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978-0-521-46476-5 - Theology, Ideology and Liberation: Towards a Liberative Theology

Peter Scott

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

This book is about the liberation of theology from ideology. It seeks to discern whether theology is the critic of the eclipse of God or an unwitting contributor to that very eclipse. My main concern is with the question: how might theology be non-ideological? This is no academic matter. Ideological strategies are those which effectively obscure, mis-speak or misrecognise the social history of which they are a part. If we cannot be sure that theology may speak non-ideologically, then we cannot be sure that theology is the critic, rather than the apologist, of society.

But who comprises this 'society'? 'We' are those who inhabit the dominant 'centre' of this global society, and whose activities, as Enrique Dussel (1985) suggests, shape the activities of those on the periphery (whether intentionally or not). My question then is asked from the centre, and is directed to the centre. But what theological word should be spoken from the centre?

The urgency of this matter lies in the problems currently facing Western society and that Christianity claims to speak a message of hope. On the one hand, this society is undergoing its own profound difficulties regarding its relations with external nature, its relations with the periphery, and the attempt to secure over again its global economic dominance. The 'subjective' outworking of this is a suspicion regarding our institutions and democratic processes, even our immediate relationships, and a concern as to whether the complexities of our situation can be addressed.

On the other hand, Christianity speaks a message of hope.

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Yet here lies the rub for it is not clear, both to Christian communities and beyond, whether this message is relevant. Christianity speaks of freedom, but is it an account of freedom that engages with social freedom? Can Christianity speak so that it might be heard? Can the message of hope, of the Word enfleshed, be received, or is there too much static on the line? Or indeed, is Christianity, as some report, concerned rather with 'religious subjectivity', with support for the individual amid the contingencies of life? (Christianity does seem, on too many occasions, to have chosen the side of reaction rather than liberation.)

At stake here is whether we may trust our constructive theological work, or whether theology is already 'placed' as an unwitting contributor to processes of legitimation. I think that this is the central issue facing Christian communities both in themselves and in their witness to wider society. Do we speak of a God of freedom who engages with human beings in the demand to extend social freedom? Or something else? The issue is not really the survival of Christianity in this modern, or, indeed, postmodern world. The issue is rather: can Christianity speak to this world?

For the task of theological discernment even to begin, we need some confidence that theology is not ideological. What it might mean for theology to be non-ideological, and how the task of theological discernment might be possible, is the argument of the following chapters. I wish to stress that this is not a matter simply of investing theology with some political interests, but of rethinking theology against the epistemological critique of ideology, of exploring theological protocols against the eclipse of God in ideology.

The dominant concern of this book is to set out one response to this set of questions. The only way that Christianity's message of hope and freedom can be heard is, I argue, through a sustained engagement with the critique of ideology. This is ironic indeed. In a post-Gorbachev world, I am suggesting that we need to employ Marxist materials in order to secure the relevance of Christianity.

Although Marxism is important to my argument, this is not

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a revival of the Christian–Marxist dialogue. In some ways, the following has affinities with Latin American liberation theology and the political side of feminist theology, although I concentrate on one issue – ideology – and develop a somewhat different methodology and structure. I also hope to offer a theological response that is systematic in scope if not in execution. It is this thoroughly theological response, whether persuasive or not, which will, I hope, be of some interest. This response is, I contend, a matter of engaging at the centre of theological construction with the critique of ideology. Indeed, crucial to the later stages of my argument is an engagement with resurrection: what appears to be the most unlikely feature of a liberative theology turns out to be central. As such, my argument may interest those who are concerned to develop a theological response to this post-Gorbachev era. The expectations raised by the ‘revolutions’ in Europe in 1989 have hardly been met; and despite the enthusiasms of some American theorists we are certainly not enjoying the ‘end of history’.

Implicitly, I am suggesting that a retreat into the Christian heartlands is not an option, as it fails to engage with the complexity of our current situation. As such, it is to deny the relevance of Christian hope. Instead, in the face of such complexity, we do need to be sure that our theological interpretations are truthful, and that our theology is contextual.

And yet, for the Christian, the task of discernment remains *theological*. In order for theology to be engaged with the current situation it needs to be contextual; and in order for the engagement to be Christian, it needs to be thoroughly theological. Theology and context, context and theology: only here lies the possibility of securing the ‘identity and relevance’ (Jürgen Moltmann) of Christianity. It seems to me that the only way of doing this is by the critique of ideology because it is this critique which insists that theology is already thoroughly contextualised. If theology wishes to bear contextual witness to the liberating power of the Word, then this can only be shown through a serious engagement with the critique of ideology.

I have learned much about these issues from Latin American liberation theology, in two respects especially: a methodologi-

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cal insistence on the social context of theological work and on the political interests that inform the task of theological discernment; a constructive commitment to holding together, although in rather different ways, the theological categories of creation and redemption (compare Gutiérrez, 1974 and Assmann, 1975 with Míguez Bonino, 1975 and Rubem Alves, 1975). Here lies, as I interpret their work, the persistent connection made between salvation and liberation.

A commitment to an account of embodiment, which I shall call ‘materiality’, also marks a connection between my argument and some feminist theologies. In this area of theological work, there is a stress on social context (often construed in terms of pluralism: see Rebecca Chopp, 1978: 245–6) as the basis for a methodological programme incorporating women’s experience which seeks to affirm human embodiment. Such an insistence on the incorporation of women’s experience (see Pamela Young, 1990: 11–17) might be understood as the oppositional strategy against the absence of women’s ‘bodies’ in theological work up until now. This affirmation of embodiment, including rootedness in nature, is at the centre of the critical assessment of body-denying, world-denying motifs in ‘theology proper’ (Chopp).

Such a commitment to embodiment, to seeing things whole and in relation, does often lead to the avoidance of such terminology as creation and redemption because these categories, it is claimed, carry overtones of human beings being saved from their bodies and from this world. (For a forceful presentation of this point of view, see Ruether, 1981: 57–70.) Yet, in common with liberation theology, an eschatological horizon persists in the insistence on the theological contribution to the transcendence of unjust, restrictive social structures. Theological construction does shape and guide our commitments and our energies, and inform our attitudes and attention. The task of theological reconstruction is then to offer fresh interpretations of its practical task that will nerve oppositional (that is, world affirming), liberative practices.

The argument of this book also insists on theology as practical, on an eschatological horizon toward the transformation of

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social relations, and the holding together of creation and redemption. But its basic dynamic is to offer an outline of a theology that is not ideological (it is not silenced by the static on the line!), and yet is genuinely theological. If the argument is right, a theology that is not ideological is liberative: it speaks of a triune God governed by relations of freedom whose presence is the enactment of and demand for social freedom. In this way, I argue, Christianity speaks a theological word to the world: addressing the fundamental questions of this social world in theological categories of freedom.

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PART I

*The shape of the argument*

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## CHAPTER I

*Theology and the Marxist critique of ideology*

## I THE SOCIAL LOCATION OF THEOLOGY

It is perhaps somewhat ironic that there is now a need for European theology to catch up with the concerns of theologies coming out of Latin America, Africa and Asia. As I read them, these theologies are asking the profound question as to what it is that we, as social animals, might trust. I am speaking here of a specific account of trust: a concern with the trustworthiness of our social structures and relations. More precisely, it is to ask whether there may be (liberative) theological insights into the question of the restrictive or emancipatory character of social relations and structures.

At the back of this for Christians is the difficult matter of whether theological interpretations may be trusted. How might Christians think theologically about social matters? Is a theological contribution possible that will not be assimilated into the post-Cold War 'order' and which does not retreat into 'religious subjectivity'? Against such a background, the intention of this book is to offer a constructive proposal for a liberative theology. I plan to do this by joining the debate on the relation between theology and Marxism. It is out of this engagement, I shall be suggesting, that a genuinely liberative theology may emerge. So this book is a theological enquiry from the 'centre': an economic and military 'centre' which structures the space-time of this parnational society. As will become clear, a theology of the

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powerful 'centre' is above all required to pay attention to the dangers of ideology.

The theological proposal developed here may be linked with many other styles of theology in insisting upon the importance of context: all theology with pretensions to be liberative must be contextual. Theology must reflect upon and be directed to determinate situations. Theology is concerned with the particular and not the general, the ambiguities of the real history of people in struggle, with commitment to the struggle for liberation. In particular, the commitment to theological thinking in a specific context raises the issue of the social location of theology: what is the 'place' of theology? To what pressures is it exposed?

My argument is concerned with the social location of theology. But this is a theological inquiry, not an essay in the sociology of religion. This inquiry is concerned with the status of theology as liberative: what is it that allows us to grasp a theology as liberative? As Segundo has argued, from his particular context: 'It is my feeling that the most progressive theology in Latin America is more interested in *being liberative* than in *talking about liberation*. In other words, liberation deals not so much with content as with the method used to theologize in the face of our real-life situation' (Segundo, 1976: 9). Taking a cue from Segundo's remark, my argument is thus an argument in epistemology (and, implicitly, in the ontology presupposed by such epistemological considerations). Indeed, it is only at the epistemological level that the issue of the liberative status of theology can be addressed.

Framing the issue of liberative status in such fashion does perhaps sound strange enough. To make matters stranger still, the epistemology promoted is Marxist. In other words, I try to establish what it is that Marxism claims for itself in terms of epistemological status – often referred to by Marxists as the 'scientificity' or the 'scientific' character of Marxism. I argue that the Marxist claim to be a non-ideological 'science' raises serious questions for theology. I then suggest ways that theology might interpret and respond to Marxist epistemological strictures through the construction of an outline of a liberative theology.



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Such an odd way of doing theology requires some explanation. As I hope will be clear by the end of the book, an explanation must turn upon the location of theology as the theory of the practice of the Christian religion, of the practices, religious and social, of Christians. So an explanation of an argument concerned with the social location of theology must ask the question: what is the context of the practice of Christianity?

Some comments by Jürgen Habermas might be considered here. Habermas has argued that:

In the industrially advanced societies we observe for the first time as a mass phenomenon the loss of the hope in redemption and the expectation of grace, which, even if no longer within an ecclesiastical framework, are still supported by interiorized faith traditions. For the first time the mass of the population has been shaken in the basic levels of securing its identity; in limit situations it cannot get away from a fully secularized everyday awareness and have recourse to institutionalized or at least deeply internalized certainties. (Habermas, 1983: 18)

The Judaeo-Christian tradition, according to Habermas, is losing its capacity to secure identity and meaning. And this loss of capacity has serious consequences because there seems to be no obvious and immediate substitute. Certainly not the 'rational' society for which Marx and Engels hoped and worked. Habermas also adds that there seems to be no substitute for religion that has shown itself 'capable of mastering by means of consolation and trust the *de facto* meaninglessness of death in its contingency, that of individual suffering, or that of the private loss of happiness – in general, the meaninglessness of the negativity of the risks built into life' (Habermas, 1983: 17–18). And yet, what Habermas seems to miss – perhaps because he welcomes the end of the availability of the certainties of the Judaeo-Christian tradition<sup>1</sup> – is the very persistence of religion. The growth of Green Spirituality and the New Age

<sup>1</sup> This impression is reinforced by Habermas' paper 'Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World', in Don S. Browning and Francis F. Fiorenza (eds.), 1992: 226–50.

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movement (not entirely separate phenomena) are two good examples of this persistence.

If this does characterise our period – the rise of ‘religiosity’ and the reduction in the ‘reach’ of the Judaeo-Christian tradition – then these may be understood as dangerous times for Christianity and Christian theology. Why dangerous? Because, if there is something in Habermas’ argument, Christianity needs to avoid being appropriated as a ‘myth’ of identity and meaning.<sup>2</sup> As David Harvey has noted, following Simmel, it is during ‘times of fragmentation and economic insecurity that the desire for stable values leads to a heightened emphasis upon the authority of basic institutions – the family, religion, the state. And there is abundant evidence of a revival of support for such institutions and the values they represent throughout the Western world since about 1970’ (Harvey, 1989: 171). In order not to become a new ‘myth’ of stability Christian theology needs to have some sense of itself, to avoid being coopted. It needs to be critical of false forms of stability and exploitative accounts of identity, and of the danger of being employed as a guarantor of meaning and stability: ‘... in moments of despair or exaltation, who among us can refrain from invoking the time of fate, of myth, of the Gods?’ (Harvey, 1989: 202).<sup>3</sup> It needs some sense of its own epistemological location within the class divisions of capitalist society so that it might discipline Chris-

<sup>2</sup> For more detail, see Scott, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> A key attempt to found and fund false forms of identity in Europe has, of course, been fascism, or what Paul Tillich termed the ‘revolutionary’ form of ‘political romanticism’ (see Tillich, 1977). There are plainly dialectical connections between the aestheticisation of space in fascism and the acceleration of time within the capitalist dynamics of modernity. It is here, under the conditions of ‘space-time compression’, that a renewed emphasis upon place, tradition, race, culture and gendered patterns of work may find the community-forming and tradition-oriented aspects of Christianity to be important. (Indeed, somewhat speculatively, it may be that Christianity provides precisely a kind of predisposition toward myth which, as Jameson notes, following the work of Norman Holland, ‘enables’ remythologisation: ‘only if we have been told the work is mythic ahead of time, the unquestionable “resonance” of the mythic rewriting presupposing not the operation of some mythic unconscious but rather our own preliminary conscious “set” toward the reading in question’ (Jameson, 1989: 67).) The only extended theological critique of fascism known to me is Tillich, 1977; I have tried to offer some account of the importance of Tillich’s critique in Scott, 1994. For an account of the cultural search for myths in this century, see Harvey, 1989: part 1.