

Theology from Europe Trajectories and Perspectives

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The question to which I would like to respond runs like this: What is the stance of European theology vis-à-vis Liberation Theology (taken in all its pluriformity and complexity)? This question offers us the opportunity to articulate an essential perspective on the theology of the 20th century.

I

Surveying the course taken by theology during the 20th century, we can point out four movements or four approaches that were employed in “doing” theology.

The first movement goes under the name of a theology of the Word of God, or a theology of Christian Revelation. This approach focuses on affirming with Karl Barth the transcendent character of the word of God, or, with Hans Urs von Balthasar, the in-comparability or the non-comparability of Christian revelation with any philosophy or human wisdom. This approach in 20th century theology is concerned with the identity of the Christian faith and with the specificity of theological discourse. During the final decades of the past century and continuing on to the present, these theologies of identity have re-emerged within the context of that complex phenomenon which goes under the name of postmodernity. According to the theologies of identity, the Christian church should speak its own language and encourage its own praxis in an era marked by the experience of diaspora: theology should follow the lead of the Biblical text by practicing *intratextuality*. In this context, theology functions as “the Ecclesial Canon” (Barth’s *Kirchendogmatik*), as “the Grammar of Faith” (Lindbeck) or even as “the knowing that opens onto reflecting” (Jüngel).

A second approach combines the focus on identify with a concern about the relevance of Christian discourse for existential, anthropological, cultural and experiential human reality. One may categorize under this heading the existentialist theology of Rudolf Bultmann, the theology of culture of Paul Tillich, the anthropological theology of Karl Rahner, the theology of experience of Schillebeeckx, the ecumenical and inter-religious theology of Hans Küng, and the hermeneutical theology of Claude Geffré. Here theology is conceived of as a complex correlation to be worked out between two poles: the pole of revelation and of the tradition which hands it on, and the pole of the present situation in which each human being lives, attains sense and meaning through its projects and receives a superabundance of meaning from the Christian answer. This manner of doing theology has come to be called “the anthropological turn in theology”. The approach which is known as “the hermeneutical turn in theology” is a variant configuration of the anthropological turn. In this context theology may be defined in the way in which Marie-Dominique Chenu has characterized it: as “the faith which stands in solidarity with its own time.”

A third approach moves beyond the anthropological and hermeneutical turn into a political

turn when proponents – such as (proleptically) Bonhoeffer, and then in particular Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle -- advocate the development of the social and political content of the Christian message. This “political theology” emerged in the 1960's, underscoring the problem of interrelating theology and practice in Christian discipleship. The faith of Christians has to turn itself into “praxis in history and society”. Theology takes up the “option to enter into the field of history” and to understand itself as a “knowing oriented to doing” which does not simply wonder about the meaning of life and history but which aims to make living in history a practical experience. It sees itself as a way of knowing that leads one to discern public responsibility, a way of knowing that leads to service in the communication of the Gospel and of its power to speak prophetically and achieve solidarity in the midst of the conflicts of history. It is a theology which has moved forward by taking on – in the words of Metz (1997) – the challenges of its time: “In the first place, the unresolved conflict with the problems of the Enlightenment, then the catastrophe of the Auschwitz tragedy, and finally, the emergence in the theological world of a non-European world, i.e., the Third World.” Along the same lines, Jürgen Moltmann affirms: “If one takes the church seriously, then on a par with it theology should act a function of the Reign of God in the world. And in this function it should play an integral part in the spheres of the political, cultural, economic and ecological life of society.” In this regard, Jürgen Moltmann asks: “So, what remains, and what doesn't?” He answers: “What remains, if we want to speak in very general terms, is the recognition of the political dimension of the Christian faith in the cross of Christ and in the Reign of God. What remains is the necessary critique of the idols of political and civil religion. What, in a general way, has been accepted is the preferential option for the poor. What have been developed are the principles of every contextual theology: context, kairos, and community.”

A fourth movement in the theology of the 20th century is to be found in the theologies of liberation which represent the real “break-through” of the last decades, and which it is the task of this gathering to illustrate, to deepen and to relocate in the new social and cultural contexts of our time.

In synthesis, these movements of European theology can be identified with three key words or phrases: identity, correlation, passion for the Kingdom. Perhaps one can say that in these last years we have seen, on the one hand, the ongoing reaffirmation of the search for identity, which is to be clearly distinguished from a fundamentalism characterized by a religious identity that focuses aggressively on exclusion. On the other hand, we note the pressing urgency to understand this identity in constructive relation with other cultures, practices, and religions.

If one wished to formulate a concise synthesis of these many trajectories, it might be worded as: theological existence and passion for the Kingdom. The phrase “theological existence” recaptures a well-known expression of Barth and gives expression to the theologies of identity, whereas “passion for the kingdom” gives expression to the theologies of correlation and the political theologies.

We must also remember that the Catholic theology of the 20th century, above all in its European expression, contributed decisively in the preparation of the Second Vatican Council. What theologies were involved in this epoch-making “turn”? In the analysis proposed by a French

historian, this council “of the church and about the church” actually “relativized” the church, in the sense that it deliberately described the church in terms of its relationship with the Word of God (*Dei Verbum*) from which it emerges and in terms of its witness and mission in the world (*Gaudium et Spes*).

The European theology of the 20th century is not an innocent theology. Against the background of a dramatic era that happened to be one of the most evangelical centuries in the history of the Christian church (Congar), “doing” theology also took the form of betrayal as the “German theology of war” at the beginning of the century in the fatal year 1914, or, in more recent memory, as the “theology of the state” worked out in South Africa in defense of Apartheid in reformed communities of white Europeans that were forcefully denounced in the Kairos document of 1985, which was itself the expression of a prophetic church and a prophetic theology.

It has also shared in the silence of the Christian community and its institutions concerning the Holocaust, when it should have served as its critical conscience there and in other moments of political and cultural significance as well.

But it is a theology which found itself confronted with a awesome task – as the theologian Joseph Moingt has written – “a theology which has come up against a prodigious evolution in mentality and awareness, an overwhelming wave of incredulity which has shaken Christianity to its foundations. It is a theology which has become the interpreter of the experiences and the aspirations of the Christian men and women of our time.”

In the Century of Martydom, as the 20th Christian century has been defined, European theology yoked together the “apologia” with the “martyria” and this is typified in the names and reflections of individuals such as the Orthodox theologian Pavel Florenskij, victim of the Stalin-era gulag, Edith Stein, martyr to antisemitism at Auschwitz, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyr in the resistance to the Nazi barbarities at Flossenburg. This last named is uniquely representative of the heart of 20th century European theology and has evoked resonances in Christian communities outside Europe. On the walls of prisons in South Korea and South Africa graffiti have been found reading: Remember Bonhoeffer.

II

How does one go about comparing European theology with the theology of liberation when the latter understands itself on its own terms as reflection that presupposes praxis? Liberation theologians consider themselves consciously responsible for introducing the “story of the people” into this reflection or, more exactly, “the story of those whom official historiographers and also Christian and theological writers have dismissed as non-persons and non-histories.” In non-western cultural and religious contexts these are the ones who put intertextuality into practice (and not just the intratextuality of the theologies of identity).

Within the framework of Catholic theology one notes what might be described in a rather

shorthand manner as a shift from Rahner to von Balthasar, i.e., from the anthropological turn to the retrieval of Christian identity in an age of pluralism. One consequence of this has been the reticence of European theologians regarding the overtures of Liberation theology. In fact, to a certain extent they are widely disregarded.

The present situation could also be characterized as one of uncertainty and fear. (At the 2004 congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology, the beginning of the Manifesto of the Communist Party from Feb 1848 was cited with this variation: “A Specter Shakes Up Europe - The Specter of Fear). People seem to be looking for a spirituality that tends to privatize the Christian experience and this does not favor the acceptance of the appeals of Liberation theology either.

Moreover, one must take into account the situation of Eastern Europe and that of the Russian Orthodox. In the period between 1989 and 1991 these areas experienced a kind of “liberation”, different from that envisioned by Liberation theology. A Russian Orthodox theologian recently affirmed during a theological Forum in which I myself participated: “We Orthodox had a rather complex relation with Liberation theology. Its concession to a so-called “well intentioned Marxism (a definition which circulated in Orthodox circles in the Soviet Union) is absolutely foreign to the spirit of our faith which was subjected to that “liberation” [i.e., the “liberation” offered by Soviet communism]. Similar sentiments are expressed by philosophers and theologians of Eastern Europe, particularly by those from Poland.

In general, however, I believe that one can speak of a critical reception of Liberation theology within European theology. One need only think of its “preferential option for the poor,” its rejection of the “structures of sin,” its choice of the title “God of Life” and its introduction and encouragement of new forms of inter-religious dialogue. Liberation theology has expanded the conscience and opened the heart of the Christian church.

I conclude, recalling the analysis proposed by the international theological journal *Concilium* at the congress held at the Catholic University of Louvain in 1990 on the theme, prophetic in its formulation, “At the Thresholds of the Third Millennium.” It was perhaps the first time that European and North-Atlantic theology had engaged one another in one of the most prestigious universities of Europe, in a challenging confrontation with the new ecclesial and theological realities which had been emerging in the final decades of the 20th century. On that occasion the North American Catholic theologian David Tracy addressed the problem which had sprung up repeatedly in the atmosphere of the last years and which was indicative of the direction being taken by western theology. The title of his presentation was “On Naming the Present” and it proposed a path that could be taken between two opposite and contradictory positions. For the neo-conservatives and the fundamentalists, modernity is a “failed experiment” and therefore we must return to the healthy tradition. Even for those who define the present as postmodernity, modernity is still a time to be overcome, not in order to return to tradition but for the demolition of the *status quo* in favor of the *fluxus quo*. Now, if the tradition had a center, postmodernity is characterized by the “loss of center,” but in this way it offers the possibility of discovering the other, the different, the oppressed, the marginalized. Theology, in a “time of passages” (Habermas, *Zeit der Übergänge*, 2001) lives in the tension between modernity and postmodernity. It must embrace the inalienable values of the

tradition, it must also embrace the positive advances accomplished by modernity, but, in a spirit of dialogue and solidarity, it must open itself to the other: the outcome could be a new solidarity in the struggle for the true era of justice.”

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