

Political Theology I

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This is the first of a series of articles intended to be an introduction to contemporary political theology. It is not meant to be a survey of movements or literature. There is already a large and increasing number of articles and books which set out to do this. But a certain amount of surveying will have to be done, since it is of the essence of political theology that it is tied to history. It is not a purely theoretical discipline which can be elaborated without regard to events. It has been generated precisely as a christian response to events. It is a response to the historical misappropriation of theology. It is a historical *reappropriation* of the Bible, of the christian tradition and of the practice of worship out of the hands of those who serve certain dominant class interests with the aid of these things. It is a critique of Christianity in its form of class ideology and at the same time a critique of those societies which use christianity in this way. This critique is done in the name of a more authentic christianity, faithful – it is hoped – to the true purposes of revelation. It is not therefore a mere branch of theology, to be studied alongside of a ‘theology of marriage’ or even a ‘moral theology’. It is not a ‘theology of politics’, still less a ‘theology *and* politics’: In the hands of the Liberation theologians at least, it claims to be a complete rethinking of theology: an entirely new turning point in the historical articulation of the Christian faith. Such a large claim will need examination. At any rate it is clear to me that theology can no longer proceed without a close examination of the role that it has played in the past and even now plays in the political determinants of human life. Christian theological innocence is now lost in this respect: as should have been acknowledged since Marx’s critique of religion. We cannot escape facing the use to which theology has been put in case the very purposes of revelation have been frustrated by this use. No politically neutral theology is now possible. Political experience has forced itself upon theology.

This is not to say however that all theology is really about politics despite the appearance to the contrary. No modern political theologian holds such a position, so far as I know. A reduction of that kind would only ask to be dismissed as having nothing to say about large and equally important aspects of reality. But if theol-

ogy has anything to do with articulating the revelation of God's justice and the human response to that justice, then concern for theology and concern for political relationships will be inescapably locked together. In this regard most theologies betray themselves more by their silences than by their positive statements. It is not so much what they say that betrays their political affiliations – it is rather what they do not speak about and the part they play in lending ideological support in covering up the human responsibility for the injustices of the societies which provide their creators with a place and a living.

Above all the political innocence of biblical exegesis can no longer be maintained. Of course exegesis is a discipline governed by its own rules, which in the study of detail must be left to produce their own results free of control by other interests. However, silences and the choices about what counts as most important and conspicuous failures to connect the gospel with the Old Testament concern for justice – despite abundant clues in the text – and like failures to connect the gospel with what most burdens people today: all these play their part in rendering modern biblical commentary harmless, or worse, a useful diversionary tool for class interests. (See for instance the brilliant, if sometimes overdone, fresh look at exegesis by José Porfirio Miranda in *Marx and the Bible*, SCM Press, 1977.)

The statement that the apparently objective discipline of biblical exegesis cannot escape being conditioned by the political outlook of the people who practise it becomes more acceptable if for “political” we substitute “moral”. Then it becomes clear that we are saying nothing that is new to the christian tradition itself. One of the best statements of this truth occurs in St Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*. The topic of this book is the interpretation of scripture: what we would call hermeneutics or the rules that must be followed for the correct understanding of the sacred text. The correct interpretation depends not only on having the right intellectual equipment, the right languages, critical apparatus, knowledge of sciences and so on, but also on living according to the right principles, for the right end. No one who is without love can understand the scripture. He may talk about it endlessly and be very clever at using it for his own purposes, but God will not show himself through it. Only a life of charity already embarked upon will give that necessary insight into the true meaning of difficult passages. Without charity irreparable mistakes will be made – the wrong choices, the wrong emphases, the wrong applications. The heart must be moving in the right direction before the mind can understand. On the other hand, those who live a perfect life would not need the scriptures at all – though we know from elsewhere

that Augustine believes that no one can live a perfect life here below. So the scriptures are for the benefit of the ordinary christian halfway between the old life and the life of heaven: the 'convalescent' Christian – as Augustine saw himself to be – the man who is pointed in the right direction, but who is nowhere near perfect in faith, hope or charity. But in order to even begin to understand them, some beginning in these virtues – especially charity – is needed. It is a kind of hermeneutical circle: we need the scriptures in order to know how to lead the good life, but without a beginning in the good life, we will not understand what the scriptures are about. I see no difficulty in accepting this kind of circle of interpretation if the scriptures are to be taken seriously as the revelation of God. We do not approach God through objective sciences, but through a fundamental re-orientation of the heart. The sciences are necessary for an accurate analysis of the text, but no amount of analysis will let the Word of God through if a person has the wrong set of values to begin with. To ask where these values come from is to raise all kinds of difficult questions about moral freedom and grace, but it does make sense to believe that the knowledge of God does not come from the text alone, although the text is necessary for the accurate and permanent acquisition of this knowledge. What comes first is not the written word of God, but a fundamental conviction about good and evil, or at least the stirrings of one. What comes first is a moral perception: what Hume would have called an "original passion", which is perhaps the best term for it.

James Cone acknowledges this point when he says "scripture is not a guide which makes our decisions for us" (*A Black Theology of Liberation* p 68). The Bible does not coerce people into the right outlook. This is only too obvious to a Black Theologian like Cone, who wonders what happened to the truth of God's revelation when the Bible-toting, hymn-singing white christians were lynching black men, burning their families out of their homes and forbidding them entry to their schools.

According to Juan Segundo (*The Liberation of Theology*, pp 7-38) the hermeneutical circle of which we are speaking presupposes a profound human commitment, a partiality that is consciously accepted, not on the basis of theological criteria, but on the basis of human criteria. Hence the attack of some Liberation theologians on "academic theology" for its supposed political impartiality, a claim that can only be false in view of its overwhelming silence in the face of social evils. No theology is uncommitted, even if it is only the sterile commitment to one's own privileged life. Segundo sees four decisive factors in the circle of interpretation; which I interpret as follows:

1 The life experience of some people may lead to “ideological suspicion”, i.e. the suspicion that they are not being told the truth about themselves and their real needs; that they are subjected to a set of illusions about values, about what they and their work is worth in relation to other classes and their work. An ideology in this sense is a set of illusions deliberately propagated to support the partial interests of a class of people who hold power and who maintain their position through the work – and ignorance – of another class. An ideology is a false belief about a common interest which is not really common at all. It is successful when the class of people being used in this way accepts what is said about them and their worth to the supposed common interest. Once they begin to question this and to perceive that the supposed common interest is not their interest, but only damages their lives – once they see the gap between the ideology and the reality – then they have embarked on ideological suspicion. This may be well illustrated by reference to the rejection by black people in South African townships of the white man’s negative evaluation of them and their culture. I intend to discuss the Black Consciousness movement and its significance for theology in a later article.

2 In the next stage, this ideological suspicion is applied to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular. If theology has been used as an integral part of the dominant ideology, in the service of the values of the dominant class, then it too comes under suspicion. There is a realisation that God can’t be as he is said to be. If God’s demands have led to the intolerable injustices that are experienced, then they have been given the wrong God.

3 This then leads to an “exegetical suspicion”, a conviction that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has been a key factor in the propagation of this wrong view of God. One of the chief ways in which the Liberation theologians find the common interpretations defective is in their failing to connect the Old Testament’s message of God’s liberation from injustice with the teachings of Jesus, as if these had nothing to do with one another: as if Jesus came to preach a new privatised religion of one-to-one relationships with God, superseding the prophetic demand for justice in the community.

4 This exegetical suspicion then leads to a new hermeneutical enterprise, a new reading of scripture. The Bible is understood in a new way, and God is understood in a new way, because the consequences of the original understanding were seen to be morally unacceptable, especially by those who suffered them.

An important point to be remembered is that this process of reinterpretation is not seen by any of the political theologians as

a purely individual one, leading to a private interpretation of scripture. It is always the work of a community because it involves the self-understanding and moral valuations and experiences of a whole class of people thrown together in their common suffering. Since they are individually oppressed or discriminated against because of their belonging to a particular class, a shared suffering produces a shared re-interpretation of christianity.

There are obvious dangers in this process. But there is no way of interpreting the Bible that is free of dangers. The dangers of being content with the accepted, unexamined, interpretation are greater. "Decisions have to be made when it comes to putting the teachings of Christ into practice. We must not succumb to the lazy christian's dream of having a complete set of rules which will make it unnecessary to take any risks" (Segundo).

Let us consider by way of illustration the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount about turning the other cheek to an aggressor. There is no good reason to doubt that this was what he really taught. He seems to have taught a doctrine of non-violence, non-retaliation against enemies and even of co-operation with them. In the history of christian preaching this doctrine has appeared most commonly in the form of exhortation to the oppressed who might otherwise be provoked to rebel. It is implied that rebellion – especially with physical violence – would be a betrayal of Christ. The doctrine is less often invoked when the 'lawful authorities' or their property are under attack. Then Christ appears to be on the side of just suppression of evil. Observations of that kind may lead some people to suspect that the doctrines being preached to them are being used simply to keep them in their place. A suspicion of this leading value of staying in your place rather than rebelling will sooner or later enter the minds of those who are so treated. The battered christian wife attempting to leave her husband who is told by the priest that the only christian thing to do is to return to her duties; the people of the black township who are told that peaceful (i.e. ineffective) means are the only legitimate ones for achieving a better life for themselves and their children, even when official violence is daily used against them: at least some people in such positions will eventually refuse to believe what they are told. There will come a point when they will refuse to take either the treatment or the ideology that has made them submit to it. They will recognise that the "turn-the-other-cheek" doctrine has been preached to them by those who oppress them, or at least by those who have nothing to lose by preaching it. Then they may suspect that religion is being used as a tool of social control, to keep them in their place. At this point such people may give up christianity altogether, as for instance many young people

in the black townships of South Africa are now doing. On the other hand they may remain christian but progress to another kind of suspicion: that the version of Christ's teaching that has been fed to them is seriously defective. This will call for a re-examination of the teaching, which may involve a number of moves.

In the first place one might ask whether the usual interpretation of this particular group of sayings is in deep accord with the basic principles of the gospel, as otherwise understood. Can it really be seen as part of the 'good news to the poor'? If this is just morally impossible to comprehend, then something must be wrong. Secondly one must ask whether the "turn-the-other-cheek" type of behaviour is always an expression of the gospel precept to love your neighbour as yourself. (cf. Augustine's teaching that charity is the final arbiter when it comes to interpreting difficult passages of scripture.) On reflection it would soon appear that non-resistance to an aggressor is not necessarily to love *him*, let alone yourself and your dependents. In letting him get away with it and think that it is right you may be doing him damage and you will certainly be allowing evil to continue unchecked. It might be more loving to hit back or to go on strike or do whatever is possible and effective to change the pattern of things. This opens up the large question of legitimate means which I do not want to discuss at this point. But the very fact that the question is opened up in this way shows that decisions about what exactly is in accordance with charity cannot be taken for granted, especially when the received doctrine seems to allow the continuance of great evil. Of course, "turning-the-other-cheek" will still remain the loving thing to do in some circumstances, such as where a quarrel between brothers threatens, or when revenge would be only too easy and lead to a complete estrangement between people who are otherwise more or less equal in their power to do good and evil to one another. Preservation of the common good is the rule. It becomes morally very problematic where there is great inequality of power and when institutional violence is done to one party by another. The ideological weapon is precisely a mystification about the common good. And the non-retaliation can very easily be used in the service of this mystification.

Realising that there are times when some particular words of Christ do not apply, even in a metaphorical sense, makes one think of the times when they do. That is quite an achievement in itself. Questioning received interpretations from moral premises does not weaken one's hold upon the teachings of Christ but rather strengthens it because the purpose of it becomes clearer. And hence the application becomes surer. This may go some way towards answering the objection that if we give priority to moral

convictions in interpreting the text of scripture we might as well dispense with the scripture altogether and just follow our convictions, independently arrived at. This objection ignores the dialectic of mutual interpretation that is always involved in connecting the Word of God with the present situation.

Scripture may not be a "guide" that makes our decisions for us", as Cone says, but it is a guide which enables *us* to make decisions. It is a challenge to our unexamined moral positions, but it cannot by itself determine our reconsidered moral positions. It can open our eyes to the evil that we ourselves do or support but it does not provide a detailed guide to the decisions which must be made by those who have evil done against them, still less for their would-be moral instructors. It is a mistake to imagine that we must first learn the meaning of the scriptures and then go out armed with certainty to do good to our neighbour. That is a liberal fallacy. If there is any certainty, it is learned only in the events which are forced upon us. It is very important to have an initial familiarity with the text. But the real meaning of it can only be learned after we have felt the daily necessity of choosing good from evil. Then a return to the text – armed with suspicion of received interpretations – will lead to a better understanding of its meaning: to connections not previously seen; to the relative importance of different sayings; to discernment of the really important values. First we have to be willing to risk making the choices without asking for the sure and certain back-up of authority.

As Segundo makes clear (op. cit. pp 75-81), this is the precise point of contest between Jesus and the Pharisees. He calls it a difference in their theological methodology. According to St Mark's Gospel, the Pharisees, who see themselves as the guardians of revelation, i.e. the Law, and whose authority with the people depends on this, feel their authority to be challenged by Jesus whose activity cannot be judged from the point of view of the received traditions of the Law. "Their aim is to divest the concrete phenomenon before them of anything and everything that cannot be wholly deduced from divine revelation, so that they won't run the risk of making a mistake ..." (Segundo). But Jesus, it appears, is "Something new about which past revelation has nothing specific to say". There are no guaranteed tests for judging Jesus apart from his activity itself, which is consistently that of liberation from suffering. But to this the Pharisees are blind because their attention is directed not at what is happening before their eyes, but at the Law and the progressive elaboration of what it allows or forbids. Mark 3: 1-6 is worth quoting in full: "Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the sabbath, so that they

might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come here'. And he said to them, 'Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. And he looked around him with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand'. He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."

So the Pharisees' attempt to judge Jesus's activity according to purely theological criteria is a failure. The issue of good and evil escapes them entirely because they are not prepared to risk a decision without the backing of their own source of authority, which has no answer for the question that Jesus asks them. On another occasion they ask what authority he has for doing the things he does (Mark 11: 27-33). This is the way their theological method proceeds: the complete dependence on the authority of the oral tradition for interpreting and applying the Law to particular cases. Jesus throws them again by countering with a demand for a judgement about the value of John's baptism. They are caught in a cleft stick since, if they say it is from God, he will then ask them why they didn't accept it and if they say it is merely human they will lose their authority with the people, who largely accepted its divine origin. It is probable that they had been unable to accept the baptism of John for the same reason that they couldn't accept the activity of Jesus: because there was no warrant for it in their tradition. Never mind what good was in it. So, if they were unable to recognise the intrinsic authority of John's baptism of repentance for sins, they will be unable to recognise the like authority of Jesus's liberating activity. He is therefore unable to communicate it to them in any other way and refuses to continue the conversation.

The same issue is at stake in the Beelzebub controversy (see Mark 3: 22-26) and in the Pharisees' demand for a sign from heaven (i.e. from God) which would authenticate Jesus's work (see Mark 8: 11). The two incidents are woven together in Luke 11: 14-23 where some claimed that it was the prince of demons that gave him power to cast out demons, while others demanded a sign from heaven to prove that it was God's work he was doing. He asks them to judge the evidence before their eyes in the way they would judge such incidents done by their own people and to recognise that it is the work of the "finger of God", which is itself a sufficient sign that God's kingdom has arrived. Then he ends, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters". The Pharisees will not accept that healing cripples, deaf mutes, casting out demons etc. is itself sufficient evidence for

God's own work. Instead they need the direct intervention of a revelation from heaven – a theological criterion on a level with their tradition – before they will risk a judgement on the value of what is happening before their eyes. This kind of behaviour is not “gathering” but “scattering”. They are not bothered about whether or not Jesus is doing good, but about whether he has a right to do it: a concern which is typical of those who put preservation of their power before the liberation of those over whom they exercise it, as at least some of the Pharisees appear to have done in Jesus's time.

The conviction that true liberation must always be supported, no matter by whom it is brought about is fundamental to modern political theology. God acts in the activity of all those who work for the cause of justice and the elimination of man-originated suffering, and not merely – and often not at all – in his “official” representatives. But his official representatives at least have the task of making it known that God so acts; that it is God, the Father of Jesus Christ, in whose interests the liberation of human beings is accomplished. Insofar as this liberation is to be brought about by political means – insofar as it is a political reality – there is every reason why the church should actively promote or encourage those political currents which seek it as their goal, no matter by whom they are originated or with whom it finds itself to be associated in the process. The ways of political liberation are complex, risky and often ambiguous. They are by no means as plain as curing the lame and the possessed. So it would be worthwhile indeed if theologians lent their talents and knowledge to the difficult task of showing what would count as real human liberation on the political level – or, shall I say, what political conditions there must be for real liberation. That task cannot be relegated to some other expert – the politician or the political philosopher – while the theologian gets on with his ‘proper’ task of discussing liberation on some other ‘higher’ level. Theology is not one more human expertise which must be careful not to cross its boundaries and trespass on the ground of another expertise called politics. The issue between theology and politics is not parallel with that between theology and natural science. The reason for this is that both of these activities can claim in different ways – by enabling rather than controlling – to be interested in the totality of human life and its betterment. So their interests must overlap permanently in the area of justice and human liberation. (Further arguments to establish this important point can be found in my article “The Politics of the Spirit”, *New Blackfriars*, April 1979. Or better still, Cosmas Desmond, *Christianity or Capitalism*, Bowerdean Press, 1978).

All too often however, the position taken by the church is at once that of pretended non-interference and actual support for the existing authority and its oppressions. These two things always go comfortably together. The role of the theologians is to back up this position by demonstrating with great shows of learning that there is no warrant in the teaching of Jesus or in the fundamentals of the faith for active christian involvement in liberation politics or the revolutionary struggle. The circle is closed, the authority of theologians and governments is maintained and people go on suffering helplessly because of what other people do to them. And Theology has nothing to say to give them a hope of a better life in which people do not treat one another in such a way.

There have been a variety of political theologies in the history of christianity, largely conditioned by changes in the theological evaluation of nature, in the self-understanding of the church and its role in the world and in the notion of what counts as politics. There is no single, ahistorical discipline which could always be counted on to present the 'christian view' of political life, which in itself is a constantly changing thing, subject to major revolutions of subject matter. I hope to show in subsequent articles how contemporary changes in these things have combined to produce new political theologies which take the imperative of liberation from injustice as the crossing point of Gospel and political aspiration. Whatever the type of politics the church confronted in previous ages, it is indisputable that contemporary politics is about liberation from various kinds of injustice and the effects, positive and negative, that nationalism has upon it. Since the most important kinds of injustice are social in character – i.e. they oppress people insofar as they belong to some class or type – a first step will be to examine the notion of social justice. I shall then try to connect the findings with the Gospel demand for justice between men as a condition for entry into the Kingdom of God. (For a preliminary view of this, see my article, "A Christian View of Justice", *New Blackfriars*, August 1978, pp 344 - 359). I do not expect the relationship to be a simple one, if only because there are a number of conflicting notions of what constitutes social justice. Nor is the idea of liberation unproblematic, though it is to be hoped that our problems about it don't come at the same point as they did for some of the Pharisees. Afterwards I shall give an account of some of the main types of recent political theology. It may be that we will learn enough so as to be able to face the truly evil aspects of government in our own country with something better than mere feelings of dismay.