

Liberation Theology and the Holy See: A Question of Method

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I The Holy See's critique of liberation theology

In its document *Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'* the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith not only accepts but welcomes the advent of a 'theology of liberation', seen as a theological exploration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a 'message of liberty' and as 'liberating power'.¹ The CDF finds fault, therefore, not with the project but with its execution, not with liberation theology as such but with the structure and content of a significant proportion of the liberation theology currently being written.² Just how much a significant proportion might be is impossible to determine. On the one hand, some writings of the more extreme members of the school offer the most complete textual confirmation of the portrait by the CDF. Thus in a work put into English in 1977 we read that a theology which accepts the truth of historical materialism (i.e. classical Marxism) will 'assume his (Marx's) theory completely in order to see what sort of faith, if any, is possible on that basis'.³ A moderate liberationist, Gustavo Gutierrez, admits in the preface to a work by a more radicalised colleague that it would be 'disingenuous' to deny the danger of reductionism of just the kind now identified by the CDF⁴. On the other hand, the *genre* of the document is not textual description so much as logical or conceptual projection. That is, it appears to be concerned with the end-state to which a consistent application of the principles involved in current liberation theology would lead, rather than with a description of a representative mean in the present state of liberation theology. Thus, while many examples of liberation theology now extant may be no fair target for the CDF's strictures, the reason for this may be their own indecisiveness in following through their grounding principles, owing to the moderating influence of other theologies, ecclesial faith and practice, and so forth. The comparison with Pope Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi* is inevitable, but not necessarily to the discredit of the Roman magisterium. *Pascendi* can be regarded as a brilliant statement of the systematic form which Catholic Modernism would take were the principles and methods of Liberal writers consistently followed. As such, it assisted contemporary historians in their attempts to establish

a taxonomy of the religious thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵

A consideration of the aims and *genre* of the CDF document suggests, therefore, that its primary concern is with the first principles of liberation theology, in other words, with *theological method*. Admittedly the document has strictures to pronounce on aspects of content, both theological and political. It finds some liberationist emphases in exegesis, dogmatics and preaching at best partial, at worst distorting; and it regards much of the political programme as sitting ill with the 'social tradition of the Church' as well as historically naïve. Nevertheless, these flaws in content are essentially symptomatic of a more structural fault at the level of theological method. The particular strictures of the document are governed by its assessment of the question of method, to be found principally in Chapter VI, *Nova christianismi interpretatio*, and Chapter X, *Nova ratio interpretandi*. Here the CDF joins hands with some of the best recent criticism of liberation theology from a standpoint wholly independent of that of the Roman see.⁶ The general strictures of the CDF on liberation theology's methods may be stated in the form of counter-principles, three in number. These are: a principle of totality, a principle of catholicity, and a principle of relative theological autonomy.⁷

The principle of *totality* states that theology must address itself to the total human being by bringing to bear the total Christian revelation. As the total person is open to transcendence, this person is more than their secular self (however crucial the secular realm as a mediation of transcendence), and the secular self is more than the political self (however much politics may be assumed by, or lie subjacent to, say, aesthetic or inter-personal activities). Similarly, the total Christian revelation, the free self-manifestation of the triune God in incarnation, atonement and the transfiguring mission of the Spirit in the Church, has social-political aspects or implications yet cannot be reduced to these socio-political aspects or implications.

The principle of *catholicity* states that theology (or at any rate, Catholic Christian theology) cannot be generated by simply juxtaposing biblical themes and images (in this case, the theme and images of liberation) with particular human situations (in this case, those of economic, social and political domination of one group by another), while bypassing the theological tradition of the Catholic Church, whether one thinks of that synchronically, across space, or diachronically, across time. The principle of catholicity is here asserted over against biblicism which would ignore the transmission of revealed meaning as Scripture-read-within-Tradition, and also over against what may be called an experiential particularism which ignores the dialogical character of the emergence of human meaning in a

conversation between generations and between cultures.⁸

Finally, the principle of *relative theological autonomy* states that, as the intelligent expression of divine revelation, theology cannot be subordinated to the deliverances of philosophy or to the findings of the social sciences. Its autonomy resides in its own nature, as a form of knowing which takes its rise from a divine self-communication. On the other hand, this autonomy is admittedly limited, relative, since theology needs concepts drawn from other disciplines in order to carry out its own reflection. Here the document draws attention to the instrumental rather than normative character of secular concepts or analytic tools within theology. It is because Athanasius treated the concepts of Middle Platonism as merely instrumental that he can be regarded as theologically inspirational; it is because Origen (probably) regarded them as normative that he is not a 'classic' in the same sense.

II *The problem of theological method*

Standing back for a moment from the clash of principles involved here, something may usefully be said about the basic character of the contest. Although there are histories of theology, such as the great article in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* by Père Congar,⁹ and even histories of the history of theology such as Jaroslav Pelikan's monograph *Historical Theology*,¹⁰ there is, as yet, no such thing as a history of theological method. Disputes over what would now be termed theological method surfaced fairly early in the history of theology. One thinks of Tertullian's invective against the uncritical take-over of pagan philosophy into theology, the more subtle reflections of the Cappadocians on the same theme and the internal debate within Augustine's *corpus* on the respective claims of *scientia* and *sapientia* as a proper self-description of theology. While summary statements of the nature of theology can be found appended to theological works in the medieval period, for instance in the opening question of Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*, it is a moot point whether principles stated so programmatically have in any deep way organised, informed and controlled the texts which follow them. A post-factum exposition of the theological method of the *Summa* would correspond ill, it may be argued, to question 1 of the *Prima Pars*. The first full-scale consideration of theological method may be said to be the *De locis theologicis* of the Spanish Baroque Scholastic Melchior Cano, but the concern with various 'degrees' of theological authority, which occupies the centre of this work, deflected attention from the need for coherence and explanatory force in theology to an almost exclusive absorption in the question of its proper sources. This narrowing in the definition of the problem of theological method ultimately derived from the Scripture-Tradition debate of the Reformation period and was not overcome until the nineteenth century.

It was the search for a unitary method in the theological renaissance of nineteenth century German Catholicism which made the issue of theological methodology a focus of interest for writers of many schools within that earlier 'pluralism', and aroused for the first time the anxieties of the Holy See in its capacity as guardian of Catholic teaching.¹¹ Without the Roman interventions of the pontificates of Gregory XVI and Pius IX in the successor movements to the first Tübingen school, it is less likely, perhaps quite unlikely, that Pius X would have elected to engage Liberal Catholicism on the battle-field of theological method and that he would have made the (in retrospect, regrettable) attempt to impose the pattern of medieval theology, and more especially Thomism, on faculties and seminaries as a way of foreclosing the issue of the grounds and principles of theological activity.

But the fact of the matter is that so long as theological method preserves its present inflated status in the estimation of theologians, it will be impossible for the Holy See *not* to comment upon it. If there is to be an attempt to state a unitary method (whether this be along the lines of Juan Luis Segundo,¹² or of Bernard Lonergan¹³), then there will always be a rational basis for the fear of those who have guardianship of doctrine that they will be faced at any moment with a *haeresis haeresium*, a compendium of all heresies, a discordant *nova christianismi interpretatio*. Because, manifestly, if the communication of Christian doctrine is to be governed by a single comprehensive and exclusive theological method, the doctrine which emerges will only be what the method allows to emerge. And so, if the guardians of doctrine may legitimately intervene anywhere to protect the formulation of Catholic faith, *a fortiori* they may intervene here. Under the highly intelligent guidance of Cardinal Ratzinger, the CDF will no doubt only intervene in a negative sense, that is, by ruling out of court theological methodologies that are defective in the light of theological tradition as a whole. This is a far cry from the attempt of the Holy Office, in the wake of the Modernist crisis, to intervene in a positive sense by decreeing the universal adoption of a single theological method, or its equivalent—a decree which had such deplorable results in terms of episcopal authoritarianism yesterday and theological anarchism today. Nevertheless, so long as the issue of theological method retains the exaggerated place it now holds, the temptation to impose a single theological type must be recurrent for anyone who cares about orthodoxy.

The absorption in theological method is an aspect of an absorption in theological epistemology, which itself reflects the hyper-inflation of the epistemological problem after Kant. The hero of theological methodologists is in effect G.W.F. Hegel, and the role of method in their writing may be compared to the role of the concept of

Geist in his. Hegel's attempt to trace the immanent intelligibility of the world to a source which can be conceptually delimited is mirrored in the attempt of theological methodologists to locate a method which would be adequate to revelation and yet could be stated in terms of fundamental axioms or givens. Historically, the connexion between Hegel and Catholic theology passes through the influence of the 'Right' Hegelians on the early Tübingen school. More generally, the philosophical project as defined by Hegel, the making of a systematically coherent and universally illuminating account of the world, is similar to the self-set task of theological methodology, to relate an all-embracing revelation to a set of first principles which can constitute the intellectual foundation of revelation's self-expression.¹⁴ The inversion of Hegelianism in Marxism leaves the universally-systematising form of Hegel's thought intact, whilst turning its content upside down. Inevitably, then, the combination of Marxism with post-Catholic Revival concern for theological method led liberation theology to its present crisis.

III *The methods of liberation theology*

Liberation theology has not been content to regard the theme of liberation as the axis on which one theological world among many might turn. Nor could it be satisfied by drawing in theological materials from a variety of sources to illuminate its own (perfectly well-chosen) problem. Instead, it characteristically combines the peculiar Marxist concept of truth with the prevailing search for a unitary method and so produces that interpretative scheme, at once ortho-praxis and ortho-theory, in which it has found itself, as the CDF document remarks, so very largely enclosed.¹⁵ For while, in the mind of the averagely informed person, liberation theology is regarded as essentially pastoral, evangelical, populist and almost *amateur*, in reality a great deal of it is concerned in an extremely sophisticated way with methodological issues.

While liberation theology is itself a pluralism, as the CDF is the first to confess,¹⁶ the common element in the methods of its practitioners consists in the belief that the verification of a theological formulation depends upon its agreement with the actual liberating process that God is bringing about in history.¹⁷ In some writers, the content of a liberationist hermeneutic is decided by the 'scientific' analysis of modern society to the extent that the independent value of Christian revelation becomes problematic.¹⁸ In others, a new understanding of the Gospel message is found through revolutionary commitment, yet is potent enough to transpose the quality and meaning of that commitment.¹⁹ In yet others, the application of criteria drawn from dialectical materialism isolates certain biblical ideas as privileged or key ideas, leading to the possibility of

interpreting the whole of revelation from their standpoint.²⁰ The theologies to which these understandings of method lead will differ except in what may be called their imperialism, that is, their claim to autonomy and sufficiency vis-à-vis the theologies of the past.

The methodologically-based suspicion of all other theologies is the most worrying feature of liberation theology, and justifies to a degree the anxiety of the Roman authorities that it may not be possible to talk (in any serious sense) with its exponents.²¹ Yet once the obsession with method is healed, it should be possible to see that a good theology will always be a receptive theology, a theology which welcomes the insights of other theologies and lives happily in the ambience of a theological tradition wider than itself. Acquaintance with the history of theology indicates that there is no theological method in the singular, only theological methods in the plural, perspectives in which we come at the inexhaustible mystery of the self-revealing God. In a Catholic theology certain features or elements should, it is true, be present (as for instance, some appeal to reason, Scripture, Tradition, magisterium, Christian experience). But not the least desirable, nay necessary, of these features is the built-in possibility of hospitality to other refractions of the single Word. In this sense, the supreme methodological desideratum is the ability to show that one's own theological method does not have the last and only adequate word. Let us hope that Rome's intervention may remind the liberation theologians of the call to catholicity in this, its profoundest sense.

- 1 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'* (Vatican City 1984), Introduction.
- 2 *Ib.* III. 1–4; VI. 7–10.
- 3 A. Fierro, *The Militant Gospel* (London 1977), p. 382.
- 4 In H. Assmann, *Practical Theology of Liberation* (London 1975), p. 20.
- 5 See e.g. J. Kübel, *Geschichte des katholischen Modernismus (Tübingen 1909)*, p. 170; M. Petre, *Modernism. Its failure and its fruits* (London 1918), p. 115.
- 6 Cf. J. Andrew Kirk, *Liberation Theology. An Evangelical View from the Third World* (London 1979), pp. 143–203.
- 7 Adapted here is some material presented by me in 'Theology of Liberation: Analysis of the Document', The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Briefing XIV*. 20 (7.9.1984), pp. 4–8.
- 8 Liberation theology would benefit from an encounter with the account of 'experience' and 'tradition' found in H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London 1975), especially pp. 323–325.
- 9 Y.M.-J. Congar, OP, 'Théologie, Histoire de', in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique XV*, 1, 341–447.
- 10 J. Pelikan, *Historical Theology* (London 1971).
- 11 See G.A. McCol, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century. The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York 1977).
- 12 J.L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Dublin 1977).
- 13 B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London 1972). Much of the criticism to

- which this remarkable work has been subjected turns on the desirability or otherwise of formulating a single (albeit allegedly 'transcendental' or trans-categorical) method in theology. See A. Nichols OP, 'The Theological Method of Bernard Lonergan and the Counter-Claims of a Theory of Paradigms' in *Angelicum* (forthcoming).
- 14 The pervasiveness of Hegel's influence on contemporary theology, Catholic as well as Protestant, is increasingly recognised. For an early statement, see H. Küng, *Menschwerdung Gottes. Eine Einführung in Hegels theologisches Denken als Prolegomena zu einer künftigen Christologie* (Freiburg 1970), pp. 13—37.
- 15 *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'*, op.cit. X. 1.
- 16 *Ib.* VI. 8.
- 17 J. Andrew Kirk, op. cit. p. 35.
- 18 H. Assmann, *Opresión-Liberación: desafío a los cristianos* (Montevideo 1971), p. 141, cited in Kirk, op.cit. pp. 36—7.
- 19 J.L. Segundo, op.cit. Chapter 1.
- 20 E.g. J. Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (New York 1974), p. xvii.
- 21 *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation'*, op. cit. X. 1.

Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Theology of Liberation: A letter to a young theological student¹

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Dear friend

You are beginning to study theology and have already been confronted with the so-called 'theology of liberation'. You tell me you have professors who, in the name of Saint Thomas Aquinas, speak strongly against this trend. You are, yourself, perplexed, not knowing exactly what to think. Would the 'theology of liberation' be an alternative to the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas? You would even tend to agree with those who think so. I will tell you straight away what I think: neither the Thomists nor the anti-Thomists seem to me to be right on this question. The first ones, because they are dogmatic, and the second because they appear to be dilettantes. But I also do not want to appear to be a "recuperative" theologian, who states quickly, without a better analysis: "The 'theology of liberation' is a direct product of Thomism". No, I think the relationship between these two schools is deep, in another sense.

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