

READING THE BIBLE IN THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE¹

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Every theology is political, even one that does not speak or think in political terms. The influence of politics on theology and every other cultural sphere cannot be evaded any more than the influence of theology on politics and other spheres of human thinking. The worst politics of all would be to let theology perform this function unconsciously, for that brand of politics is always bound up with the status quo. Liberation theology consciously and explicitly accepts its relationship with politics . . . insofar as direct politics are concerned, it is more concerned about avoiding the false impartiality of academic theology than it is about taking sides and consequently giving ammunition to those who accuse it of partisanship.²

RECENT MONTHS have only served to remind us of the accuracy of Juan Luis Segundo's words. We have seen evidence that biblical interpretation has certainly become part of the ideological struggle, as the language of religion becomes a means by which men and women once again seek to pursue particular interests. Historically, there is nothing particularly surprising about that. Indeed, it is something that Christians should welcome. What is difficult for church people and theologians to come to terms with is that minority concerns have been suddenly thrust into the centre of the stage in an increasingly divided economic and political arena. Theological and ecclesiastical concerns are not merely matters of private concern but a contested area of discourse where the dominant economic forces and power-base seek to recruit the language of religion to their ideology. From the age of Constantine onwards that has ever been so. We have become so unaccustomed to the language of religion being a contestable area of debate that we are not as well equipped as we might be to deal with the competing claims. What that means for

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those who have been accustomed to have the field to themselves as they seek to use the bible in the discussion of justice and peace issues is that they now find that they have powerful and sophisticated competition. That will demand of those who believe that the way of Jesus is a way of peace, justice and good news for the poor the fullest possible use of the resources available in the struggle and in the problems confronting us in our present approach to scripture. We need to be aware of the problems. There is a clear challenge from those who want to affirm a clear religious tone to the Christian tradition and would prefer to isolate the scriptures from the political struggle and confine religion to the things of the soul.³ More problematic, however, is the simplistic way in which the scriptures have been used as part of debate about justice and peace issues. Some who would be sympathetic to the issues find themselves alienated by the way in which texts are taken out of context and used as proof texts for particular political projects, while ignoring contrary indications found in other parts of the canon. There are important questions to wrestle with. There is also an urgency, particularly for those who do not consider that the Thatcherite project corresponds to the major themes on justice as set out in the Christian tradition and that the time has come to take issue with a complacent acceptance of variety in interpretation when that can allow injustice to abound.

The problems, however, do not by any means arise from the contemporary political scene. There are deep-seated problems in the character of contemporary exegesis. There is a homogeneity about our mode of interpretation and its setting in its preoccupation with the texts and their original meanings and settings. The hegemony of this interpretative approach is firmly rooted in theological education and the Churches. Indeed, successive generations of ministers have been taught to read the bible using the historical-critical method. Few will have been given a glimpse of the variety of exegetical practice in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, except as a way of contrasting the scientific character of present methods with the eisegetical excesses of the past. In the process of acquiring the tools of historical scholarship we have all been enabled to catch a fascinating glimpse of the ancient world as it has been reconstructed for us by two hundred years of a biblical scholarship of increasing sophistication. But all too often our attention devoted to the quest for the original meaning of a Pauline phrase or saying of Jesus has left us floundering when we are asked to relate our

journey into ancient history to the world in which we live and work. We may find ourselves resorting to obscurantist and ill thought-out beliefs or recitation of favoured proof-texts which happen to prove our point. While the journey into the past has offered us insights a-plenty, our preoccupation with the past has left us with the feeling that the world we have constructed is alien to us.⁴ So the biblical text, instead of being a means of life, can become a stumbling block in the way of our contemporary discipleship. The enormous investment of our energy in the quest for the original meaning has frequently led us to ignore the more important task of relating that complex of meanings and the biblical world which we have constructed to the pressing needs of the contemporary world. It would not have been so bad if we had given sufficient attention to the exploration of the whole of the hermeneutical enterprise at the same time. As we are finding to our cost, we have ignored this. Consequently when it comes to using the bible in wrestling with the contemporary problems of Christian discipleship we find that our exegetical efforts frequently leave us without the necessary skills, when it comes to the provision of guidance for the exploration of those questions which our generation is asking.

Many today are willing to accept, at least in principle, that a text may be the vehicle of a variety of meanings to different readers. Yet there is a deep divide among interpreters of scripture. On the one hand there are those who think that the original meaning of the text is not only retrievable but also clearly recognizable and should be the criterion by which all other interpretations should be judged. On the other hand, there are those who argue either that the quest for the original meaning of the text is a waste of time or that, even if it is possible to ascertain what the original author intended, this should not be determinative of the way in which we read the text. This means that whatever the *conscious* intention of the original author, levels of meaning can become apparent to later interpreters, granted that the text is free from the shackles of the author's control and has a life of its own in the world of the reader.

Understandably, the first group is worried that the freedom implied in the second approach might lead to exegetical anarchy. It wants some kind of control over interpretation, and where better to find it than in the original meaning of the text? It is a desire which lies at the very heart of the problem of authority in the

Church which has always been such a pressing issue within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. No doubt most biblical exegetes would chafe at the imposition of any kind of hermeneutical control on their endeavours. But the fact of the matter is that there is a 'magisterium' of the historical-critical method in many parts of the Church today: the critical consensus of the biblical exegetes, preoccupied as most of them are with the original meaning of the text and its controlling role in the quest for meaning of the scriptures. That may be no bad thing; but we should recognize precisely what is going on, in particular the extraordinary influence this particular exegetical approach has had on the reading of the bible in the Churches over the last century. We have become so sophisticated in forging for ourselves tools for the retrieval of the original meaning that we have failed to see how defenceless we have become when it comes to using the bible in the discussion of contemporary social ethics. Our practice has been divorced from our research, and we are struggling to put the pieces together again.

Liberation theologians have drunk deep at the well of European biblical scholarship and are grateful for it. Their method of work differs from what is customary in this country. Many spend a significant part of each week working with grassroots communities in the shanty towns on the periphery of large cities or in rural communities. As part of their pastoral work they listen and help the process of reflection on the bible which is going on in the grassroots communities. They gain insights from listening to the poor reading and using scripture in the whole process of development and social change. They find that this process of listening and learning has given them a stimulus to their exegesis and, more important, has opened up new vistas and questions in the interpretative enterprise. This grassroots biblical interpretation provides a basis for the more sophisticated theological edifices they wish to build. Yet it is clear that the different experiences and world-view of the poor offer an unusually direct connection with the biblical text, which, whatever its shortcomings in terms of exegetical refinement, has proved enormously fruitful as far as the life of the Christian Church is concerned.

Also, they are much more concerned to take full account of the social formation of the biblical texts and the movements which produced them. Thus the issues which they are dealing with include the connection between the text and the social formation

and the way in which a particular text either challenges or affirms that social formation. Most exegetes who are influenced by liberation theology would not want to claim that they have the hermeneutical key which unlocks the meaning of the whole of the scriptures (though there *are* some who think the perspective of the poor is the criterion for a true reading of scripture). They are insistent that European and North American exegetes need to take fuller account of their perspective, because, they argue, the immediacy of the relationship between biblical narratives and the situation and experiences of the poor has enabled them to glimpse interpretative insights which have so often eluded the sophisticated, cerebral and largely upper-class, orientation of First World biblical exegesis.

Carlos Mesters⁵ who has worked with peasants and urban shantytown dwellers in Brazil for many years, points out that weariness translated itself into Brazilian biblical study with the growth of learned works on exegesis which had little appeal or relevance for the millions seeking to survive in situations of injustice and poverty. In that situation, however, a new way of reading the text has arisen, not among the exegetical élite of the seminaries and universities but at the grassroots. Its emphasis, derived from the insights of Catholic Action, is on the method: see (starting where one is with one's experience, which for the majority in Latin America means an experience of poverty), judge (understanding the reasons for that kind of existence and relating them to the story of the deliverance from oppression in the bible) and act. Ordinary people have taken the bible into their own hands and begun to read the word of God in the circumstances of their existence but also in comparison with the stories of the people of God in other times and other places. Millions of men and women abandoned by government and Church have discovered an ally in the story of the people of God in the scriptures.

This new biblical theology in the basic christian communities is an oral theology in which story, experience and biblical reflection are intertwined with the community's life of sorrow and joy. That experience of celebration, worship, varied stories and recollections, in drama and festival is, according to Mesters, exactly what lies behind the written words of scripture itself. That is the written deposit which bears witness to the story of a people, oppressed, bewildered and longing for deliverance. While exegete, priest and religious may have their part to play in the life of the community,

the reading is basically uninfluenced by excessive clericalism and individualistic piety. It is a reading which is emphatically communitarian in which reflection on the story of a people can indeed lead to an appreciation of the *sensus ecclesiae* and a movement towards liberative action. So revelation is very much a present phenomenon: 'God speaks in the midst of the circumstances of today'. In contrast the vision of many priests is of a revelation that is entirely past, in the deposit of faith, something to be preserved, defended, transmitted to the people by its guardians.

So the bible is not about past history only. It is also a mirror to be held up to reflect the story of today and lend it a new perspective. Mesters argues that what is happening in this new way of reading the bible is in fact a rediscovery of the patristic method of interpretation which stresses the priority of the spirit of the word rather than its letter. God speaks through life; but that word is one that is illuminated by the bible; 'the principal objective of reading the bible is not to interpret the bible but to interpret life with the help of the bible'. The major preoccupation is not the quest for the meaning of the text in itself but the direction which the bible is suggesting to the people of God within the specific circumstances in which they find themselves. The popular reading of the bible in Brazil is directed to contemporary practice and the transformation of a situation of injustice. That situation permits the poor to discover meaning which can so easily elude the technically better equipped exegete. So, where you are determines to a large extent what you read. This is a reading which does not pretend to be neutral and questions whether any other reading can claim that either. It is committed to the struggle of the poor for justice, and the resonances that are found with the biblical story suggest that the quest for the so-called 'objective' reading may itself be unfaithful to the commitments and partiality which the scriptures themselves demand. Of course, Mesters recognizes the difficulties of this approach. Nevertheless he asks us to judge the effectiveness of the reading by its fruits: is it 'a sign of the arrival of the reign of God . . . when the blind see, lepers are clean, the dead rise and the poor have the good news preached to them'?

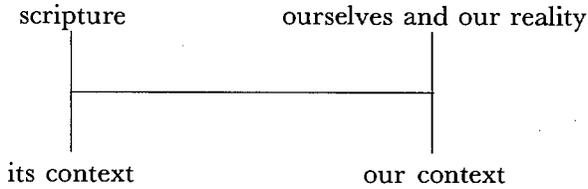
In his essay on a liberation theology for the British situation Charles Elliott succinctly sums up the challenge to contemporary interpretative procedures:

Liberation theology is about a fundamental change in the way in which persons, personal relationships and therefore political relationships are conceived and structured . . . why is liberation theology so important intellectually? . . . Firstly it is true to elements . . . of the biblical tradition which were long neglected by the colonialist church . . . neither a colonialist church nor an established church can bear to think that the biblical tradition is actually about challenging power: but if you see the essence of the nature of God as being to free the oppressed from their oppression, then you are necessarily engaged in a challenge to power . . . Secondly it marks a quite different theological method . . . what liberation theologians are saying is . . . the only way you will derive theological truth is by starting where people are, because it is where poor and particularly oppressed people are that you will find God. Now that stands on its head sixteen hundred years of philosophical tradition in Christendom. From the third century, Christians have thought the way to establish theological truth has been to try to derive consistent propositions, that is to say propositions that are consistent with the facts of the tradition as revealed primarily in the bible . . . What the liberation theologians are saying . . . is that this will not do as a way of doing theology. If you want to do theology, you have to start where people are, particularly the people that the bible is primarily concerned with, who are the dispossessed, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the prostitute, the pimp and the tax collector. Find out what they are saying, thinking and feeling, and that is the stuff out of which the glimpses of God will emerge.⁶

Few would want to turn their backs on the insights which two hundred years of historical scholarship on the bible have offered. Yet liberation theologians rightly point out that the insights of the poor and the marginalized have breathed new life into our understanding of the concerns of the bible. Reading the story of the people of God and the gospel stories in particular with the eyes of the poor can cast much new light on parts of the text which the bourgeois reading of the first century Church and academy can so easily miss. The rediscovery of God's option for the poor in the bible is a case in point.⁷ Also, the concern with the socio-economic context of the Christian movement has helped our understanding of the way in which the radical message of Jesus was blunted in the urban environment of the Pauline churches.

We cannot be content to regard the biblical texts merely as manifestations of the social processes of the past, because they are

part and parcel of our world and continue to contribute to the ebb and flow of ideological formation in our day. It is inadequate to concentrate in any social hermeneutic on what the text *meant* only. Of equal (if not greater) importance is the analysis of contemporary usage, whether in academy or in church, and the investigation of the particular interests that are being served by various patterns of interpretation. That point is neatly encapsulated in the diagram taken from the work of the Brazilian theologian, Clodovis Boff.⁸



Bearing such matters in mind will equip us for the quest for a truly critical reflection on the scriptures and our use of them in order to be better able to lay bare the role they are playing in ideological struggles in various and different social contexts. This outline of the position of much contemporary biblical study and the contribution of the liberationist exegesis from Latin America are a prolegomenon, though a necessary one, to the task of working out a critical awareness of our interpretative task. In so doing we cannot erect another set of boundaries which will hinder a creative and imaginative use of scripture in contemporary struggles. At the same time we cannot easily tolerate a situation where individual contexts so relativize the way in which we read that we find that we have little in common with those in positions different from our own. What kind of approach to scriptures should we be looking for?

*Provisional guidelines for a contemporary interpretation*⁹

1. A prime task of the exegete is to watch the way in which the biblical material is and has been *used*. In so doing it is necessary to make sure that readers are engaged with the text in its various parts and are as attentive as possible to it. To take an example. If we concentrate solely on Mk 12,17 ('Render to Caesar' etc.) as the clue to Jesus's attitude to the Roman occupation of Judaea, we lose some of the force of the context in which that saying is uttered. What is more, when the way in which we hear this saying

is governed by the interpretation of this which seems to be offered in Romans 13, 8, then we may find ourselves rapidly assuming that Christian attitudes to the state are unproblematic. That may be all right when we live in a relatively benign democracy, but that does not apply to many of our brothers and sisters, say in South Africa or in Guatemala or El Salvador. Are they put in a position of having to choose between following Jesus and our own inclination to resist or rebel in some circumstances? With some justification they look to parts of the scriptures which we may prefer to ignore, for example, the Book of Revelation. In Revelation 13 there is a much less optimistic assessment of the state (to put it mildly). There the state is seen as an agent of the powers of darkness, and in the picture of its power and rule in Chapter 17 the seer indicates that this power is insecure, based on self-aggrandizement and oppression.

In the light of this we may be driven back to the gospels again and begin to ask questions about the context of Jesus's saying in Mk 12,17. The reference there to the handling of the coin and the discussion of its superscription raise a question about the rectitude of Jews dealing in coinage which bore an image in direct contravention to God's law. Also, we cannot forget the context of the saying: the journey to Jerusalem, the so-called triumphal entry and the political dimension of the challenge to the Temple.¹⁰ In that situation Jesus found himself in a vulnerable position, and the whole incident as described in Mark has the air of a trap being laid from which Jesus extricates himself by an ambiguous reply.

What I am suggesting is that there is more than meets the eye in the way in which we are wont to read and use the scriptures. That may well be because our Churches school us to read in particular ways because of the ways in which particular texts are juxtaposed. Thus, for the Sunday eucharistic readings in the Anglican Church when the incident with the tribute money is discussed, the readings from the epistles are Rom 13 and Tit 2. Both of these urge subservience to the ruling powers and as a result condition the way in which we hear the account of Jesus and the tribute money (which alternates in its Matthaean rather than Markan form with the account of the murder of John the Baptist). No sign of Revelation 13 here which would temper the complacency of Christian attitudes towards the powers given by the more positive accompanying readings (Isai 45,1ff; 1 Kg 3,4-15).

2. It is necessary to contribute alternative horizons to our contemporary use of scripture. Firstly, we may do this by exploring to the full what might have been the original setting and circumstances of the various texts *as well as the history of interpretation within and outside the Church* as a challenge to self-indulgence and the belief that our application of the texts tells the whole story of their meaning. Secondly, the language of the kingdom itself offers an alternative perspective on the arrangements of the present. A broader horizon is offered and the reader is asked to consider the present in the light of the threat of judgement and the glory of the age to come. It has protested against those arrangements which have the appearance of order but which in reality have brought about the prosperity and progress of some at the expense of others. It is frequently those who have to bear that suffering who can see the fragility of those structures which appear to offer peace and security. Those whose lives are fragmented and who live at the margins can discern the signs of the times in ways which are frightening to those of us who cannot see from what is apparently a more favoured vantage-point. Many throughout history have been attentive in ways which would not be possible for those in more comfortable surroundings, for whom life does not seem to present such stark choices or an oppressive threat.

3. We should accept the inevitable eisegesis which is part of the variety of the exegetical (i.e. the complex process of finding meaning in texts), to enable one another to be aware of the kinds of eisegesis which we are carrying out in all their subtlety and sophistication. That must concentrate just as much as the various human interests which may be at work in the maintaining of particular positions of individuals and groups. That is going to necessitate that we take seriously the patient analysis of the particularity of each situation and whose interests are being served by various interpretations.

4. This will mean that there will be a greater sensitivity to methods of finding meaning which do not necessarily attribute much weight to authorial intention or even the original setting of the text and its transmission, e.g. canon criticism, literary criticism and the structuralist approaches in all their variety.

5. It is easy to see how biblical material can be extracted from its context and function as instructions which abstract the reader from the challenge of the messianic way, as it intersects with an order which is passing away, into the world of fantastic speculation

and out of touch with reality. Accordingly, the temptation to wrest verses out of context in a particular book must be resisted and the wider fabric of the narrative heeded. Nor should those of us who are on the 'left' of contemporary theology ignore those parts of the canon which do not fit so easily with our particular views of the world. Most middle-class Christians, like the writer of this article, actually practise the compromises which characterize the outlook of books like the Pastoral Epistles with their social conformity and theory of male supremacy. We may not tolerate these solutions but we cannot fail to recognize that such compromises are the normal stuff of our existence. At the very least the unpalatable parts of the canon can place a mirror before our rhetoric and remind us of the frequency of the distance which exists as compared with our practice. A realistic self-criticism must accompany the critique of contemporary ideology. In this situation this must be a corporate activity which recognizes the fallibility of our judgements while affirming the necessity of keeping to the task of proclaiming justice and peace, however costly that may be.

The use of the bible must not be separated from the narrative of Jesus's proclamation and inauguration of the reign of God. It is that context which is necessary to prevent decisions about the present and the future becoming wildly unrealistic or deeply compromised. Discipleship involves sharing the way of the cross of the Son of Man as he goes up to Jerusalem. What is offered the disciple is the sharing of the cup of suffering of the Son of Man rather than the promise of sitting at his right hand and his left when he reigns on earth. There can be no escape from the painful reality of the present witness, with its need to endure the tribulations which precede the vindication. That is the mark of the realism of the struggle, the recognition that over-optimism and rapid solutions are not what is promised and that patient endurance is needed in the face of injustice. That is the challenge which faces those who wish to live out the messianic narrative in their own lives.¹¹ Jesus promises his disciples persecution and the need to be ready to bear witness before the courts of the powerful. They can expect to maintain a critical distance from the institutions of the old order. The decisive question is not so much (to use the words of Klaus Wengst)¹² 'How can I survive this situation with the least possible harm?' Rather, the one question which is important is: in this situation, how can one bear witness to the way of the Messiah? Life along the usual lines may no longer be an option

for the disciple who takes seriously the need to take up the cross of the Messiah rather than the sword of violence. The consequence is social separation and a refusal to join in the normal pattern of society. So, by contradicting and resisting, the disciples dispute that the world belongs to those who claim to rule over it. Something like this seems to me to be what the New Testament witness is demanding of those of us who are seeking to bear witness to and work for the reign of God. It is going to have a decentred quality¹³ consistent with identification with the one who died 'outside the city', reflecting the distorted world in which we live and the incompleteness of God's project of establishing a reign of justice and peace. When it offers satisfaction and wholeness, questions need to be asked when that claim to wholeness ignores those at the fringes of our wholeness, whose fractured existence is a reminder of the pain of the suffering Son of Man and the struggles still endured and to be shared before the kingdom comes.

NOTES

¹ This article is based on themes from a forthcoming book by Mark Corner and Christopher Rowland on the use of the bible in liberation theology to be published by SPCK in 1989-1990.

² Segundo, J. L.: *The liberation of theology* (New York, 1976).

³ See further D. Forrester, *Theology and politics* (Oxford, 1988) and for a detailed account of some of the history of this process see Nicholas Lash, *Easter in ordinary London*, 1988.

⁴ For some pertinent comments on these points see N. Lash, 'What might martyrdom mean?' in *Theology on the way to Emmaus* (London, 1986).

⁵ C. Mesters 'Com se faz Teologia hoje no Brasil?' in *Estudos Biblicos* vol 1 (1985) and the series of articles by Margaret Hebblethwaite in *The Tablet*. On the pastoral practice of the Brazilian church see the concise survey in David Regan, *Church for liberation: a pastoral portrait of the Church in Brazil* (Dublin, 1987).

⁶ 'Is there a liberation theology for the UK?' Heslington Lecture, University of York, 1985).

⁷ See for example J. Santa Ana, *Good news to the poor: the challenge of the poor in the history of the Church* (Geneva, 1977) and from an evangelical perspective T. Hanks, *God so loved the Third World* (New York, 1983).

⁸ Boff, Clodovis: *Theology and praxis* (New York, 1986), particularly chapter 8.

⁹ There are interesting parallels to what is said here, though he is approaching the issue from a rather different ecclesiastical background, in Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, sabbath, war and women: case issues in biblical interpretation* (Scotdale, Pennsylvania, 1983), pp 211ff. For a useful discussion on the role of the bible in social ethics see also T. Ogletree *The use of the bible in Christian ethics* (Oxford, 1983).

¹⁰ See, for example, the survey in M. Clevenot, *Materialist approaches to the bible* (New York, 1985) and G. Pixley, *God's kingdom* (London, 1981).

¹¹ See further the suggestive comments of S. Hauerwas in *The peaceable kingdom* (London, 1983).

¹² Wengst, K.: *Pax Romana and the peace of Jesus Christ* (London, 1986), pp 118f.

¹³ See further D. Turner, 'De-centring theology', *Modern theology* 2 (1986) p 142: 'a theological discourse which can qualify as truly cognitive is that which knows itself to be the decentred language of a decentred world . . . ' (quoted in Lash, *op. cit.*, p 225).