is in itself praxis (as orthopraxis) is hardly used univocally by liberation theologians, it generally refers to practical political involvement for the liberating the poor and the oppressed. Orthopraxis is, however, not an automatic translation of the biblical text the of this word-world scheme of theological thinking.


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14. J. Sobrino, 'Theologisches Erkennen in der europäischen
und lateinamerikanischen Theologie', in K. Rahner et al. (eds.),

15. Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, p. 249. As Mannheim
points out, 'The task of the social sciences is that in
certain situations the collective consciousness of certain groups
obscures the real conditions of society both to itself and others
and thereby stabilizes it' (K. Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia


19. Sobrino, Liberation Theology and Proclamation, loc. cit. for a short
but helpful discussion of this problem by different liberation
theologians see in this chapter and the next chapter.


21. Documento Finale', I, 1, 1, cited by Migone-Bonito, op. cit.,
pp. 21-22.


makes sense only under the presupposition of 'autonomy of praxis'.

If the praxis of liberation is both a theological starting-point and at the same time the decisive criterion of the truth of a theology, then praxis of liberation becomes the decisive locus theologicus. The primary 'text' for the hermeneutic is not the written witness to Jesus of the prophets and apostles, but the 'global historical clarification of the voice of the human sciences'. The Bible has to be read anew from the perspective of the 'Bible of history' understood as the Word revealed in the cosmos and the development of humanity. While liberation theologians plead for a hermeneutic of liberative praxis they are trying not only to take seriously Marx's epistemological revolution. In addition, they claim that a hermeneutic of praxis is demanded by the Christian revelation. For example, a suitable strategy to let the Christology grow out of a hermeneutic of praxis derives from the prior determinative question, 'What kind of hermeneutic seems to be one that will indeed do justice to our present subject matter, i.e. Christ?'

For Sobrino only a hermeneutic of following Jesus (or of praxis) is adequate for understanding Christ and his work. One of Sobrino's most important presuppositions for understanding the liberation of Jesus Christ, for example, is 'a specific praxis which is nothing else but the following of Jesus'. He grounds this view in the fact that resurrection appearances in the New Testament are always bound up with a calling to mission. A hermeneutic adequate for understanding the resurrection must be one of apostolate. The resurrection of Christ can be understood only in the process of proclamation, and, above all, the transformation of the world. This desire and intention to bring about a transformation of the world is the common horizon which is covered by both the text and the interpreter and which makes it possible for us to comprehend what the resurrection. Only in that case the interpreter will be following in the footsteps of the texts.

Liberation theology claims also more direct biblical evidence which supports a hermeneutic of praxis. The Old Testament prophets seem to identify God's kingdom with the knowledge of God (Je. 22:16). In Johannine literature correct knowledge of God is contingent on correct practice (Jn. 7:17). In the third part of the paper I will discuss some further biblical evidence supporting a hermeneutic of praxis.

Modern inversion of the traditional understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, some biblical impulses, and a situation of oppression have led liberation theologians to put the praxis of liberation in the centre of theological thinking. For them, praxis is a starting-point, a goal, and in some cases, the decisive criterion of theologizing. The hermeneutic of liberation theology is aptly summarized in Assmann's words, '... from action through the Word to the word of action'.

3. Assessment

Liberation theologians have rendered important service to theology in forcefully drawing fresh attention to the fact that a theological practical is oriented to practice. The Greek concept of theory as self-sufficient contemplation is hardly applicable to theology. The first theological efforts in the New Testament to set forth the question of faith and practice arose not from detached contemplation, but out of concrete situations in the life of the church. Furthermore, they were aimed at the life of the church.

This was not merely historically conditioned and coincidental to the structure of the theology expressed in these texts. For Christian theology to do, not with the unchanging order of the universe, but with salvation. Christian theology is based on salvation as already realized in Christ and the ongoing history of the church. Because its purpose is the mediation of salvation to the world, Christian theology is an essentially practical science. Protestant orthodoxy has expressed this truth by defining theology as a practical habitus or scientia. In modern European theology this truth has found expression in the designation of practical theology as the crown of theological studies.

Are we agreeing with liberation theologians in their emphasis on a practical orientation of theology, I wish to plead against them for the ultimate priority (in logical, not necessarily in temporal terms!) of theory in theologizing. This priority seems to me to be implied by the nature of Christian revelation. As the biblical witness indicates, God's final and perfect revelation to mankind occurred in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1ff; Jn. 1:18). This revelation is accessible to us only through the medium of a particular kind of theory — the written word of the Holy Scriptures. It is only through this prophetic and apostolic witness that Christ, the Truth, is accessible to us.

The task of theology is to make it possible that this Truth — no other — makes men free. Thus, in order to be practical, theology has first of all to be theoretical. Correct practice will always ultimately depend on correct interpretation. Against the background of final revelation in Christ, ortho-praxis cannot be considered as an autonomous locus theologico from which orthodoxy is developed and judged. In so far as it wants to be Christian, and not only world-changing, practice must fall under the critical judgment of the Word of God. Otherwise, theology is in danger of merely producing talk and to do what other emancipatory movements are saying and doing anyway.

If one is to understand the Greek concept of theory as an end in itself is not appropriate to theology, neither is the modern notion of an autonomous field of humanizing practice. This must be said precisely in the interest of humanizing practice. For practice can be humanizing only if it is obedient to the revelation of God, who, as Luther said, became man so that we, through faith in Christ, might become true men. Not least for that reason, Christ the Truth, witnessed to in the Scriptures, has to remain the decisive criterion of the truth or falsity of any theory or practice claiming to be Christian.

Both of the mentioned theses — the eminently practical nature of theology, and the ultimate logical priority of theory — can be traced back to the locus classicus of the doctrine of inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Because the Scriptures are theopneustos (inspired) they have priority over practice and determine what correct practice is. But they are in order to become an object of abstract argumentation, as seemed to be the problem in the circles in which Timothy moved, but in order to make the man of God 'equipped for every good work' (2 Tim. 3:17). As a leading Yugoslav New Testament scholar, Nikola St. Duda has said, 'The Word of God indeed is and wants to become the “mother of deed”'.

Since theology is bound to God's revelation in Christ, it must maintain the ultimate logical primacy of theory, because theologically it is irrelevant in the hermeneutic process. In this process one must speak of the mutual influence of theory and practice upon each other.

By emphasizing the necessity of correct practice for correct theories, authors like K. Poppert has made a lasting contribution to theology. They have done by taking seriously the challenge of Marx and the sociology of knowledge. The way we live — and the economic aspect of our lives is an important dimension — does exist of the way we think. In saying this I do not want to repeat the all too obvious mistake of Marx in reducing the ideal super-structure ultimately to the economic factor — important as that may be. Nor is the sociology of knowledge, in its current fashion, the last word. But Karl Popper has indicated, the problems of the sociology of knowledge are seen already when one applies its method to the sociology of knowledge itself.

This means that certain social situations in which men live have a much deeper influence on their thought than traditional epistemologies have allowed for. Theologians must give more serious thought to this fact. It is accidental - to give some contemporary examples - that a conservative North American can see the Bible as the 'undisputed book on financial success' (W. C. Wagner), whereas a radical Latin American can claim to be a revolutionary precisely because he was a priest and a theologian (C. Torres). Theologians must face the fact that their own social situation has influenced and does influence their understanding of the function of theology.
makes sense only under the presupposition of 'autonomy of praxis'.

If the praxis of liberation is both a theological starting-point and at the same time the decisive criterion of the truth of a theology, then praxis of liberation becomes the decisive locus theologicus. The primary 'text' for the hermeneutic is not the written witness to Jesus of the prophets and apostles, but the 'historical voice of the human sciences'. The Bible has to be read anew from the perspective of the 'Bible of history' understood as the Word revealed in the cosmos and the development of humanity.

When liberation theologians plead for a hermeneutic of liberative praxis they are trying not only to take seriously Marx's epistemological revolution. In addition, they claim that a hermeneutic of praxis is demanded by the Christian revolution. For example, one of the chief tasks let the Christology grow out of a hermeneutic of praxis derives from the prior determinative question, 'What kind of hermeneutic seems to be one that will indeed do justice to our present object world, i.e. Christ?'. For Sobrino only a hermeneutic of following Jesus (or of praxis) is adequate for understanding Christ and his work.

One of Sobrino's most important presuppositions for understanding Christ in the New Testament is, for example, 'a specific praxis which is nothing else but the following of Jesus.' This grounds this view in the fact that resurrection appearances in the New Testament are always bound up with a calling to mission. A hermeneutic adequate for understanding the resurrection must be one of apostolate. The resurrection of Christ can be understood only in the process of proclamation, and, above all, the transformation of the world. This desire and intention to bring about this transformation is the common horizon which is shared by both the text and the interpreter and which makes it possible for us to come to understand the resurrection. Only in that case will the interpreter be following in the footsteps of the texts.

Liberation theology claims also more direct biblical evidence which supports a hermeneutic of praxis. The Old Testament prophets seem to identify God with the poor (cf. Jer. 22:16). In Johannine literature correct knowledge of God is contingent on correct practice (Jn. 7:17). In the third part of the paper I will discuss some further biblical evidence supporting a hermeneutic of 'praxis' (Jas 2:18) and the following of Jesus (1:17). In some cases, the decisive criterion of theologizing. The hermeneutic of liberation theology is aptly summarized in Assmann's words, '...from action through the Word to the word of action'.

3. Assessment

Liberation theologians have rendered important service to theologians in forcefully drawing fresh attention to the fact that the church is called to be oriented to practice. The Greek concept of theory as self-sufficient contemplation is hardly applicable to theology. The first theological efforts in the New Testament for understanding Jesus Christ arose not from detached contemplation, but out of concrete situations in the life of the church. Furthermore, they were aimed at the life of the church. This was not merely historically conditioned and coincidental to the structure of the theology expressed in these texts. For Christian theology to have, not with the unchanging order of the universe, but with salvation. Christian theology is based on salvation as already realized in Christ and salvation as the church. Because its purpose is the mission of salvation to the world, Christian theology is an essentially practical science. Protestant orthodoxy has expressed this truth by defining theology as a practical habitus or scientia. In modern European theology this truth has found expression in the designation of practical theology as the crown of theological studies. For agreement with liberation theologians in their emphasis on practical orientation of theology and so forth. In the course of Christian theologizing we need to be convinced of the ultimate priority of this (in the strict judgment of terms) of theory in theologizing. This priority seems to be implied by the nature of Christian revelation. As the biblical witness indicates, God's final and perfect revelation to mankind occurred in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1ff.; Jn. 1:18). This revelation is accessible to us only through the medium of a particular kind of theory - the written word of the Holy Scriptures. It is only through this prophetic and apostolic witness that Christ, the Truth, is accessible to us.

The task of theology is to make it possible that this Truth - no other - makes men free. Thus, in order to be practical, theology has first of all to be theoetical. Correct practice will always ultimately depend on correct interpretation. Against the background of final revelation in Christ, ortho-praxis cannot be considered as an autonomous locus theologicus from which orthodoxy is developed and judged. In so far as it wants to be Christian, and not only world-changing, practice must fall under the critical judgment of the Word of God. Otherwise, theology is in danger of mere theory: to say and to do, what other emancipatory movements are saying and doing anyway.

If the Greek concept of theory as an end in itself is not appropriate to theology, neither is the modern notion of theory as the creation of a volume of humanizing practice. This must be said precisely in the interest of humanizing practice. For practice can be humanizing only if it is obedient to the revelation of God, who, as Luther said, became man so that we, as Luther said, might become true men. Not least for that reason, Christ the Truth, witnessed to in the Scriptures, has to remain the decisive criterion of the truth or falsity of any theory or practice to be Christian. Both of these theologized intensions - the eminently practical nature of theology, and the ultimate logical primacy of practice - can be traced back to the locus classicus of the doctrine of inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Because the Scriptures are theopenenstes (inspired) they have priory over practice and determine what correct practice is. But they are not the basis, but in order to become an object of abstract argumentation, as seems to be the problem in the circles in which Timothy moved, but in order to make the man of God 'equipped for every good work' (2 Tim. 3:17). As a leading Yugoslav New Testament scholar, Branimir Duda, has said, the Word of God indeed is and wants to become the "mother of deed." 14

Since theology is bound to God's revelation in Christ, it must maintain the ultimate logical primacy of theory. But the conclusion that ortho-praxis is irrelevant in the hermeneutical process. In this process one must speak of the mutual influence of theory and practice upon each other. By emphasizing the necessity of correct practice for correct theory, theologians have made a lasting contribution to theology. This they have done by taking seriously the challenge of Marx and the sociology of knowledge. The way we live - and the economic aspect of our lives is an important dimension - and the very way we think and in saying this I do not want to repeat the all too obvious mistake of Marx in reducing the ideal superstructure ultimately to the economic factor - important as that may be. Nor is the sociology of knowledge, in its recent turning from Marxism. As Karl Popper has indicated, the problems of the sociology of knowledge are seen already when one applies its method to the sociology of knowledge itself.

This means true that social situations in which men live have a much greater influence on their thought than traditional epistemologies have allowed for. Theologians must give more serious thought to this fact. It is accidental - to give some contemporary examples, that a conservative North American can see the Bible as 'the undisputed book on financial success' (W. C. Wagner), whereas a radical Latin American claimed to be a revolutionary precisely because he was a priest and a theologian (C. Torres). Theologians must face the fact that their own social situation has influenced and does


5Augustine's attempt to strike a balance between his desire for freedom and understanding of Greek philosophy, and Christ's commandment to love is instructive. In De Civitate Dei he tries to reconcile his love for Plato and his love for Christ. But for me, he does what charity demands. Indeed, one has to avoid being committed too much to either Greek philosophical thought or to Christ's commandment of love. In each man's neighbour's needs as well as being so absorbed in action as to disengage with the contemplation of God (X, 99).


7It would actually be more proper to speak of the contribution of political theologians. The understanding of the relationship of theory and practice in liberation theology is a radicalized version of the treatment of this problem by political theologians in the form of the 'theologie der Weltgeschichte', Perspektiven der Theologie (München: Kaiser, 1960) and J. B. Metz, Zur Theologie der Welt (München: Grünwald, 1968).

Evangelical revival and society: a historiographical review of Methodism and British society c.1750-1850

David Hopmanton

The author is lecturer in the Department of History in the Queen's University, Belfast.

There is no character for whom the worldly (or selfish) man feels so much contemptuous pity as for an enthusiast, until some undeniably great result forces him to confess that enthusiasm is a powerful reality. Enthusiasm became such a powerful reality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the

context of the relation between doing and knowing of 'every good work' (Col. 1:10; 2 Cor. 9:8; 2 Tim. 3:17) - a technical term for works of charity done to both the living and the dead. The unrighteousness by which the truth is suppressed encompasses the whole realm of the ethical, in its most private and its societal aspects.

The emphasis on the importance of correct doing for understanding the biblical message should by no means lead to the neglect of the historical critical method. It should rather supplement it. The obedient doing can supplement the historical-critical method in that it makes possible the preconditioning necessary for the historical-critical task. Although Bultmann, to whom we owe the concept of pre-understanding, is not aware of the influence of doing upon understanding, he pays little attention to it. His concept of pre-understanding is consequently inadequate. The question of the truth of human existence is as such insufﬁcient to constitute a proper pre-understanding for the interpretation of the biblical message. In its concrete content this question needs to be shaped by obedient doing of God's will. For it is he who practices the truth that comes to the light (Jn. 3:21).

Latin American liberation theology has rendered an important service by drawing fresh attention to the practical nature of theology. To the extent, however, that it emphasizes the autonomy of practice (following the modern inversion of the relation between theory and practice) it undermines the basic structure of Christian faith. A theologically appropriate and consistent biblical theory and practice must take into consideration the already-not yet structure of Christian existence. Because of the not yet aspect of Christian existence, theology cannot accept the self-sufﬁciency of theory as such because the particular historical already in Christ, theology cannot accept practice freed from independent normative theory.

The most important contribution of liberation theology has forced many theologians into a new perspective on the signiﬁcance of doing (in its societal form) for correct understanding. Its limitation is excessive enthusiasm about its own discovery. For to the degree that liberation concentrates mainly on political involvement and disregards other objects of doing signiﬁcant for interpreting, its important hermeneutical discovery will produce mis-understanding.


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influence their reading of the Bible. They must make a genuine effort to analyse their social situation and in this way try to overcome their—the use liberation theologians' theological—ideological captivity. This holds true of course no less for 'radicals' than for 'conservatives'. Only then will theologians be able to distinguish the voice of their own culture and that of the Word of God. Only then will they be able to apply God's word critically as well as comforting Word to their situation.

From the importance of practice (life situation) in general for theological understanding follows the importance of ortho-praxis for correct theologizing. Theology should not have had to be forbidden of that by Marx and his followers. Both the Old and New Testaments make it clear that there is a close relation between man's knowledge of God and his obedient doing of God's will. According to Paul, love (obedience, love) and knowledge are closely related. In Colossians 1:9, Paul prays that the Colossians might be filled with the knowledge of (God's) will so that they may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord and thus also increase ‘in the knowledge of God’. In his prayer for the Philippians (Phil. 1:9f) the sequence is inverted. Instead of knowledge—good works—knowledge as in Colossians, he speaks of love—knowledge—good works. This knowing-doing relation can also be expressed negatively, as in Romans 1:18, where Paul speaks of suppressing the truth by unrighteousness. A similar idea is expressed when John writes, ‘For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to light, lest his deeds be exposed’. But he who practises the truth comes to light that his deeds might be manifested as having been done in God (Jn. 3:20-21; cf. 17:6-8; 1 Jn. 4:8). In the New Testament ‘Knowledge and loving action form...an inextricable and growing unity’ (see, e.g., page 30 in the Eng. trans. of Emile). And indeed this unthinkableness without the other.

The necessity of practice for correct understanding is indicated also by the nature of biblical texts. The texts are not only the most part the oral and missionary practice of the church. The struggle for their correct interpretation should also occur in the context of pastoral and missionary involvement. Two days before his death Luther wrote the following in his hyperbolic way. ‘...No one (I imagine) understands Cicero's letters, unless he has had twenty years' involvement in some prominent position in the state. No one should think he has adequately tasted the Holy Scripture, unless he has been involved in church leadership along with the prophets for a hundred years’ (er habe denn hundert Jahr hant dem Prophet). And the interpreter's obedience in love is an important constituent of a proper theological hermeneutic. This circulation should actually be a ‘hermeneutical spiral’ which grows 'out of our commitment in faith and corrects that commitment as we proceed. The more we know, the more we are called to respond obediently. And this is because the more we obey, the more He makes Himself known.'

In the hermeneutical process, it is thus equally true that correct practice presupposes correct theory, and vice versa. It is true that correct theory is a presupposition for correct practice. Correct interpreting takes place only when theory and practice mutually influence each other. But practice, though of crucial importance, cannot serve as a criterion of proper interpreting. In a hermeneutical process it is only an instrument for finding a theory which corresponds to the theology expressed in biblical texts. As the witness to Christ, Scripture is the only criterion of the truth of a theory in a hermeneutical process. Precisely because obedient doing is important for interpreting, it is of crucial importance to have a concept of doing which corresponds to the biblical texts themselves. Doing cannot be seen as autonomous if it is to offer any real help in interpreting the biblical documents. A too narrow understanding of doing, for instance, is likely to result both in ‘interpreting’ or even disregarding some aspects of the biblical message as ‘interpretating’ others. This seems to me to be the case in liberation theology with its reduction of doing to the praxis of political liberation.

The biblical concept of doing as a presupposition for knowledge as well as the practice approach of the church and in our situation also political involvement—in the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. But the biblical concept of doing cannot be reduced to political, liberative action alone. Paul speaks in the context of the relation between doing and knowing of ‘every good work’ (Col. 1:10; cf. 2 Cor. 9:8; 2 Tim. 3:17) —a technical term for works of charity done to both relieve the poor and the unrighteousness by which the truth is suppressed encompasses the whole realm of the ethical, in its most private and its societal aspects.

The emphasis on the importance of correct doing for understanding of the biblical message should by no means lead to the neglect of the historical critical method. It should rather supplement it. The obedient doing can supplement the historical-critical method in that it makes possible the preunderstanding necessary for the historical text. Although Bultmann, to whom we owe the concept of preunderstanding, is not aware of the influence of doing upon understanding, he pays little attention to it. His concept of preunderstanding is consequently inadequate. The question of the truth of human existence as is such insufficient to constitute a proper preunderstanding for the interpretation of the biblical message. In its concrete content this question needs to be shaped by obedient doing of God's will. For it is he who practises the truth that comes to the light (Jn. 3:21).

Latin American liberation theology has rendered an important service by drawing fresh attention to the practical nature of theology. To the extent, however, that it emphasizes the autonomy of practice (following the modern inversion of the relation between theory and practice) it undermines the basic structure of Christian faith. A theologically appropriate approach to liberation theology and practice must take into consideration the already-not yet structure of Christian existence. Because of the not yet aspect of Christian existence, theology cannot accept the self-sufficiency of theory and practice. Liberation theology must be concerned because of a particular historical already in Christ, theology cannot accept practice freed from independent normative theory.

The most important contribution of liberation theology has forced many theologians into a new perspective on the significance of doing (in its societal form) for correct understanding. Its limitation is excessive enthusiasm about its own discovery. For to the degree that liberation concentrates mainly on political involvement and disregards other aspects of doing significant for interpreting, its important hermeneutical discovery will produce my-understanding.


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The exodus motif is, for instance, both 'overinterpreted' in that in a particular message is read into it, and 'underinterpreted' in that some of its important aspects are disregarded.