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INAUGURAL LECTURE
DELIVERED AT RHODES UNIVERSITY
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S.T.L., S.Th. Doc. (URBAN)



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**Brian Patrick Gaybba
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THE SHIFTING FOCUS OF THEOLOGY: FROM TEXTS TO QUESTIONS TO PRAXIS

Introduction

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, in the past twenty or so years a revolution has occurred in theological thinking. It has displayed all the traits of revolutionary movements, including the ability to arouse intense feelings for and against it, feelings that frequently make any sort of rational assessment very difficult indeed.

I am referring to liberation theology. Many of its protagonists claim it is the only way to do theology. They would write off traditional theology as being at worst a sinister cover-up for an unjust status quo, and at best an irrelevant ivory tower exercise. In return, many critics of liberation theology will see it as being at worst a sinister cover-up for Marxism and at best a dangerous mélange of amateurish ideas by people more concerned with meddling in politics than with promoting true religious values.

It is not my intention to deal at any length with the pros and cons of this form of theologising, though that would be an interesting exercise in itself. Instead, I would like to insert it within a broader perspective. For it is not the first of radical changes in how to go about doing theology and its appearance affords one with a useful opportunity to look back, once again, at the broad development of theology as a discipline. In doing so we can see how its focus has shifted as its field of interest broadened - from simply interpreting a text (the biblical text); to a radical probing and systematising of the whole gamut of beliefs held by Christians; to a reflection on socially involved action. Each of the shifts encountered resistance. And yet each has proved to be necessary for the ongoing vitality of theology.

Theology as commentary

In the West, up to and including much if not most of the 12th century, what we to-day call 'theology' lacked any clear term to describe it. One major reason for this was that it was not conceived of as a specific academic discipline, or art as they would have called it in those days. All the arts involved building up a body of knowledge, utilising whatever techniques were appropriate to that art. However, the body of knowledge proper to theology was not conceived of as being built up through theological work, but rather as something already present in the Bible, waiting only for someone to dig it out.¹ The contents of the Bible were God's revelation and the theologian's job was simply to extract it from the text and communicate it to others. Theology was a process of discovering what was already there. It was not a process of expanding our knowledge about a subject matter in the same way as, for example,

mathematics or physics or philosophy would be. Indeed, the last thing a good theologian of those days wanted to be was creative or novel. Creativity implied novelty and both implied adding something to God's Word. And that was simply not on.

Theology's body of knowledge was therefore conceived of as being a purely divine reality. Human beings had no role to play in establishing it. Hence it is that when we read early discussions of theology's 'methods' and the way in which its body of knowledge is established and transmitted, no place is given to the human theologian's work. Instead, reference is made to the diverse ways in which God chose to convey divine revelation to us in the Scriptures: viz., through the narration of historical events, the use of allegory, history, poetry, prophetic language, hortatory passages, and so on.²

Not surprisingly therefore, the main shape that theological writings took - and for centuries had taken - was simply that of a straightforward commentary on the sacred text.³ Certainly there was much study of and reverence for the Fathers, as the great theologians of the first six or seven hundred years were called. But they were prized simply because they were seen as outstanding commentators on Scripture.

The human input in theological work was even further restricted through an epistemology, a theory of knowledge, bequeathed to the West by Augustine.⁴ This theory saw all knowledge of enduring realities as a gift from on high, an illumination of the mind from on high. Such knowledge could not be uncovered by a rational analysis of the world, for the present world and all that was in it was seen as being but a shadow, a symbol of the real world behind it. When that real world broke through the symbols, illuminating our minds with its reality, then and only then did we gain real, enduring knowledge - for nothing was truly known until one saw its relationship to all that was enduring, above all to God.

Knowledge about God's revelation, then, was not to be gained simply through a rigorous logical analysis of scripture's words or sentences or ideas. For the words, the ideas, the descriptions and situations we find in the scriptures, even the realities in the world around us are but symbols of the divine world. And symbols are flexible: they operate by having several levels of meaning at the same time. This is why the early medievals insisted that Scripture had several levels of meaning - and the profoundest level was not the literal one.

Apart from their flexibility, symbols also work by a form of self-revelation: they trigger off insights within us. In contrast, logic demands rigorously well-defined and consistent meanings of the terms one uses. To impose such logic on the scriptures would be to treat them in a way they cannot be treated. It would be to destroy their plasticity, their flexibility. Worse still, it would be to suffer from the delusion that

they were exact encapsulations of the truth, rather than only pointers to it, albeit divinely chosen pointers and therefore ones we can go to with total confidence.

This was why secular knowledge was usually regarded as having very little to contribute to theological work. This was also why logical reasoning was seen as having a minimal role to play - the only effective role being to refute the objections of unbelievers. The only secular discipline that was really prized was grammar: for grammar at least enabled one to understand what the biblical text was saying, to grasp what depictions of the divine were being put before us.

For this type of theology, then, not only its body of knowledge but also the understanding of that deposit is a gift from on high. Hence, love, prayer, piety were stressed as the route to understanding. For such practices opened one's eyes to the divine message. The philosophers in our midst will not fail to see in all this the Christianising of Plato's theory of knowledge.

In the twelfth century the representatives of this form of theologising were the monks. And for them love was absolutely essential, if one were to understand the scriptures properly. God is love and so if we love we become more godlike and therefore more attuned to divine things. As a result we are more receptive to the depths of meaning in God's revelation. Love - love of God and love of neighbour - illuminates. And whereas the young theological Turks on the horizon prized logic, the monks still put their methodological trust in love.⁵

Let us turn now to those Turks, for their appearance signals a radical shift in the way in which theology was conceived and practiced.

Theology as questioning

While the traditionalists saw and valued the use of grammar (though a few questioned the value even of that), it was the new generation, the young Turks who proclaimed the virtues of another discipline: dialectics. Dialectics was one of the logical arts. It dealt with the logical relationships that existed or should exist between words, sentences, affirmations, and analysed the principles underlying logical reasoning. Already in the eleventh century, brash young theologians had proclaimed the virtues of dialectics: the famous Berengarian controversy over the Real Presence of Christ in the eucharist was triggered off by an appeal to dialectics. Berengar claimed that a dialectical analysis showed that it is semantically incoherent and therefore unacceptable to assert that bread and wine become Christ's Body and Blood.⁶ For his troubles, Berengar was condemned and his use of dialectics did not create a situation favourable to its general absorption into theology.

It was in the twelfth century that the use of logical theory and logical analysis gained

a permanent and public foothold in theology. The person responsible for that was Peter Abailard, a man whose name has gone down in history as one of the great logical theorists, one of the great theologians and also one of the world's great lovers, thanks to his tempestuous relationship with and secret marriage to Heloise.

Abailard caused a sensation by claiming that he could unpack the meaning of the scriptures simply by using his knowledge of dialectics. And, if we can accept his own version of the affair, he proved his point in spectacular fashion.⁷

The pride of place Abailard gave to human logic ran counter to the spirit of the old theology. It was presumptuous - so the traditionalists felt - to try and wrest the sacred text's meaning from it, rather than allow it to yield that meaning to one through prayerful reading and reliance on tried and tested commentaries of the Fathers. As Rupert of Deutz complained: 'Shamefully, they dared to examine the secrets of God in the Scriptures in a presumptuous way, motivated by curiosity and not by love'.⁸

An epistemological divide was opening up in the twelfth century. On the one side was the traditional view that knowledge of eternal realities comes from on high as a gift. On the other side was the new view that such knowledge can also be derived from an examination of God's creation. The new view was Aristotelian in spirit and the shift to it reflects the shift that occurred when Aristotle took Plato's heavenly ideas and made them forms embedded in matter. The twelfth century is also known as the one in which the world around us became a matter of interest for its own sake. No longer was it seen simply as the veil of the eternal but rather as something worth knowing, studying, prizing in its own right - since it was part of God's good creation. Not surprisingly, the century also witnessed an emphasis on the literal meaning of scripture, which had hitherto played a very second fiddle to the non-literal meanings. Theology's return journey earthwards had begun.

All of this was as confusing and blasphemous to the older theologians as is much of liberation theology to many to-day. Above all, it implied that there was value in probing the sacred deposit with one's mind, asking endless questions and debating the pros and cons of various answers. William of St. Thierry, one of the most interesting and brilliant of the old school, was horrified. He compares people like Abailard to the proud who prefer to dispute with the doorkeeper of the household of faith rather than go in.⁹ Instead of debating the admittedly many difficult issues found in the Scriptures, one must be humble and rest in the writings of the Fathers until the Spirit illuminates us.¹⁰

But the older theology was on the wane - despite its insistence that it was really the only way to do theology; and the new theology was waxing stronger every day. Its attractiveness resided in the fact that it was prepared to build bridges between itself and the rest of the human sciences. It was prepared to utilise the best analytical tools

of the day to do its work. It was prepared to ask endless questions.

Questioning had not been unknown in the past. The practice of commenting on the scriptures had raised not a few issues which needed addressing, and which were addressed by theologians in the course of their biblical expositions. But the idea of debating an issue and, above all, the idea of focusing one's theological work around the debating of questions - that was foreign to the theological mind of the day.

As every student of theological history knows, it was Abailard who brought about the change. He gathered together in one book 158 contradictory statements from the revered Fathers of the past. One is always being told to rely on the Fathers, but what if the Fathers appear to be at odds with one another? Presuming one had checked the texts and their contexts, one simply had to get down to analysing the issue and reason the matter out for oneself. And so in his book, aptly called *Sic et non* ('Yes and no'), each of the 158 topics was presented in the following form: that p is so, followed by patristic support for that point of view; and that p is not so, followed by patristic support for that point of view. And he left it to his students to sort out the problems!

Henceforth, theology focused on questions. The practice of commenting on the scriptures remained, and all the great medieval theologians devoted at least as much time to that as to dealing with specific questions. But biblical commentary was now on the road to becoming a distinct discipline from question-orientated theology, which eventually developed into my own discipline - Systematic or (as it is usually called in Catholic circles) Dogmatic theology.

Structuring one's theological work around questions changed the shape of theology radically.

First of all, it demanded new skills from would-be theologians. To be a theologian, you now had to master not simply the scriptures, the writings of the Fathers and grammar but also and above all logical theory. Students had to learn how to debate properly, using the proper syllogistic form. This, incidentally, is the origin of that much misunderstood debating topic: how many angels can sit on the head of a pin? The issue was one of many ludicrous topics chosen precisely because they forced students to face the logical issues and distinctions such a topic would raise. It was an exercise - and it is as silly to judge medieval theology by that topic as it would be to judge modern English literature by books proclaiming that the cat sat on the mat.

Secondly, it freed theological writings from having to follow the order of the books of the Bible. They were now able to structure their material thematically. Our present broad approach of dealing with God, creation, sin, salvation and matters eschatologi-

cal derive from those days - though that thematisation has its own roots in the earlier collections of snippets from the Fathers, known as *sentences*.

Thirdly, focusing on questions also allowed theologians to probe the inner harmony, the inner logic binding the various aspects of Christian faith to each other. Indeed, theologians tried to show how theology, like the other disciplines in the recently born Universities, was a body of knowledge that had basic axioms on which all the rest could be built. For theologians like Aquinas these were the basic truths of faith, such as are contained in the scriptures and the creeds. The rest of theology is built on them, deduced from them.

Fourthly - and very importantly - theology's body of knowledge comes to be seen as being not simply God's revelation but also the fruit of human reflection on that revelation. It comes to be seen as a body of knowledge *built up* by human reflection.

One of the many ironies one's finds in history is the spectacle of the early scholastics repeatedly asserting that theological knowledge is nothing more nor less than God's revelation - while at the same time devoting their time to writing massive tomes of theology that contained far more of their own ideas and analyses than the simple Word of God contained in the scriptures. Theoretically they clung to tradition and held that theology's body of knowledge was a purely divine reality, while in practice they were transforming it into a massive human outpouring of ideas and conclusions on a scale unprecedented in theological history.

The contradiction between theory and practice was highlighted by the introduction of Peter Lombard's *Four Books of Sentences* into the theological classroom, as a text to be used alongside the biblical one. The *Sentences* were an encyclopaedic survey of theological knowledge, based on the questioning approach introduced by Abailard. (They were also to remain *the* theological text book for centuries, a record unbroken to this day.)

This very action symbolised the radical change that had taken place in theology. And it in turn posed a problem for the theorists when discussing the nature of theology: for the content of the *Sentences* was undeniably theology, and yet all of it could hardly be regarded as divine revelation (though one early theorist did argue that the *Sentences* were simply that in another form¹¹).

Eventually, the paradigm shift occurs - in the works of Aquinas and, above all, Bonaventure - and theory is adjusted to practice. God's revelation now becomes the *foundation* and not the sole content of theological knowledge. Theology is now clearly a body of knowledge built up by human reflection on God's revelation.

This can lead into the *fifth point*, which is that the human input in theology became

overwhelmingly evident when not merely human logic but also the contents of other human sciences such as, for example, psychology, physics, metaphysics were utilised.

In the early thirteenth century, all of Aristotle's works on these topics became known to the west for the first time. The consternation this caused can only be imagined by looking at the consternation caused in many circles to-day by the thought of theologians utilising Marxist ideas. To the Platonised medievals, Aristotle was a thoroughly secular and therefore radically anti-Christian philosopher. As is well known, Aquinas took Aristotle by the scruff of his pagan neck and baptised him - so successfully that Luther will have a hard time trying to boot him out. But my point is that in doing so, Aquinas made the utilisation of secular knowledge an intrinsic part of theological work. Henceforth, a theology book will no longer simply reflect Aristotle's logical form but also a good deal of interaction with Aristotle's ideas on other topics too, above all his psychology and metaphysics.¹²

Finally, all of this pushed theology into a speculative direction. For the traditionalists, theology was clearly a *practical* discipline, that is to say, one whose aim was to bring about a particular way of acting: viz., to encourage belief, live accordingly, and thus find salvation. However, in the mid-thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas argued that theology was primarily a speculative or *theoretical* discipline. That is to say, its primary purpose was to establish truth rather than promote action. Of course, action should follow. But the immediate aim was to get one's ideas, one's intellectual knowledge right.

Not all followed Aquinas in this - simply because not all accepted the Aristotelian epistemology that buttressed it. But the whole stress on questioning and analysing - which itself owed much to Aristotle - *de facto* turned theology into a speculative discipline. Anyone who reads Duns Scotus' detailed and impassioned defence of the practical character of theology¹³ cannot but be struck by yet another irony - viz., the fact that the writings of the 'subtle Doctor', as he was called, were a monumental exercise in the most abstruse speculation imaginable.

This speculative shift was heralded not simply by the endless questions that were now debated but also by the drive towards creating an overarching system, one that laid bare the inner logic binding the various aspects of the Christian faith to each other. Ironically, the drive towards systematisation had barely occurred when, in the fourteenth century, William of Ockham's relegation of universals to the purely logical realm and its concomitant questioning of any value in metaphysics, sowed the seeds for the destruction of all such systems. One can trace a broad though clear line from William through his later compatriot David Hume to Kant and from Hume to the rest of the British empirical tradition, right down to the postmodernism of our own day, for which a search for rationality in reality is a futile one. But theological

systems continued to be built. It is only in our own century, when we have become so conscious of the variety of frameworks within which people think and operate, that the idea of overarching systems in theology is no longer as attractive as it used to be.

That then is, all too briefly, the story of the first major shift in theology: the birth of scholasticism and with it theology as an academic discipline. This new form of theology, exciting, vibrant, in contact with all the intellectual issues of the day, was to last a long time. Indeed, it had so much going for it that it never fully died out, being resurrected to a relatively brief but in its own way brilliant modern form in recent neo-scholasticism. It even found a somewhat different but still recognisably scholastic form in Protestant circles in the seventeenth century, a theology known as Protestant Orthodoxy. But in its medieval form, it eventually degenerated into a sterile squabbling over abstract issues, out of touch with the sources that gave it its initial life - the scriptures and the writings of the Fathers. Luther had good reason for fulminating that he had had enough of Aristotle in theology. And the scholastics of his day, who were for the most part followers not of Aquinas but of Duns Scotus, gave birth to a new word in the English language: dunces.

The Reformation saw a strong reaction against the use of reason in theology, above all against the use of secular sources of knowledge. The main thrust of its early years was to make theology what it used to be: an exposition of the scriptures. However, the practice of structuring one's thinking around specific topics rather than around the order of the biblical books remained, even though a new and enriching series of biblical commentaries were also produced. And as the decades rolled by, so too the products of reason entered once more even into Protestant theology and the dialogue of theology with the wider world that we find in Aquinas appears in different ways in different theologians.

The twentieth century has seen many significant developments in theology. Its early decades witnessed in Karl Barth a massive reaction to any attempt to build theology on anything other than the pure Word of God. In Barth we see recurring, albeit in modern dress, one of the basic ideas of the old, monastic theology: God's Word cannot be unpacked by human reason; rather must the theologian wait on that Word to reveal itself. But in theologians such as Wolfhard Pannenberg the pendulum swings back to stressing the necessity of reason's involvement in theology.

I believe Pannenberg's basic criticism of Barth - viz., that he effectively imprisoned theological thought within a faith-bound ghetto - was justified. Theology can never turn away from the bridges it has built with the wider world. And to-day especially, theologians have to listen to the many questions being posed by modern academic insights and modern experience. One thinks, for example, of the implications for theology of the fact that it no longer can operate within a single overarching

world-view, but must take account of the fact that our world is fragmented into many such views, many 'universes of discourse' as they are called.¹⁴ One thinks of the renewed criticisms of the very intelligibility of theological discourse - the problematic aspects of which the medievals themselves were very much aware. The response of theology to all these issues is changing the face of theology quite considerably. Taking over Thomas Kuhn's famous phrase, theologians are beginning to speak of a 'paradigm shift' in theology.¹⁵

One could at this point outline several notable shifts in theology. One even hears of theologians who proclaim that they are no longer theists, that theology can be done without the concept of God.¹⁶ However, all of these new types of theology would still have in common the fact that the focus would be on an intellectual analysis of theoretical issues. They remain within the broad framework of theology as an academic pursuit, bequeathed to us by the scholastics.

The really radical change, therefore, is to be found elsewhere - in a theology that shifts its major attention from both texts and issues to actions. It is time to turn our attention to liberation theology.

Liberation theology

With liberation theology we find a new shift in theology's focus: from reflecting on ideas to reflecting on actions. Whereas traditionally the theologian's task was seen primarily as being to reflect on either God's Word or our understanding of it, the questions that can be raised about it and the conclusions drawn from it, now the theologian's task is seen as being to reflect on socially involved action in the light of God's Word.

Inspired by Marx's observation that the object of philosophy was not to think about the world but to change it, liberation theology sees theology's task as being not simply to think about God's Word and how it relates to our world but about how that world must be changed in the light of that Word.

Born out of the experiences of oppression of black Americans and the reflections of theologians working in the slums of Latin America, liberation theology is a theology dedicated to changing unjust social structures into structures more in conformity with the Gospel. It takes its name from the conviction that the effects of God's saving grace are meant to be felt not simply in our liberation from personal sins but also from the sinful structures that we create and perpetuate.

There are many points of contrast - radical contrast - between liberation theology and traditional academic theology. However, liberation theologians themselves will say that the most radical difference of all is in the way in which they do theology. So let

us concentrate on that for the moment.

Their particular way of theologizing is normally described as 'critically reflecting on praxis'. By this they mean that the first step in doing theology is not to look at an idea but to become involved in changing an unjust social situation to a more just one. Step one is therefore a commitment to action, but a commitment that is accompanied by reflection. This is what is meant, in fact, by 'praxis', an important term in Marxism taken over by liberation theologians. Having committed oneself to such socially transforming action, and having got somewhat involved in it, one *then* reflects theologically. And such reflection is two-pronged: it is a reflection on what one has done in the light of the Gospel but also on the meaning of the Gospel in the light of what one has done. Hence, liberation theology is not simply about how one acts but also about what insights socially involved action gives us into Christianity's beliefs: e.g., about the Trinity, the Church, Sin, Salvation, our future hope, etc.

Reflection on one's Christian social involvement is meant to be ongoing. The results of one's reflection should lead to further or more nuanced actions and these in turn to still further reflection. Thus Segundo describes the process as a 'hermeneutical circle'¹⁷ - though I suppose spiral would be a better analogy.

Unlike academic theology, therefore, the theologian does not aim at building up a body of ideas or insights so much as establishing an ongoing form of involvement through the interaction of theory and practice, a combination designated by the word praxis. However, though the emphasis is on involvement, one of the results is - as noted - new insights into Christianity's traditional beliefs.

Behind this new approach is a theory of knowledge, an epistemology that represents a fairly radical break with theology as it has been practiced until now. Commentators therefore refer with some justice to an 'epistemological break'.¹⁸

The break had already occurred in various ways in the writings of earlier thinkers. It represents a shift away from the old, Aristotelian inspired, viewpoint that the intellect alone provides understanding, working on the raw material presented by the senses. Action must be guided by understanding, without understanding being in any way influenced by action.

However, as the sociology of knowledge has amply demonstrated, the way we act, the role we play in a society determines to a very large extent the way we think, what seems logical to us, reasonable and so on. If then traditional theology operated on the understanding that ideas shape actions, liberation theologians stress the exact opposite: viz., that actions shape ideas. And so we repeatedly hear phrases that have come to shock many a traditionalist, such as: orthodoxy flows from orthopraxis, not the other way around. Translated into simpler terms they are saying that you must

act in accordance with the Gospel if you want to have the right ideas about the Gospel. It is a delusion to think you can have really correct ideas about the Gospel's meaning in any social setting if you do not live in that setting according to its demands.

The monastic theologians of old would have applauded - at least this, if not the other aspects of liberation theology! For what we are seeing occurring here is really the retrieval, in a new sociologically justified format, of the old idea that love illuminates. So the epistemology is not as new as everybody seems to think! But let us probe it a bit deeper.

What is really important about this business of one's ideas being influenced by the social position one occupies and lives out, is that an awareness of these forces has contributed enormously to uncovering what Marx and others have called 'ideologies'. And much of the critical reflection of liberation theology is devoted to uncovering these ideologies - both within secular society and (to the consternation of many church authorities) within the Church.

I do not wish to go into the vexed question of how one should define an ideology. It has become one of those buzz words that people use to give their language a particular flavour without being quite clear as to what they mean by it. In Marx's sense of the word, it is something not very nice - a social form of self-delusion, whereby a system appears to be reasonable but in fact favours the privileged class. In Segundo's use of the term, an ideology becomes something essential to social living and what is important is not to eliminate ideologies but to have the right ones. Here 'ideology' functions almost as the recent in-word 'myth' does. But as I said my point is not to go into the word. What is important is that as social self-delusions, ideologies are extremely difficult to spot. And people such as Marx have shown us a way to do so, a way that liberation theologians have accepted into their theologising.

The way in which liberation theologians go about spotting them is by means of the famous 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Boiled down to its bare essentials, this involves asking of any particular social or theological position the uncomfortable question: who benefits by it? And it is remarkable what answers surface. For recent examples of the sort of answers that can surface, one need only look at the controversial Kairos document, where the ideological use of normally admirable concepts such as 'law and order', 'forgiveness', 'reconciliation' is exposed. The document showed how these ideas appeared to stand for Christian values but were in fact used in South African society to entrench unjustly the privileges of the few.

Uncovering ideologies together with the broader aim of changing an unjust situation to one more in conformity with the Gospel demands of the theologian quite new skills. Above all it demands learning from the social sciences the tools of social analysis. After all if you want to change a society, you need to know what makes it

tick in the first place. And of the various forms of social analysis available, the one that liberation theologians felt made most sense of their Latin American situation was Marx's one. It was an analysis that saw society as being split into basically two groups or classes, of opposed interests. The basis of the split and of the opposing interests was economic in character. The economic system that existed - capitalism - exploited the one class and favoured the other.

It is above all the acceptance of these Marxist ideas that has led to much of the furore about liberation theology. And what is most interesting is that the furore usually illustrates the very point Marx was making - since opposition to liberation theology usually comes from those in a privileged position, while acceptance of it comes from the opposite camp.

This use of Marxism is obviously open to criticism. And charges of amateurism, while often unjust, are not entirely without foundation. However, the charge of 'unChristian' is unjust. It is no more unChristian to utilise Marxist analysis than it is to use Aristotelian philosophy. Aquinas' utilisation of Aristotle caused quite as much of a rumpus initially as is being caused at the moment by liberation theologians utilising Marx's social analysis. I suppose I must also add - since there may be people here regrettably so ill-informed - that in utilising Marx's ideas about the role of economics in society and about the ways in which ideologies operate, such theologians are not proclaiming their agreement with his atheism. A good deal of nonsense is written in popular literature, especially popular theological literature, about liberation theologians believing neither in God, nor prayer, nor grace; but rather in the self-sufficiency of human effort and, above all, the virtues of violence. And of course, here in South Africa one of the many abuses the government made of the SABC was precisely to reinforce that image in the public mind.

However, there is one thing of which the liberation theologians have been rightly accused - if 'accused' is the right term, having as it does its own ideological (nice word that) overtones. And that is their belief that salvation takes shape, visible shape in social structures.

This idea is still startling to us and indeed quite unacceptable to many Christians. However, it is worth noting that it would not have been startling at all for the early Christians. Indeed, it is the rampant individualism we are so familiar with that was foreign to them.

The image used by Jesus for the salvation he offered was 'the kingdom of God' or 'kingdom of heaven'. This is a social image, evoking as it does the idea of a society governed by God. For most Jews this society would be brought into being by the messiah, God's supreme Anointed One, the channel of all God's blessings.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the first generation of Christians saw themselves primarily as a people, a community. And their vision of the future was of a world totally transformed by God's presence: a new heaven and a new earth, with a new, heavenly, Jerusalem at the centre of the latter (cf. Rev 21:1ff).

This idea of salvation as encompassing not simply the individual but also the social relationships and structures binding individuals to each other was kept alive for the next few centuries in millenarianism: the belief that Christ would return to this earth at the end of time, establish a world without warts, and reign over it for a thousand years.

Many factors contributed to the demise of this view of salvation. However, a major one was the influence of neo-Platonist individualism. For neo-Platonism, what counted was the soul and what the soul needed to do for happiness was to become reunited to the divine unity from which it had become separated. Translated into Christian terms, this became the need for souls to be purified by God's grace and weaned from their attachment to the things of this earth, so that they could in the next life enjoy the blessed vision of God for all eternity.

Recent decades have seen a rediscovery of the social dimension of salvation, especially in Catholic theology, which is the theology that gave birth to liberation theology. Stress is now placed on the fact that God's saving presence is meant to transform not simply the individual but also the social structures created by individuals, the relationships existing between individuals - indeed between humanity and the entire cosmos. Whereas in the past the world was seen as being destined simply for an awesome destruction (2 Pet 3:10), now it is seen as being destined for transformation, for sharing in God's saving action (Rom 8:20).

Liberation theologians believe that, just as God's saving presence enables the individual to sanctify him or herself, so too does that presence enable human beings to sanctify their social structures, to transform them into structures that humanise rather than dehumanise, that build rather than destroy community; structures that reflect the community that is Christianity's triune God rather than the separateness that reflects the sort of self-centredness we see in *Apartheid* and so many other nationalisms.

Hence, liberation theologians argue that when, under the influence of God's grace, they are impelled to struggle for a just society they are in fact struggling to make God's Kingdom more of a reality in the world than it is at present. Their social action is seen as having an immediate theological significance. It is seen as part of the process of making significant aspects of God's salvation a reality in the world.

As can be seen the clear lines that used to be drawn between the Church and the

world are now blurred. Those who welcome the blurring will argue in its defence that in Christ God became part of the world and not simply of the Christian Church. However, it is important to note that blurring the distinctions between Church and world does not imply jettisoning traditional ideas about Christ's uniqueness, the forgiveness of personal sins, the need for personal repentance and so on. There is no question here of simply a social gospel, a reductionist Christianity that no longer has a role to play for the Church. But the allaying of such fears would take another lecture.

The new and the old

Let me turn instead now to another issue that has been raised by the appearance of liberation theology, viz., whether or not all theology should be done that way. The question becomes more clearly focused if one uses the term 'contextual theology'. This has perhaps replaced 'liberation theology' as the favoured term in socially concerned theological circles in South Africa today. It also has the advantage of pinpointing what is at the heart of liberation theology: focusing on a particular social context and, along with personal involvement, thinking through the demands of the gospel in that context.

The impression is often created by liberation theologians both here and abroad that the only way to do theology, at any rate the only way to do theology in South Africa today, is their way, the contextual way.¹⁹

I disagree with that. Were one to accept the idea that liberation or contextual theology was the only way to do theology, one would have to accept that theology is only about what the Gospel demands for today. One would have to accept that theology is only about what the Gospel looks like when seen from the perspective of someone struggling to establish a just system. And this would be to impoverish theology. For just as the broader patterns of life and culture must go on, even as the struggle continues, so too must the broader concerns of theology continue. Liberation theology has every right to draw our attention to and demand that many more get involved in working on what David Tracy calls the 'crisis of global suffering'. But traditional theologians have also the right to devote time to other matters, such as what the same Tracy calls the 'crisis of cognitive claims'.²⁰

Even in South Africa, painstaking exegetical, historical, speculative work must continue. The study of issues that go beyond our immediate context but which reflect broader concerns must go on in our country.

One of the lessons to be learnt from the sterility of scholasticism in the sixteenth century was that it had cut itself adrift from all that was best in the older theology that it replaced. It had become too obsessed with abstract analyses and questions

and no longer fed itself with the living stream of commentary, prayerful commentary on the scriptures. Were the broader links to be broken, then, even liberation theology would end up terribly impoverished.

A further lesson to be learnt from the past is that just as the appearance of scholasticism resulted in the existence henceforth of two specialisations within theology - biblical studies and systematic theology - so too must liberation theology see itself as the coming into being of a new and vitally important specialisation within theology. What would distinguish it from the other disciplines would not be its content so much as the way it went about reflecting on the same content studied by the other specialisations within theology.

Traditional theology, a theology that looks beyond the present context and deals with issues that relate to far broader contexts, must continue then. But it must do so both here and abroad only in constant dialogue with liberation theologians, with the insights given us by them. Not to do that would be to condemn itself to a sterile academic ghetto, producing material that may be of some use to someone somewhere, but which does not really contribute to theological thinking here in South Africa. Our theology must be at one and the same time in constant contact with the burning social and existential issues here in Grahamstown and South Africa, as well as with the methodological issues studied by a David Tracy or the work on God and suffering found in Moltmann, the work on the trinity and love in Jüngel, the process debates in North America, and so on. To give a local example, the sort of work being done on epistemological issues by my colleague in Port Elizabeth, Professor Wenzel van Huysteen,²¹ is of the utmost importance for the development both of local and world-wide theology.

The rise of liberation theology has reopened the old debate on whether theology is a speculative or a practical discipline. To-day we can see that the answer must be nuanced. Theology is no longer a single discipline, but a cluster of specialities. And some specialities are practical, others speculative sciences.

Talking about rooting theology both in South Africa and in the wider world context raises another issue, intimately related to oppression, but which I have time only to mention. It is the need for a theology sufficiently rooted in African soil to have freed itself from the alien character that its western culture still presents to many. Somehow or other our Faculty will have to find ways of rooting itself more deeply in that soil. Several of our postgraduate students are engaged in research in this area but much more needs to be done. Here too, however, the broader links must be maintained - something that did not really happen with the only sustained example we have of such Africanisation of Christianity: the African Independent Churches.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, one of my earliest actions on being appointed here was to seek to establish, at least on a contractual basis, a post in contextual theology. My aim was to institute in the heart of our Faculty that cross-fertilisation that I have spoken about. I am happy to report that at last sufficient interest is being shown in the project by certain agencies to make its establishment a real possibility in the not too distant future. Then my dream of a Faculty in which the old and the new enrich each other, respect the values found in each other, and together help build up a Faculty of theology thoroughly rooted in African soil but still in fertile contact with the broader theological tradition - that dream will become a reality. For if this brief history that I have sketched teaches us anything, it is that the new always needs what was valuable in the old and the old must always be open to the new.

Conclusion

In conclusion may I express my gratitude to Rhodes for appointing me to this prestigious position, one that has a long and honoured history in South Africa's theological world. My immediate predecessor, Professor Angus Holland, honoured it with a combination of erudition and piety that I cannot hope to emulate. If, when the day of my retirement comes, I am spoken of as affectionately as people speak of him, I will be a lucky man. Finally may I express my gratitude to the members of the audience for coming. I know that Grahamstown does not offer much in the way of light diversion but it still takes some steeling of the nerves to attend an inaugural lecture with as mystifying a title as this one.

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1. For more details cfr. my *Aspects of the mediaeval history of theology: 12th to 14th centuries*, Pretoria: Unisa, 1988, chapter 2.
 2. See *op. cit.*, pp. 116ff.
 3. See Y. Congar, *A History of Theology*, New York: Doubleday, 1968, p. 51.
 4. See R.H. Nash, *The light of the mind. St. Augustine's theory of knowledge*, Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1969.
 5. See my *op.cit.*, ch. 1.
 6. See Berengar's *De sacra coena*, ed. Vischer, 83.
 7. See Abailard's *Historia Calamitatum* in Migne's *Patrologia Latina* 178:125.
 8. *De Trinitate*, In Reg., I, xv; PL 167: 1084-1085.
 9. *Speculum Fidei*, PL 180: 370.
 10. *Speculum Fidei*, PL 180: 373.
 11. See e.g., my *op. cit.*, pp. 84ff.
 12. See Y. Congar, *A History of Theology*, New York: Doubleday, 1968, p. 86.
 13. See his Prologus, *Opera Omnia*, Vatican Press, 1950 ff, para 228ff.
 14. See, e.g., D. Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture*

of *Pluralism*, London: SCM, 1981. 15. See e.g., H. Kng and D. Tracy (Eds.), *Paradigm Change in Theology*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1989.

16. The modern origins of this are to be found in the 'Death of God' theologians of the sixties. The most notable contemporary defender of this perspective is Don Cupitt.

17. See his *The liberation of theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis, ch.1.

18. See e.g., Per Frostin's 'The Hermeneutics of the Poor - The Epistemological 'Break' in Third World Theologies' in *Studia Theologica* 39 (1985), pp. 127-150.

19. For an interesting discussion of this issue from a North American perspective see S.M. Ogden's 'The Concept of a Theology of Liberation: Must a Christian Theology Today Be So Conceived' in B. Mahan & L.D. Richesin (eds.), *The Challenge of Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981.

20. See D. Tracy's Introduction to B. Mahan & L.D. Richesin *op.cit.*

21. See e.g., his *Theology and the justification of faith: Constructing theories in systematic theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.