

METHOD IN LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

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[The author argues that despite real diversities among different kinds of liberation theologians, they are all on a common journey, heading along different paths toward the same destination. A common element, their method, unites them. He analyzes the three components of this method: the use of praxis and academic disciplines other than philosophy, the interpretation of Scripture and tradition, and its relating theory to praxis. Finally, he shows how a correct understanding of the method used by liberation theologians will obviate several objections commonly leveled against them.]

FUTURE HISTORIANS OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY will no doubt judge liberation theology to be the most influential movement of the twentieth century, possibly even since the Reformation.¹ They certainly will painstakingly document its emergence as independent theological movements in the late 1960s and will marvel at its spectacular expansion throughout the entire *oikoumene* in a matter of just a couple of decades.² The profound influence of liberation theology will be evident not only from the way it has penetrated far-flung countries and continents and permeated all the branches of Christian theology, from biblical studies through systematics to ethics,³ but also from the critique by the Roman magisterium as well as

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¹ For helpful general introductions to liberation theology which are legion, the following may be consulted: *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993); *The Future of Liberation Theology*, ed. Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989); *Liberation Theology*, ed. Curt Cadorette et al. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992); and Peter C. Phan, "The Future of Liberation Theology," *The Living Light* 28/3 (1992) 259–71.

² For excellent documentation, see *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).

³ The series "Theology and Liberation," which may include some 60 volumes,

vigorous attacks by political authorities who have regarded it as the most pernicious threat to democracy and the capitalistic system.⁴

Even though it is customary to refer to liberation theology in the singular, it is obvious, even from a cursory study of its history, that it is by no means a homogeneous and uniform system. It has been practiced in different contexts and continents—North America, Central and South America, Africa, and Asia, just to mention those where it has attracted a sizable number of adherents.⁵ It has targeted various arenas of oppression—gender (white feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theology), sexual orientation (gay and lesbian theology), race (Black theology), class (Latin American theology), culture (African theology), and religion (Asian theology), again just to cite a representative few. Of course, these forms of oppression are not restricted to a particular region; rather they are each widespread in *all* parts of the globe and are often intimately interlocked with each other and mutually reinforcing, so that any genuine liberation theology anywhere must fight against all forms of oppression, be they sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, classism, cultural and religious discrimination, all at once, siding in effective solidarity with victims of all forms of oppression. In this sense, it is appropriate to refer to liberation

attempts to reformulate all the basic theological themes in light of the theology of liberation.

⁴ For the critique by the Vatican, see the documents by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’,” *Origins* 14 (September 13, 1984) 193–204 and “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation,” *Origins* 15 (April 17, 1986) 713–28. The second document reflects a more positive attitude toward liberation theology. For an evaluation of the Vatican’s documents, see Juan Luis Segundo, *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) and Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *Dialectic of Salvation: Issues in Theology and Liberation* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1989). For a balanced assessment of the critique of liberation theology, see Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989). Opposition to liberation theology has not been limited only to silencing some of its more vocal exponents (e.g. Leonardo Boff). The murder of many Christians engaged in the struggle for justice including the six Jesuits and two women in El Salvador in 1989 is attributable to violent opposition to the views of liberation theology. Jon Sobrino has pointed out: “The corpses of the Jesuits show that this theology is not elitist but of the people, because it has risen in defense of the people and shared the people’s destiny”; see Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría and others, *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 51.

⁵ For presentations of liberation from the global perspective, see Alfred T. Hennelly, *Liberation Theologies: The Global Pursuit of Justice* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995); *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998); and Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison, *Jesus in Global Contexts* (Louisville, Kent.: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

theology in the plural: there are liberation *theologies*. It is important to take account of this diversity of liberation theologies, since it is a common mistake to lump all liberation theologies together as an undifferentiated theological movement.

This diversity has been well expressed by Mary Potter Engel and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite: "There are distinctive emphases in liberation theologies; they are not clones. None of them—North American feminist liberation theologies, womanist, *mujerista*, gay and lesbian liberation theologies, African American liberation theologies, Native American liberation theologies, Latin American liberation theologies, *minjung* theologies, or others, including those who as yet have not found a way to name their theological situation for themselves—is interchangeable with any of the others. Each has its own peculiar interests, emphases, viewpoints, analyses, and aims, dependent upon the requirements of its own particular social context."⁶

While acknowledging these important diversities, this article will focus on what binds liberation theologies together, namely, the essential elements of their method. It will examine the resources liberation theologians make use of, their hermeneutical approaches, and their criteria of truth. In other words, the article will study the three elements of the epistemology of liberation theology—its analytical, hermeneutical, and practical mediations.⁷ It will illustrate these methodological considerations with a wide-ranging appeal to the writings of a variety of liberation theologians themselves. It intends to show that liberation theologians, whatever their national and cultural provenance, are fellow travelers on a common journey, albeit through different routes, to the same destination.

A VARIETY OF GRIST TO THE THEOLOGICAL MILL: THE SOCIOANALYTIC MEDIATION

It has been asserted that liberation theologies are not simply "genitive theologies" in which liberation would be no more than one subject among

⁶ *Lift Every Voice* 5.

⁷ See Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) xxv; *Teoria do Método Teológico* (Petropolis, Brazil: Vozes, 1998). These three components correspond to the three acts of see-judge-act characteristic of the method used by supporters of Catholic Action among the Young Christian Workers (the Jocsists) founded by Joseph Cardijn (1882–1967). On the connection between the method of liberation theology and Catholic Action, see Agenor Brighenti, "Raízes da epistemologia e do método da Teologia da Libertação. O método ver-julgar-agir da Ação Católica e as mediações da teologia latino-americana" diss. Catholic University of Leuven, 1993. See also Clodovis Boff, "Epistemology and Method of Liberation Theology," in *Mysterium Liberationis* 57–85 and Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) 22–42.

many, conventional theologies about some hitherto undiscovered reality or dealing with a new theme. Rather the claim is that liberation theologies are new ways of doing theology in which liberation is a kind of horizon against which the whole Christian faith is interpreted.⁸ In other words, they are essentially a theology with a new method.

Part of the methodological novelty lies in the partners-in-dialogue with whom liberation theologies converse, or to put it differently, in the kinds of grist they bring to their theological mills. Gustavo Gutiérrez has argued that, in contrast to theology as wisdom and theology as rational knowledge which dialogue almost exclusively with Neoplatonic and Aristotelean philosophies respectively, liberation theology is a “critical reflection on praxis.”⁹ As reflection on historical praxis, liberation theologies will highlight certain Christian themes that might have been obscured in the past, such as charity as the center of Christian life, the intrinsic connection between spirituality and activism, the anthropological aspects of revelation, the very life of the Church as a *locus theologicus*, the task of reflecting on the signs of the times, action as the starting point for theological reflection, the (Marxist) emphasis on the necessity of transforming the world, and the necessity of orthopraxis in addition to orthodoxy.¹⁰

Conversation with the Social Sciences

To carry out this critical reflection on historical praxis effectively as part of their methodology liberation theologies must enter into dialogue with

⁸ “[T]he theology of liberation offers us not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way* to do theology. Theology as critical reflection on historical praxis is a liberating theology, a theology of the liberating transformation of the history of humankind—gathered into *ecclesia*—which openly confesses Christ” (Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed., trans. Sister Caridad and John Eagleson [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988] 12). Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel use the building metaphor to express the radical challenge of liberation theology: “Liberation theologies are not about rearranging the furniture in the house of theology, or even about redecorating or remodeling the house. Rather, they are about rebuilding the foundation (method) and redesigning the floor plan (categories)” (*Lift Every Voice* 14). Juan Luis Segundo explains this new way of doing theology in detail in *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976).

⁹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 5. In an earlier lecture (July 1968) given at Chimbote, Peru, Gutiérrez gave a definition of theology in relation to praxis: “Theology is a reflection—that is, it is a second act, a turning back, a re-flecting, that come after action. Theology is not first; the commitment is first. Theology is the understanding of the commitment, and the commitment is action. The central element is charity, which involves commitment, while theology arrives later on” (Hennelly, *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* 63).

¹⁰ See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 5–11.

the social sciences.¹¹ To help transform the structures that oppress the poor, liberation theologians must have an accurate knowledge of the concrete sociopolitical and economic conditions of the people to whom they convey the Christian message. The expression “(preferential) option for the poor” describes well the fundamental commitment or the “first act,” to use Gutiérrez’s memorable phrase, out of which liberation theologians are supposed to do their “second step” of reflection.¹² However, to know who the poor are in our society and the causes of their poverty requires more than expertise in the Bible and philosophy; what is needed is what Clodovis Boff calls the “socioanalytic mediation.”

With regard to the relationship between theology and the social sciences Clodovis Boff rejects five ways of conceiving and practicing it in the past. These he terms “empiricism” (absence of socioanalytic mediation), “methodological purism” (exclusion of socioanalytic mediation), “theologism” (substitution for socioanalytic mediation), “semantic mix” (faulty articulation of socioanalytic mediation) and “bilingualism” (unarticulated socioanalytic mediation).¹³ Instead of these inadequate ways Boff recommends

¹¹ Among liberation theologians the one most insistent upon the need for theology to dialogue with the social sciences was Juan Luis Segundo whose theological project was to dialogue with the social sciences in order to “de-ideologize” the customary interpretation of the Christian faith and its language that hide and legitimate oppression or social injustice. See Juan Luis Segundo, *Signs of the Times: Theological Reflections*, ed. Alfred Hennelly, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), especially two essays: “Theology and the Social Sciences” (7–17) and “The Shift Within Latin American Theology” (67–80). In the last-mentioned essay Segundo was critical of his colleagues for having made the poor rather than the de-ideologizing of Christian tradition the primary locus or source of theology.

¹² “The Christian community professes a ‘faith which works through charity.’ It is—at least ought to be—real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others. Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*; it is the second step” (Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 9). For a critical evaluation of Gutiérrez’s understanding of the “preferential option for the poor” in the light of Thomas Aquinas’s notion of charity, see Stephen Pope, “Christian Love for the Poor: Almsgiving and the ‘Preferential Option’,” *Horizons* 21 (1994) 288–312; Patrick H. Byrne, “*Ressentiment* and the Preferential Option for the Poor,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993) 213–41; Stephen Pope, “Proper and Improper Partiality and the Preferential Option for the Poor,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993) 242–71. For a critical examination of the relationship between orthopraxis and doing theology, especially as proposed by Juan Luis Segundo, see Bernard J. Verkamp, “On Doing the Truth: Orthopraxis and the Theologian,” *Theological Studies* 49 (1988) 3–24.

¹³ See Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 20–29. According to Boff, “empiricism” wrongly assumes that knowledge is immediately given (“the facts speak for themselves”); “methodological purism” is the epistemological version of “*sola fides*”; “theologism” is the theoretical correlative of supernaturalism that considers theological interpretation as the only true or adequate version of the real; “semantic mix” is a hybrid discourse in which theology and sociology are simply mixed and

that we understand the relationship between the sciences of the social and the theology of the political as “constitutive” insofar as the social theories become the data for theology: “The sciences of the social enter into the theology of the political as a *constitutive part*. But they do so precisely at the level of the raw material of this theology, at the level of its *material object*—not at that of its proper pertinency, or formal object.”¹⁴

It is well known that many Latin American theologians, at least in their early writings, adopted the theory of dependence to explain the economic underdevelopment and exploitation in Latin America as the historical by-product of the development of other, mostly capitalist countries, and hence called for the abandonment of the developmental model in favor of liberation or “social revolution.”¹⁵ In his more recent writings Gutiérrez has shown himself much more aware of the limitations of the theory of dependence.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the tendency to seek the root causes of all forms of oppression and to consider them in their historical development remains influential on the methodology of all types of liberation theology. For example, Black theology has traced the roots of African Americans’ social-political and economic oppression back to racism and the ideology of white supremacy.¹⁷ Similarly, Asian feminist theologians have highlighted how “capitalism, patriarchy, militarism, and religio-cultural ideologies work to-

not fully integrated, often with theology dominating sociology, as is found in some magisterial documents on social problems and in some political theologies; and “bilingualism,” which is closely related with “semantic mix,” juxtaposes socioanalytic discourse and theological discourse, seeking to play two languages on the same field simultaneously, often resulting in contradictions and with sociology displacing theology.

¹⁴ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 31. Using Louis Althusser’s epistemology, Boff suggests that the “third generality” of the social sciences, i.e. their theories, become the “first generality” of liberation theology, i.e. its raw data. I elaborate this point in my second section.

¹⁵ See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 49–57. Gutiérrez cites the works of sociologists such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Theotonio Dos Santos, and André Gunder Frank among many others.

¹⁶ See Gustavo Gutiérrez’s essay entitled “Theology and the Social Sciences” first published in 1984 and later incorporated in his *The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 53–84. Here Gutiérrez insists on the necessity of a critical use of social theories in general: “We need discernment, then, in dealing with the social sciences, not only because of their inchoative character . . . , but also because to say that these disciplines are scientific does not mean that their findings are apodictic and beyond discussion” (58).

¹⁷ See the works of James H. Cone, Gayraud S. Wilmore, and J. Deotis Roberts. See in particular Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998); Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, ed., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, 1 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) and *Black*

gether to escalate the degree of women's oppression."¹⁸ Some U.S. Hispanic theologians perceive the origin of the marginalization of Hispanic Americans in the inability of Anglos to accept the reality of *mestizaje* and *mulataje*.¹⁹

The use of the social sciences, especially the theory of dependence and the concept of class struggle, has brought accusations of Marxist ideology against liberation theologies. Liberation theologians have defended themselves successfully against such a charge, from Gutiérrez to his younger colleagues. They distinguish between Marxism as an atheistic and totalitarian ideology (which they vigorously reject) and as a tool of social analysis; they also point out the difference between class struggle as a fact (the existence of which cannot be denied in Latin America) and the Marxist interpretation of class struggle as a law of history.²⁰

"The Psychological Tools of Introspection" and Interreligious Dialogue

Whatever success liberation theologians may have had in their self-defense against accusations of Marxism and however fruitful is the dia-

Theology: A Documentary History, 1980–1992, 2 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993). George C. L. Cummings has argued that Black Theology is rooted in six factors: the African slave trade and American slavery, segregation in postemancipation America, Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, Malcolm X and the Black Muslim movement, Black Power and the black rebellions in the 1960s, and the struggle of Black Christians to define their identity and mission; see his *A Common Journey: Black Theology (USA) and Latin American Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 2. For Black Catholic theology, see *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States*, ed. Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998), in particular M. Shawn Copeland's essay "Method in Emerging Catholic Theology" 120–44.

¹⁸ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 106. See also *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989).

¹⁹ See the works of Virgilio Elizondo, especially his *Mestizaje: The Dialectic of Cultural Birth and the Gospel* (San Antonio: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1978) and *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer-Stone, 1988); see also Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

²⁰ See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* 61–63, 69–75; Enrique D. Dussell, "Theology of Liberation and Marxism," *Mysterium Liberationis* 85–102; and Arthur McGovern, "Dependency Theory, Marxist Analysis, and Liberation Theology," in *The Future of Theology* 272–86. With regard to socialism in liberation theology, Peter Burns has carefully evaluated the critique of opponents of liberation theology, in particular Michael Novak, and has convincingly showed that such a critique is not well grounded. Burns also points out the danger that liberation theology may lose its distinctive thrust if it mutes its option for socialism as the result of the collapse of Communism; see Peter Burns, "The Problem of Socialism in Liberation Theology," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 493–516.

logue between theology and the social sciences, Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan liberation theologian, while recognizing the indebtedness of Asian theologians to their Latin American colleagues, has pointed out that “‘liberation-theopraxis’ in Asia that uses only the Marxist tools of social analysis will remain un-Asian and ineffective. It must integrate the psychological tools of introspection that our sages have discovered.”²¹ The reason for the necessity of this additional tool is the fact that, as Pieris has argued, in Asia besides “imposed poverty” there is also “voluntary poverty” that has been freely assumed, mainly by monks, to liberate others from imposed poverty and about which Marxist social analysis has nothing to say. This “introspection” not only serves as a bracing corrective to Karl Marx’s thesis that religions are the opium for the people but also highlights the potential that religions have for social transformation.

Furthermore, this methodology has forged a new link between sociopolitical and economic liberation and interreligious dialogue. Since Latin America is predominantly Christian, interreligious dialogue has not been an urgent issue for most of its theologians nor has it served as a method for theological reflection.²² This is also true of Black, Hispanic, and feminist theologies in the U.S. However, this is not the case with Asia which is the birthplace of most world religions and where Christians are but a tiny minority and therefore must collaborate with adherents of other religions in order to achieve their agenda for social transformation. By interreligious dialogue as a theological method is meant not only theological discussions among church representatives and academics, but also “dialogue of life,” “dialogue of action,” and “dialogue of religious experience.”²³ It is from these four forms of interreligious dialogue that a theology of liberation must be constructed whose genuine wellspring must be spirituality and not

²¹ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) 80–81.

²² Instead of interreligious dialogue, Latin American liberation theologians have recently paid attention to *religiosidad popular* as a source for liberation. See Cristián Parker, *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996) with a rich bibliography (265–84); as well as Michael R. Candelaria, *Popular Religion and Liberation: The Dilemma of Liberation Theology* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1990). Theologians Pablo Richard, Diego Irarrázaval, Juan Luis Segundo, and Juan Carlos Scannone have produced significant works on this theme.

²³ See Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, June 20, 1991 (Rome: Vatican Polyglot, 1991) no. 42. See also the rich collection of John Paul II’s statements on interreligious dialogue and reactions from Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims in *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasimov (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999).

secular ideologies. Hence, it is of great significance that in recent times liberation theologians have increasingly turned to Christian spirituality as the quarry of their reflections.²⁴

On the other hand, thanks to its new link with liberation, the very nature of interreligious dialogue has been transformed. It can no longer be carried out as a leisurely form of inculturation in which various elements are borrowed from other religions and grafted onto one's own—a kind of “theological vandalism,” to use Pieris's expression.²⁵ Rather it should be practiced as part of the task of liberation, since inculturation, as Pieris puts it, is nothing but announcing “the good news *in our own tongues* to our people (that is, the content of inculturation)—namely, that Jesus is the new covenant or the defense pact that God and the poor have made against mammon, their common enemy (that is, the content of liberation). For liberation and inculturation are not two things anymore in Asia.”²⁶

Interreligious dialogue as part of the method of liberation theologies also valorizes sacred texts and practices of Asian religions which have nourished the spiritual life of Asian people for thousands of years before the coming of Christianity into their lands and since then.²⁷ Intimately connected with these religious classics is what is commonly referred to as Asian philosophies.²⁸ Lastly, interreligious dialogue also highlights the importance of Asian monastic traditions with their rituals, ascetic practices, and social commitment for constructing liberation theologies.²⁹

²⁴ See, e.g., Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Well*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984); Jon Sobrino, *A Spirituality of Liberation: Toward a Political Holiness*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988); Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987); Segundo Galilea, *Following Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981); Nestor Jaén, *Toward a Liberation Spirituality*, trans. Philip Berryman (Chicago: Loyola University, 1991); *Asian Christian Spirituality: Reclaiming Tradition*, ed. Virginia Fabella, Peter K. H. Lee, and David Kwang-sun Suh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992). On the spirituality of liberation theology, see Peter C. Phan, “Peacemaking in Latin American Liberation Theology,” *Eglise et théologie* 24 (1993) 25–41.

²⁵ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* 53, 85.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 58.

²⁷ See Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988) and his *Fire and Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996).

²⁸ Highly significant in this regard are the prolific writings of Jung Young Lee, especially his *Embracing Change: Postmodern Interpretations of the I Ching from a Christian Perspective* (Scranton: University of Scranton, 1994) and *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

²⁹ Even though Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, and Raimundo Panikkar cannot

Stories from the Underside of History

Besides social analysis and psychological introspection accompanied by interreligious dialogue as part of their methodology, liberation theologians dig deep into the humus of people's lives to find resources for their reflection. The stories of these lives are often not recorded in history books written by victors but must be retrieved from the forgotten and oppressed past to form the "dangerous memory" (Johann Baptist Metz) by which the stimulus for social transformation may be nourished and sustained. Among Asian liberation theologians, Choan-Seng Song stands out as the preeminent "story theologian." Again and again he urges his fellow Asian theologians to make use of the stories not only of the Bible but also of poor and oppressed people, the "underside of history" (Gustavo Gutiérrez), and their folktales, old and new, as food for their theological thought. Song believes that the most important skill for Asian theologians is the ability to listen theologically to the whispers, cries, groanings, and shouts from the depths of Asian suffering humanity. What is needed, says Song, is the imagination, the "third-eye," that is, the power of perception and insight (*satori*) that enables theologians to grasp the meaning beneath the surface of things and phenomena. It is precisely this listening to and reflection upon the stories of suffering people that makes theology a liberation theology.³⁰

Telling stories of the underside of history is also practiced by Korean *minjung* theology as its fundamental method.³¹ As Young-Chan Ro has

be regarded as liberation theologians, they have made important contributions to the dialogue regarding Western and Eastern monasticism.

³⁰ Song is a highly skillful practitioner of story theology. For his reflections on stories as part of the theological method, see his ten theses in *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 3–24, and "Five Stages Toward Christian Theology in the Multicultural World," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, ed. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999) 1–21. For Song's own theological works, see in particular *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990; original ed. 1979); *The Compassionate God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982); *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986); his christological trilogy entitled *The Cross in the Lotus World: Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad, 1990); *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); and *Jesus in the Power of the Holy Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). For a book-length study of Song, see Karl H. Federsmidt, *Theologie aus asiatischen Quellen: Der theologische Weg Choan-Seng Songs vor dem Hintergrund der asiatischen ökumenischen Diskussion* (Münster and Hamburg: Lit, 1994).

³¹ On *minjung* theology, see *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective: Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology*, ed. Jung Yung Lee (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 1988); Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God* (Nashville: Abing-

well argued, the reality of *han*, which is “the cumulative unresolved feeling that arises out of people’s experience of injustice,” and which is the source of *minjung* theology, “reveals itself in the *telling* of tragic stories.”³² This storytelling method is also widely adopted by Black theology, Native American theology, and feminist theology of various stripes. The telling, of course, often takes the verbal form, in prose or poetry, but is not limited to it. It can be done in songs, drama, dance, ritual, symbolization, visual art, and folklore.

One of the results of storytelling as a theological method is contextualization. Storytelling makes liberation theologies concrete, rooted in real life experiences, and historical. Through stories the narrator acknowledges her or his inescapable social, political, and economic location and implicitly affirms the validity of his or her experience. By the same token, in recognizing the contextuality of their own theologies, liberation theologians also carry out, at least indirectly, an ideology critique insofar as they reject the claims to universality of the dominant or official theology and show that it too is inescapably located in a particular social, political, and economic context. On the other hand, storytelling helps liberation theologians bridge the gap inhibiting communication among people of diverse cultures because stories create a communal fund from which liberation theologians can draw inspiration for their reflection. In this way storytelling contributes to building up a kind of concrete universality, out of particular stories and histories, from below as it were, rather than the kind of abstract universality and normativeness that the dominant theology attempts to impose on others from above.

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE READING?” (ACTS 8:30): THE HERMENEUTICAL MEDIATION

Out of this abundance and variety of grist, how can one bake a single loaf of bread? Or to vary the metaphor, out of so many notes, how can liberation theologies avoid being a cacophony and produce a harmonious symphony? More fundamentally, how should these sources be used to construct a Christian theology of liberation? Like the eunuch who was asked by Philip, “Do you understand what you are reading?” readers of these sources may be forced to reply, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”

don, 1993); and Young-Chan Ro, “Revisioning *Minjung* Theology: The Method of the *Minjung*,” in *Lift Every Voice* 40–52.

³² Young-Chan Ro, “Revisioning *Minjung*,” in *Lift Every Voice* 49. According to Ro, *minjung* theology is “*mythos*- not *logos*-oriented theology. For [the] narrative element is understood to be essential to *minjung* theology, because *han* must be told, heard, touched, felt, and resolved. *A tragedy is not a tragedy until it is told*” (50).

(Acts 8:31). In other words, the next issue to be considered is the hermeneutical mediation of liberation theologies: How should one interpret these various sources in such a way that they acquire what Clodovis Boff calls “theological pertinency”?³³ More specifically, how should liberation theologians correlate them with the Christian sources, namely, the Bible and tradition? After all, liberation theology is, as Gutiérrez has said, “a critical reflection on Christian praxis *in the light of the Word*.”³⁴

The Hermeneutical Circle and Ideology Critique

One of the key elements of liberation theologians’ interpretation of the Bible and tradition is the “hermeneutical circle.” Juan Luis Segundo, the Uruguayan Jesuit who wrote extensively on hermeneutics, described it as “the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present-day reality, both individual and societal. . . . Each new reality obliges to interpret the word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly, and then to go back and reinterpret the word of God again, and so on.”³⁵ Segundo specified further that the hermeneutical circle contains four steps: “*Firstly* there is our way of experiencing reality, which leads us to ideological suspicion. *Secondly* there is application of our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular. *Thirdly* there comes a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion, that is, to the suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account. *Fourthly* we have our new hermeneutic, that is, our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith (i.e., Scripture) with the new elements at our disposal.”³⁶

Most liberation theologians adopt the hermeneutical circle, especially its ideology critique, in their interpretation of the Bible.³⁷ Thus, feminist theo-

³³ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 67.

³⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 11; italics mine.

³⁵ Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* 8.

³⁶ Ibid. 9.

³⁷ For general expositions of biblical exegesis in liberation theology, see Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979); *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983); Fernando Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark*, trans. Matthew O’Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981); Michel Clévenot, *Materialist Approaches to the Bible*, trans. William J. Nottingham (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985); J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987); *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991).

logians have unmasked patriarchy and androcentrism hidden in Christianity;³⁸ Asian liberation theologians insist on reading the Bible in the post-colonialist context;³⁹ and Black theology reveals racial motifs in the Bible.⁴⁰ Furthermore, liberation theologians often promote the interpretation of the Bible by the poor themselves who learn how to question the teachings of the Bible from the perspective of their oppression.⁴¹

There is however another question that still needs clarification, namely, how to bring the various sources I have enumerated above into dialogue with the Bible so that what results from this correlation of the two sources—social theories, the teachings and practices of non-Christian religions, and stories of the underside of history on the one hand and the Christian Scriptures on the other—becomes Christian liberation *theology*, and not just religious discourse, philosophy of religion, or the human sciences of religion?

The Hermeneutical Mediation

In answering this question Clodovis Boff's reflections on the second mediation of liberation theologies—the hermeneutic mediation—are helpful. Drawing on Louis Althusser's explanation of the process of theoretical practice, Boff suggests that the production of knowledge is composed of three moments.⁴² First, a science as a production of knowledge begins not

³⁸ For White feminists, see the works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elizabeth Johnson. For Latina feminists, see the works of Elsa Tamez, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and María Pilar Aquino. For Asian feminists, see the works of Chung Hyun Kyung and Kwok Pui-lan. For Black feminists (womanists), see the works of Diana L. Hayes, M. Shawn Copeland, Toinette M. Eugene, and Jamie Phelps. For a general evaluation of feminist hermeneutics in relation to liberation theology, see Sharon H. Ringe, "Reading from Context to Context: Contributions of a Feminist Hermeneutic to Theologies of Liberation," in *Lift Every Voice* 289–97.

³⁹ See Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998).

⁴⁰ See Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1980). Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel summarize ideology critique by liberation theologians: "... all liberation theologians agree on one basic principle for the use of any source: suspicion. All sources, whether Marxist analyses, ancient Christian texts, the Scriptures, or 'classic' literature, must be used critically and approached with the suspicion that they further the dominant mode of oppression" (*Lift Every Voice* 11).

⁴¹ The most famous collection of these interpretations is Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 4 vols. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982).

⁴² Louis Althusser's works available in English include: *Essays in Self-Criticism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1976); *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971); *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx* (New York: Schocken, 1978); *Reading Capital* (New York:

with real or concrete things, but with general, abstract, and ideological notions that it encounters in a given culture and that it uses as its raw material or data (its “first generality”). The second moment of the theoretical practice, called the “second generality,” is the “working” on these data to produce a body or determinate system of concepts that determine a specific type of science. Out of this “working” on the first generality emerges a thought-product, a specific, concrete, scientific theory which can be called the “third generality.” To put it concisely, “*theoretical practice produces third generalities by the operation of a second generality upon a first generality.*”⁴³

Theology, insofar as it is a “science” or theoretical practice, follows this three-step production: “Theological practice comprises a first generality—its ‘subject,’ or material object—a second generality, which is the body of its asymptotic or analogical concepts, and finally a third generality, the theological theory produced.”⁴⁴ Anything whatsoever can be theology’s first generality; there is nothing, including every source that has been mentioned in the first part of this article, that cannot be the raw material, or subject matter of theology. But it becomes theology only if it is “worked on” in the second generality “in the light of revelation,” what Thomas Aquinas called the “formal object” (the *objectum quo*, the *ratio secundum quam*, the *ratio qua*) of theology, that is, faith, to produce a body of theological knowledge or science.

As far as liberation theologies are concerned, according to Clodovis Boff, their first generality is constituted by social theories (the third generality of the social sciences) as well as, it may be added, by other religious and cultural data such as those mentioned above. In their second generality liberation theologies “work” on this first generality by means of theological concepts derived from the Bible and tradition through an adequate hermeneutics (these theological concepts constitute the third generality of classical theologies that Boff calls “first theology”). What results from this operation on the first generality constitutes liberation theology.

To give an example: in order to arrive at an understanding of what “liberation” means, liberation theologians start not from the Bible or tradition but from the data of oppression/liberation as the social sciences understand them. This sociological concept forms the first generality of their theological science. The theologian does not work *with* but *upon* the concept of “liberation” derived from sociological studies. In this way the

Schocken, 1979); and *For Marx* (New York: Schocken, 1979). For Althusser’s presentation of the process of theoretical practice, see especially *For Marx* chap. 4, no. 3; *Reading Capital* 40–43; and *Lenin and Philosophy* 60–63.

⁴³ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 72.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 73.

social sciences as well as other human sciences form an intrinsic and constitutive and not an adventitious part of theology. The theologian's task is to transform, with the help of the properly theological concept of "salvation" (the third generality of "first theology" now functioning as the second generality of liberation theologies), the sociological concept of "liberation" (the third generality of sociology now functioning as the first generality of liberation theologies) in such a way as to produce a theological theory that "liberation is salvation" (the third generality of liberation theologies).⁴⁵

Central to this theoretical practice to produce a liberation theology is clearly the second generality, that is, the "working" on the first generality of liberation theologies that is constituted by the third generality of the social and other human sciences. In other words, it is the hermeneutical mediation between the social sciences and other sciences on the one hand and the Bible and the Christian tradition on the other, between our present social location and the past Christian writings. Here we come back to the hermeneutical circle spoken of above. Clodovis Boff draws our attention to the dialectical circularity between Scripture as written text and Scripture as Word of God read in the Church, between the creation of meaning and the acceptance of meaning, between structure as vehicle of communication and meaning as needing structure for support, and between hermeneutics as employment of technical apparatus of interpretation and hermeneutics as a creative interpretation (*Sinngebung*).⁴⁶

As to the process of correlating the Scripture to our social location, Clodovis Boff warns us against two unacceptable common practices which he terms the "gospel/politics model" and the "correspondence of terms model." The "gospel/politics model" sees the gospel as a code of norms to be directly applied to the present situation. Such application is carried out in a mechanical, automatic, and nondialectical manner; it completely ignores the differences in the historical contexts of each of the two terms of the relationship.

The "correspondence of terms model" sets up two ratios which it regards as mutually equivalent and transfers the sense of the first ratio to the second by a sort of hermeneutical switch. For instance, an attempt is made to establish an equivalency (the equal sign) between the ratio of the first part of terms and that of the second pair of terms: Scripture: its political context = theology of the political: our political context; exodus: enslavement of the Hebrews = liberation: oppression of the poor; Babylon: Israel

⁴⁵ Ibid. 87–88. Even without the help of socioanalytic mediation one can see that salvation in Scripture also includes sociopolitical and economic liberation. But without socioanalytic mediation it is impossible to know what this liberation means *today* for us and the concrete forms it (and hence salvation) must take. Here lies the danger of "semantic mix" and "bilingualism" mentioned above.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 135–39.

= captivity: people of Latin America; Jesus: his political context = Christian community: its current political context. Although better than the “gospel/politics model” in so far as it takes into account the historical context of each situation, the “correspondence of terms model” is still unacceptable because it assumes a perfect parallel between the first ratio and the second.

The “Correspondence of Relationships Model”

In contrast to these two models, Clodovis Boff proposes what he calls the “correspondence of relationships model” which he claims is in conformity with the practice of the early Church and the Christian communities in general. In schematic form this model looks as follows: Jesus of Nazareth: his context = Christ and Church: context of Church = Church tradition: historical context = ourselves: our context. In reduced form, it looks as follows: Scripture: its context = ourselves: our context.

In this model the Christian communities (represented by the Church, church tradition, and ourselves) seek to apply the gospel to their particular situations. But contrary to the other two models, this model takes both the Bible and the situation to which the Bible is applied in their respective autonomy. It does not identify Jesus with the Church, church tradition, and ourselves on the one hand, nor does it identify Jesus’ context with the context of the Church, the historical context of church tradition, and our context on the other. The equal sign (=) does not refer to the equivalency among the terms of the hermeneutical equation but to the equality among the respective relationships between the pairs of terms. As Boff puts it, “The equal sign refers neither to the oral, nor the textual, nor to the transmitted words of the message, nor even to the situations that correspond to them. It refers to the relationship between them. We are dealing with a *relationship of relationships*. An identity of senses, then, is not to be sought on the level of context, nor, consequently, on the level of the message as such—but rather on the level of the *relationship* between context and message on each side [Scripture and ourselves in the reduced schema] respectively.”⁴⁷ This focus on the relationship between the terms of each pair and the equivalency among these relationships rather than on a particular text of the Scripture to be applied allows both creative freedom in biblical interpretation (not “hermeneutic positivism”) and basic continuity

⁴⁷ Ibid. 149. This by no means implies that liberation theologians will not appeal to specific texts or books of the Bible. On the contrary, as the Boff brothers have pointed out, certain biblical books are favored by liberation theologians, such as Exodus, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and Revelation; see Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1986) 34–35.

with the meaning of the Bible (not “improvisation *ad libitum*”): “The Christian writings offer us not a *what*, but a *how*—a manner, a style, a spirit.”⁴⁸

One of the merits of Clodovis Boff’s correspondence of relationships model of the hermeneutical mediation is that it safeguards the exegesis of liberation theologians from the dangers of biblicism, fundamentalism, and eisegesis to which some of their early works were prone. In this respect his hermeneutics would command whole-hearted agreement from most liberation theologians. It is to be noted however that some recent liberation theologians would contest his granting primacy to the Scripture as the norm according to which later interpretations is to be measured. Though he maintains that any genuine hermeneutical relationship (“dialectical hermeneutic”) involves circularity, Boff believes that “this circularity functions within an *articulation with a dominant term*. The thrust of the dialectic-hermeneutic movement comes from *Scripture* and is measured, in the last instance, upon Scripture as *norma normans*.”⁴⁹

In contrast to Boff, liberation theologians from a multi-religious context in which classics of other religions are widely read tend to deny the normativeness of the Christian Scriptures. For example, Kwok Pui-lan explicitly rejects the sacrality of the Bible, its status as canonical writing, and its normativity, and proposes what she calls a “dialogical model of interpretation” in which the Bible is seen as a “talking book” inviting dialogue and conversation.⁵⁰ R. S. Sugirtharajah calls for a “multi-faith hermeneutics” in which the sacred books of all religions are allowed to be unique and speak on their own terms, in which Christians do not claim that their story is superior to and more valid than other stories, and in which the universal Wisdom tradition is retrieved.⁵¹ Furthermore, whereas Juan Luis Segundo and Clodovis Boff do not apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to the Bible itself, many liberation theologians, especially feminists, have exposed the patriarchal and androcentric bias of the Hebrew-Christian sacred text.

Despite these important differences in their hermeneutical practice, all liberation theologians concur that the task of the interpreter is not merely to uncover the objective meaning of the text and to solve the riddles of scholarship. Rather for them the main goal of hermeneutics is to transform the unjust world, to take an “advocacy stance” (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza) in favor of the poor and the oppressed, to enact the Word of God in their context. In other words, essential to their theological method is

⁴⁸ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 149.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 149–50.

⁵⁰ See Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

⁵¹ See R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Inter-Faith Hermeneutics: An Example and Some Implications,” in *Voices from the Margins* 352–63.

what has been called *praxis*, which is the third mediation of the method of liberation theology.

“DOING THE TRUTH” (JOHN 3:21): THE PRACTICAL MEDIATION

All liberation theologians insist that prior to doing liberation theology one must “do” liberation. “The first step for liberation theology is pre-theological. It is a matter of trying to live the commitment of faith: in our case, to participate in some way in the process of liberation, to be committed to the oppressed. . . . The essential point is this: links with specific practice are *at the root* of liberation theology. It operates within the great dialectic of theory (faith) and practice (love).”⁵²

The Theologian’s Social Commitment

How does one “do” liberation? The Boff brothers suggest that there are three levels in which theologians can commit themselves to the poor and oppressed. The first, rather restricted, is sporadic or more or less regular participation in base communities and their activities; the second is alternating periods of scholarly work with periods of practical work; and the third is living and working permanently in solidarity with and among the people.⁵³ Which of these forms of social commitment is proper for an individual liberation theologian cannot be determined in advance. A choice of one or the other at a particular historical moment depends, as Clodovis Boff has shown, on the dialectical interplay among three factors or circles, namely, the relation between the social situation (society) and the personal position of the theologian (individual), the relation between analysis (sociology) and ethics (gospel), and the relation between the theologian as theoretician and the theologian as social agent.⁵⁴

Of course, such a practical commitment does not of itself guarantee the truth of the liberation theologian’s theoretical practice since there is a difference between the epistemic locus and the social locus: in the former,

⁵² Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* 22. For a balanced reflection on the relationship between orthopraxis and theological work, see the essay of Bernard J. Verkamp, “On Doing the Truth: Orthopraxis and the Theologian,” *Theological Studies* 49 (1988) 3–24.

⁵³ See Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* 23. These three models of the liberation theologian’s social commitment whereby a synthesis of theology and politics, theoretical practice and political practice, science and justice is achieved, are termed by Leonardo Boff as the “specific contribution,” “alternating moments,” and “incarnation” models respectively; see Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 168–71.

⁵⁴ See Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 171–73.

the theologian acts as epistemic agent and is related internally to the theological discipline through objective cognition, whereas in the latter, the theologian acts as the social agent and is related externally to the society through power. Nevertheless, through social commitment, the theologian acquires a “sensibility” or a heightened capacity to discern the relevance of the imperatives of the historical situation and is enabled to decide which thematic problem is of objective relevance or significance with respect to a given sociohistorical conjuncture. In addition to this sensibility there is required the capacity for critical analysis to examine and establish in a rigorous manner the relevance of the theological problematic to a particular historical situation.

Objections have been raised against the liberation theologian’s social commitment in the name of the disinterested nature of science and knowledge (“knowledge for knowledge’s sake”). It is argued that science *qua* science is no more revolutionary or reactionary than it is religious or atheistic. To obviate these objections, liberation theologians have pointed out that, insofar as it is a science, that is, from an epistemological point of view, theology is a disinterested cognition. However, insofar as it is a social positivity, that is, in virtue of its factual insertion into the fabric of social interests, theology is not an innocent, neutral, apolitical function but a partisan and interested social instrument. Like practitioners of any science, theologians have to pass judgment on how their theology is to be employed, who is to employ it and for what purposes, who are to be its addressees, and so on, questions that cannot be answered in the epistemological order but only in the practical order. As Boff has put it, “all knowledge, including theological knowledge, is interested. It objectively intends precise finalities. It is finalized, mediately or immediately, by something external to itself. The true problem, consequently, does not reside in the alternative: interested or disinterested theology. The true problem lies in questions of this kind: What are the objective interests of a given theology? For what concrete causes is it being developed? In a word, *where* are its interests?”⁵⁵

Finally, it must be recognized that there is no straight, logical path from theory to praxis, nor from praxis to theory. Since theory is constituted through a breach with praxis and since praxis is performed through a breach with theory, the passage from one pole to the other is not a matter of drawing the logical and necessary consequence but is always a human decision. It follows then, as Clodovis Boff argues, “that no theory, be it ever so rigorous or profound, will ever of itself engender praxis. The same holds for the inverse calculation: no praxis, be it as radical as you please,

⁵⁵ Ibid. 191.

will ever, just on that account, issue in a theory. . . . Thus theory and praxis represent irreducible orders.”⁵⁶

Praxis as Criterion of Truth

In addition to the requirement of social commitment or praxis as part of their theological method, liberation theologians also maintain that there is an indissoluble link between “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxis.” Of this couple priority is given to orthopraxis. Sometimes this primacy of praxis over theory is expressed by saying that “praxis is the criterion of truth.”

Many liberation theologians are aware of the ambiguity of this statement. Gustavo Gutiérrez explicitly distances himself from the position that “praxis . . . gives rise to truth or becomes the fundamental criterion of truth.”⁵⁷ For him, theology being “critical reflection on praxis in the light of the Word,” the ultimate criteria of truth “come from revealed truth which we accept in faith and not from praxis itself.”⁵⁸

To prevent misunderstandings of this principle, Clodovis Boff makes a careful distinction between “theological criteriology” and “pistic criteriology.” By the former he means criteria of truth for theology as a theoretical practice (“truth of theory”) and by the latter he means those of faith and love (“truth of praxis”). The former criteria are of an epistemological order and concern the theoretical practice of the theologian, whereas the latter are of an existential order and concern the concrete practice of the believer. In light of this distinction Clodovis Boff argues that “from the viewpoint of theological practice, (political) praxis neither is nor can be the criterion of (theological) truth. . . . The thesis that praxis is the criterion of truth is theologically nonpertinent. It seeks to compare the incomparable.”⁵⁹ For theology as a theoretical practice there are only two criteria of truth, one of the logical order and the other of the positive order. The former controls the internal coherence of the theological production, and the latter its external agreement with the positivity of faith (what the Christian community believes).

With regard to pistic criteriology, Boff notes that liberation theologies often refer to the “capacity of faith for social transformation.” While acknowledging such a capacity, Boff warns against the acritical criterion of pragmatism with the primacy given to practical effectiveness and stresses the necessity of critically evaluating the ethical quality of a course of political action through the socioanalytic and hermeneutical mediations:

⁵⁶ Ibid. 193.

⁵⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make You Free* 181 n. 45.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 101.

⁵⁹ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 198.

“We may not embrace the ideology of orthopraxy, or praxiology, dispensing ourselves from a thorough reflection on the ethical content of a given practice and from a critique of the idea of efficacy and the ‘theoretical short-circuit’ that it tends to provoke.”⁶⁰

While maintaining the difference between theological criteriology and pistis criteriology, Boff reminds us that theology is dependent upon the practice of justice and love, as demonstrated by the social position of theology, its thematic relevance, and its political interests that we have discussed above. Accordingly, says Boff, “pistic truth—a truth of praxis—and theological truth—a truth of theory—call for each other, and interact upon each other. And they do so in a rhythm that is not purely linear, but is ultimately measured by the basic ‘scansion’ or yardstick of the reality of faith. For the dialectical balance always leans toward the practical dimension.”⁶¹

The Dialectic between Theory and Praxis

The final issue in the practical mediation of the method of liberation theologies is the nature of the relationship between theory and praxis and its implications for the character of liberation theologies itself. This relationship has been described as “dialectical.” By this is meant that the relationship is not a static but a dynamic one, so that theory and praxis are related to each other in a perpetual motion. Because theory and praxis are bound up with each other in mutual inclusion (*perichoresis*) and because they are distinguished from each other in difference (*chorismos*) at the same time, there is between them a ceaseless oscillation, a “dialectical movement,” so that a total theological synthesis based on this kind of relationship between theory and praxis is never possible but always *in via*, under construction.⁶² Consequently, liberation theologies are by necessity antidogmatic and “open and continually renewing.”⁶³

With respect to liberation theologies in particular, this dialectical drive in perpetual motion occurs first of all, as we have seen, between the two mediations—socioanalytic and hermeneutical—in the theoretical practice

⁶⁰ Ibid. 203. Boff further reminds us that the final and definitive verification of the truth of faith and the practice of justice does not occur until the eschaton and is the exclusive prerogative of God.

⁶¹ Ibid. 205.

⁶² For a description of *perichoresis* and *chorismos* between theory and praxis, see Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 210–13.

⁶³ “Theologies that are contextual, *praxis*-based, communal, and prophetic are theologies that are bound to remain open to change and ongoing revision” (Mary Potter Engel and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Making the Connections among Liberation Theologies around the World,” in *Lift Every Voice* 11).

of theology in such a way that the pendulum of cognition never comes to a dead stop. But it occurs also at the more general level of the history in which theory and praxis are practiced. At this second level, praxis holds an analytical primacy over theory, even though theory holds the key to the identity of praxis. This relationship, notes Clodovis Boff, “must be represented as a current receiving its first thrust from the side of praxis, ricocheting off theory, and returning to praxis and dislocating it—and so on, over and over again.”⁶⁴ In other words, praxis exerts pressure on theory to critically examine itself; theory, in turn, reacting, modifies praxis; then theory and praxis are transcended; and the spiraling never-ending circular movement goes on and on.

“NEW WINE INTO NEW WINESKINS” (MATTHEW 9:17): A NEW THEOLOGY WITH A NEW METHOD?

Liberation theologies, as I have noted, seek to be a “new way of doing theology.” Of course, the contents of liberation theologies are new, at least if one goes by some of the names under which they are advocated: *womanist*, *mujerista*, *minjung*, and even queer (gay and lesbian) theologies. A couple of decades ago these appellations were not even mentioned in theological encyclopedias! But what makes liberation theologies new and for some a threat is not their contents but ultimately their method. As Juan Luis Segundo already stated in 1974 in his lectures at Harvard, “it is the fact that the one and only thing that can maintain the liberative character of any theology is not its content but its methodology. It is the latter that guarantees the continuing bite of theology.”⁶⁵

Of course, it is not possible to describe with historical precision which came first in liberation theologies, method or content. The question resembles the proverbial query about the chicken and the egg. Most likely, content and method occur simultaneously, though it often happens that reflections on method are undertaken only after a long practice at the craft or when the discipline is undergoing a crisis or a paradigmatic shift. At any rate, the mutual dependence between content and method is picturesquely affirmed by Jesus when he says that “people do not pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins burst, the wines spill out, and the skins are ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and in that way both are preserved” (Matthew 9:17, NAB).

This is not the place to offer an extensive evaluation of the method of liberation theologies with its three mediations—socioanalytic, hermeneutical, and practical. To do so would bring the article to unacceptable lengths.

⁶⁴ Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* 216.

⁶⁵ Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* 39–40.

My principal intention has been to discern in the rich and even bewildering tapestry of liberation theologies the thread that binds them together into a common pattern. That unifying thread, I have suggested, is methodological. Let me enumerate in thesis form the way in which the method I have described can obviate some of the oft-repeated charges against liberation theologies.

(1) It is inaccurate to say that various kinds of liberation theology formulated after the emergence of Latin American liberation theology in the early 1970s are nothing but its clones. Methodologically, for example, Asian liberation theologies, though indebted to their Latin American older sibling, have introduced new methods of theologizing (e.g. “psychological tools of introspection,” interreligious dialogue, inculturation, and storytelling) that make them quite distinctive.⁶⁶ Furthermore, more recent liberation theologies have brought to the theological mill a variety of materials from their own specific social, cultural, and religious backgrounds.⁶⁷

(2) It is inaccurate to say that liberation theologies are fundamentally inspired by Marxism or are simply theological versions of the Marxist theory of class struggle. It is true that liberation theologies have made use of the sociological theory of dependence and Marxist tools of social analysis, but these concepts and theories (the “third generality” of the social sciences) are adopted as the “first generality” of liberation theologies and are worked on in their “second generality” in the hermeneutical mediation by means of the theological concepts of “first theology” to produce a body of genuinely theological science (the “third generality” of liberation theologies).

(3) It is inaccurate to say that liberation theologies are biblically naïve or are susceptible of biblical fundamentalism. The “correspondence of relationships model” is far more sophisticated than the gospel/politics and correspondence of models that are often thought to be the hermeneutical approaches of liberation theologies. This model avoids the Scylla of hermeneutic positivism of biblical fundamentalism and the Charybdis of *ad libitum* improvisation of postmodernism. On the contrary, it enables both creative freedom in biblical interpretation and basic fidelity to the meanings of the Scripture and tradition.

(4) It is inaccurate to say that liberation theologians, with their requisite social commitment, abandon or at least jeopardize the objectivity and disinterestedness of theology as an academic pursuit of knowledge. Liberation

⁶⁶ For an excellent presentation of Asian liberation theologies, see Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997).

⁶⁷ For a description of these resources, see Peter C. Phan, “Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996) 403–5.

theologians do recognize that theology, insofar as it is a theoretical practice, is a disinterested cognition and is no more revolutionary or reactionary than any other science. On the other hand, because theology is a social fact and because the theologian is not only a theoretician but also a social agent, theology is never neutral and the theologian is never socially uncommitted. The question is not whether theology is neutral or the theologian uncommitted but to which cause theology is partisan and the theologian engaged. Such social commitment gives theologians a “sensitivity” whereby they can determine which theological problematic is required by a particular historical situation to which theology must be “relevant.”

(5) Finally, it is inaccurate to say that liberation theologies lapse into epistemological empiricism and ethical pragmatism when they grant priority to orthopraxis over orthodoxy and make praxis into the criterion of truth. With a careful distinction between “theological criteriology” and “pistic criteriology” liberation theologies recognize the difference between criteria of truth for theology as a theoretical practice (i.e. logical consistency and conformity to the contents of the faith) and the criterion of truth for faith as a political practice (i.e. the capacity of faith for social transformation). On the other hand, while maintaining this necessary distinction, liberation theologies are able to affirm the dialectical relationship between theory and praxis, both in the theoretical practice of theology (between the socioanalytic and hermeneutical mediations) and in their actual unfolding in history, so that the character of liberation theologies as a fundamentally open, ever-developing science can also be affirmed.

While the preceding five theses, and my article, may be construed as an apologia for liberation theologies and their method, my main intention is to show that liberation theologians, despite their diversity of gender and economic background, national and ethnic origin, cultural and religious membership, are, by virtue of their shared method and tasks, fellow travelers in a common journey to the same destination. The temptation must then be resisted to dismiss liberation theologies as passé, especially in view of the moribund condition of socialism and the near-universal domination of the free market system. On the contrary, thanks to the virtualities of their own method, liberation theologies will be able to contribute to the emergence of a new kind of catholicity that is not a pretension to a false universalism but appreciates and promotes the particularity of each voice, especially the voices of those who have not been allowed to speak, and in and through these particular voices, construct a new harmony for the coming reign of God.