

## CURRENT THEOLOGY

### JESUS FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF HISTORY: CHRISTOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICA

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Is it possible to view Jesus "from the other side of history," from the historical experience of the poor, the oppressed, the marginated and despised, of those who have had "no voice" in history? Has it been done? These are the intriguing questions that surround every attempt to do a specifically Latin American Christology. In seeking answers, three considerations are necessary. (1) Method: What claims are being made by liberation theologians vis-à-vis the dominance of the *progresista* wing of Western theology in Europe and North America? (2) Content: Have the liberation theologians produced results commensurate with their methodological claims in the Christologies that have been constructed so far? (3) If not, or not completely, does the possibility of a Christology indigenous to Latin America still exist? What are the conditions for such a possibility, given the methodological claims being made? This essay will focus on the third consideration as the most fruitful way to approach an original Latin American Christology. However, to engage the conditions of possibility, it is first necessary to understand the methodological assumptions and the results produced so far.

#### METHOD: PROGRESSIVE VS. LIBERATION THEOLOGY, CONTRADICTORY OR COMPLEMENTARY?

Jesús Vergara Aceves maintains that the three most representative liberation theologians on the question of method are Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hugo Assmann, and Juan Luis Segundo.<sup>1</sup> Gutiérrez represents the "programmatic break" with contemporary theology, Assmann the push toward ultimate consequences, and Segundo the hermeneutic synthesis of the two. A brief consideration of each will give us the methodological tools for understanding how a Christology should be constructed.

#### *Gutiérrez and Assmann: The True Meaning of "Subversive"*

The basic challenge of liberation theology is to the very nature of theology. What is it? Who does it? Why do they do it, i.e., from whom

<sup>1</sup> Jesús Vergara Aceves, *Teología desde el contexto de la liberación* (Zaragoza, Mexico: Estudios Sociales A.C., 1979). This is the first volume of a proposed trilogy on Gutiérrez, Assmann, and Segundo.

and for whom; in a word, what interest is being served? Where is it done? Finally, how important is it? The way we answer those questions will say a great deal about "whose side" we are on. With insistence, all the authors affirm that liberation theology is not another theological system or a new school of theology, but "a distinct way of doing theology whose starting point is the liberative praxis of the People of God. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Gutiérrez' definition of theology as "critical reflection on historical praxis"<sup>3</sup> has been accepted as axiomatic. But perhaps the most radical of the questions above is: Who does theology? Who can "speak" theologically? Whose "voice" has a right to be heard? There is no question that for Gutiérrez it is the voice of those who have had "no voice," the poor, the despised, the humiliated. It is not because poverty and humiliation are good things in themselves. It is because of the world we live in, a world that throughout history has created an unbridgeable chasm between rich and poor (Lk 16:19-31). In the context of oppression (and only in that context, although it is the one in which we all live, whether as oppressor or as oppressed), the poor are not only hearers but privileged bearers of the gospel. That is the meaning of the blessing of the poor (Lk 6:20). They alone are capable, by reason of their lived participation in the struggle, to apprehend and articulate the true meaning of the kingdom of God. Here, likewise, is the true meaning of "subversive," for the kingdom can only be articulated through concrete, historical transformation "from below" (*desde abajo*). "Christ speaks to us from the Indians!" proclaimed Bartolomé de las Casas. It is hard to imagine a more "subversive" statement than that for the Spanish conquistadors of the sixteenth century, who perceived *themselves* as bearers of the gospel. How could these pagans, poor and despised, with an inferior culture and lacking the true religion—both proven by the conquest itself—"speak" Christ?

Gutiérrez insists that this approach is in flat contradiction to the dominant *progresista* theology of the West.<sup>4</sup> The reason is that it is the bourgeois, the interlocutors of progressive theology, who are contributing to the oppression of the poor. Thus theology must begin from the experience of the "other," the "nonperson," and it must seek an alliance with the poor of the world in order to create a "new human person." This cannot take place at the "center," where the bourgeois ideology

<sup>2</sup> From the introduction to *Liberación y cautiverio: Debates en torno al método de la teología en América latina* (Mexico City: Venecia, 1976) 13 (tr. mine).

<sup>3</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973) 6-13.

<sup>4</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Teología desde el reverso de la historia," in *La fuerza histórica de los pobres* (Lima: CEP, 1979) 393. What Gutiérrez is saying in this later essay is much more radical and challenging to the assumptions of European and North American theology than anything he has said previously. Cf. Alfred T. Hennelly's review in *TS* 40 (1979) 567-68.

justifies its actions while hiding their real meaning, viz., domination, but only at the "periphery," where the total system is radically called into question.<sup>5</sup> The exploited sectors of society, the despised races, the marginalized cultures are the historical subject of a new understanding of the faith.

This view has two important implications for the question of who does theology. First, for the poor to find their own proper voice, to be active subjects, there is need for a certain *maturation of praxis* within the movements of the people. Priority is given to praxis as the first act, i.e., the actual liberation of the people. Theology as a second act must reflect the difficulties of the first act. Only those who are concretely involved in the struggle for liberation are capable of such reflection. Moreover, Enrique Dussel points out, what Europeans and others do not understand is that liberation theology is not just a theory but an ecclesial-political *movement of the base* which counts on the adhesion of thousands of religious, priests, and laity in the most varied situations.<sup>6</sup> On this level theological reflection is only in its first stages. What Gutiérrez and others are trying to do is facilitate the conditions for such a maturation to take place. The goal is to "liberate" theology, to give it back to the people.

This brings us to the second implication. The professional theologians within liberation theology are at best *transitional*. Speaking of the impossibility of profundity in liberation theology unless the poor themselves give an accounting of their hope from their own world and in their own terms, which is a historical process of vast proportions, Gutiérrez remarks: "If that which we presently have as a theology of liberation, with

<sup>5</sup> Enrique Dussel ("Sobre la historia de la teología en América Latina," in *Liberación y cautiverio* 63) points out that, while liberation theology may use many of the categories and authors of Europe and may ask many of the same questions, the meaning of theology in Europe (the center) changes dialectically in the periphery because the manner of producing the theology, viz., "en la militancia" of the struggles of the emergent classes, is different. He sees three creative moments in the history of theology in Latin America: (1) before the conquest and evangelization (from 1511); (2) before the process of national emancipation from colonialism (from 1808); (3) before the popular and national liberation from capitalist imperialism (from 1962). In each period, theology is prophetic, political, nonacademic. Liberation theology was born in 1968 (Medellin) by assuming the experience and longing of the "bases" (the concrete experience of the people) and the hypotheses of the "human sciences."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 57. He goes on to observe that, by way of contrast, one sees no movement of the Church in the European theologies of hope, political theologies, etc. The locus of European theology is the university and pastoral work, while that of liberation theology is the militance of movements. Dussel concludes that liberation theology is simply unintelligible without a hermeneutic of such movements (66). This will occupy us in the third part of this essay.

all its limitations, can contribute to that and in this way open the possibility of a new understanding of the faith, it will have completed its task of transition."<sup>7</sup> The task is basically to reread, indeed to redo, history "in terms of the poor, the humiliated, and the rejected of society." But this is only possible in and through active involvement in changing the present structures. "We are not capable today of rereading history if we are not present in the struggle for liberation."<sup>8</sup> Thus even the transitional professionals cannot escape the priority of praxis if they wish to do an effective theology, i.e., one that makes a difference in the real world.

Historical effectiveness in the real world in which we live through the necessary threefold mediation of socio-economic-political analysis, a specific ethico-political option here and now, and an articulation of that option on the level of very specific tactical strategies is the special emphasis of Hugo Assmann.<sup>9</sup> There is no need to develop his thought here, as he seems in close agreement with the later Gutiérrez. However, it is worth noting that he has singled out two major lacunae in liberation theology. The first is the need for a specifically Latin American Christology, especially given the conflicting Christologies within Latin America itself.<sup>10</sup> Such a Christology must be neither suprasituational (too generic) nor exclusively determined to one situation, but historically mediating, i.e., meaningful for the fundamental questions of the concrete historical situation. (We will investigate whether such a Christology now exists in the second part of the essay.) The other major lack is a hermeneutic of praxis. For Assmann, priority is given to our contemporary situation as our text, our primary theological locus, with the Scriptures and tradition secondary. Segundo is generally recognized as the one who has most thoroughly addressed this second need.

<sup>7</sup> Gutiérrez, "Teología desde el reverso" 369 (tr. mine). This same statement was made much earlier: see "Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith," in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 25.

<sup>8</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Statement," in *Theology in the Americas*, ed. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) 310. Gutiérrez ("Teología desde el reverso" 371) observes that the expression "to reread history" can appear to be an exercise for intellectuals if we do not understand it as the result of *redoing* history by being present in the successes and failures of the liberation struggle.

<sup>9</sup> See Hugo Assmann, *Teología desde la praxis de la liberación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1973) 104-5. The first part is more generic and has appeared as *Theology For a Nomad Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976). The second part, "Ejercicios políticos de la fe," seeks to be more concrete and specific in terms of various strategies.

<sup>10</sup> See his "The Power of Christ in History: Conflicting Christologies and Discernment" in *Frontiers* 133-50.

*Segundo: A Hermeneutic of "Systematic Suspicion"*

The key to the theological method of Segundo is "systematic suspicion."<sup>11</sup> Such suspicion presupposes the willingness not only to face the most basic of human questions but more importantly to *change* one's most cherished interpretations, especially of the Bible. Without such willingness, one's ideas in theology, intimately bound up as they are with the existing social situation, will simply serve to reinforce the *status quo*. For this reason, method is more important than content for a theology that wishes to be liberative rather than talk about liberation.<sup>12</sup> What constitutes the hermeneutic circle in theology is "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."<sup>13</sup> The fundamental and indispensable attitude is a commitment to change the world. The new way of experiencing reality that such a commitment entails, primarily in and through the praxis of the struggling poor, leads to "ideological suspicion," which is then applied to the ideological superstructure in general and, if it is to be a hermeneutic for Christian theology, to theology in particular. This then involves a second commitment: to change theology. This new way of experiencing theological reality, primarily in critical evaluative judgment, leads to "exegetical suspicion," i.e., that the prevailing interpretation overlooks or ignores the concrete situation of oppression and so inhibits God's word from speaking to the real situation. Finally, all of this results in *orthopraxis*, a doing of the truth that contains in the very act the correct understanding of God for today, in the here and now. "The fact is that God shows up in a different light when his people find themselves in different historical situations . . . . If God continually presents himself in a different light, then the truth about him must be different also."<sup>14</sup>

Here indeed is the methodological challenge to what Segundo continually characterizes as "academic" theology. There is a real "epistemological break" on two levels. The first is in the use of the social sciences. Segundo accuses academic theology of employing many sciences to shed light on the past while declaring itself autonomous and so independent of those sciences that seek to interpret the present. Liberation theology, on the other hand, seeks "to combine the disciplines that open up the

<sup>11</sup> See Mary E. Hunt, *Feminist Liberation Theology: The Development of Method in Construction* (Berkeley: GTU unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1980) 95; Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) 231: "Systematic suspicion would seem to be an integral part of the hermeneutic circle of any liberated and liberating theology."

<sup>12</sup> Segundo, *Liberation* 39-40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

past with the disciplines that help to explain the present."<sup>15</sup> The second, and more fundamental, is the ineluctable necessity of political commitment if one wishes to change the world and theology. The key issue here is partiality. He refers to impartiality as "the pretension of academic theology" which only cloaks its partiality for the *status quo*. For Segundo, "ideological neutrality" or "scientific and scholarly impartiality" is the "last systematic obstacle for any theology committed to human liberation."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, with regard to the first epistemological break, the role of sociology is to combat the "ideological infiltration of dogma." There is a need to study and so unmask "the human attitudes that are bound up with social structures."<sup>17</sup> However, for an effective collaboration of sociology and theology, there is need for a sociology that will neither retreat from depth issues (values, motivations—including the unconscious—, relationships, meaning, etc.) for the sake of clear, quantifiable results nor simply reject religion out of hand (Marx and his followers). What is needed is a "different kind of verification," not quantitative but rational and scientific nonetheless. It is interesting at this point that Segundo appeals to Teilhard de Chardin as well as to Max Weber. Weber, as a sociologist, provides analogies between economics and theology that are fruitful and applicable. But Teilhard combines a commitment to scientific expertise (paleontology) with a theological commitment in personal faith to the Christ-event. What bridges these two phenomena is a human, psychological act of faith in the fundamental unity of the world. That is to say, his human act of faith in the order and oneness of the universe, which remains within the same epistemological line as his phenomenological analysis of evolution, allows him to address the depth questions avoided by the purely quantitative approach and at the same time to

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 8. On p. 19 he speaks of this as a way "to free academic theology from its atavism and its ivory tower, toppling the naive self-conception it entertains at present: i.e., that it is a simple, eternal, impartial interpretation, or authorized translation, of the word of God." This description seems a bit atavistic itself. However, David Tracy misses the point when he criticizes Segundo's attack on "academically based theologies" while employing an "academically based sociology" (Weber) as inconsistent. See Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 41, n. 74. Segundo's point is to use *all* the disciplines, both to retrieve the past and to confront the present. He is precisely attacking any theology which refuses to use the contemporary social sciences, as well as any theology that disdains political commitment on the basis of a presumed impartiality.

<sup>16</sup> Segundo, *Liberation* 13, 25, 33–34. Of course, partiality may take various forms, e.g., a passionate commitment to truth, but within the present-day context of oppression it involves unavoidably a political option for the struggling poor.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 47.

pose correlations with the data of revelation, which come from a different source of knowledge. Thus, while Christian faith (and theology) is not reducible to sociology, such contemporary human sciences function in a subordinate but indispensable way in the formation of our specifically Christian faith knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Sociology, like history, has both a negative and a positive function: to unmask those ideologies that obstruct the commitment to change the world and to propose a new image of the world that is better than the one presently operating. But the lack of an adequate sociology at the moment must not result in the atrophy of theology. On the contrary, theology must move forward by plunging into concrete political options (the more fundamental epistemological break). The reason for this is the importance of making a choice in the concrete situation. Commitment is the first act; theology comes after. Without a prior political commitment in very concrete and specific terms, one cannot even recognize Jesus or the gospel he proclaimed.<sup>19</sup> Thus appeal is made not only to the political as a fundamental human dimension (so that theology is necessarily political) and to the need for ideological analysis using both sociology and politics, but most radically to "the liberating creativity of Jesus' own methodology." Partisanship on behalf of the poor and oppressed, openness to the concrete situation in terms of what is good for people, interpreting the "signs of the times" in the cry of human suffering, making effective options based in human sensitivity—this is the only way to "de-ideologize our minds and free our thinking for the gospel message."<sup>20</sup>

It should be clear by now that the key word for Segundo is "ideology." Alfred T. Hennelly speculates that "the real, though unexpressed, major thesis of *The Liberation of Theology* is that the entire millennium and a half of Constantinian Christianity has involved a gradual and massive ideologization of the gospel in favor of powerful and privileged interests in western society."<sup>21</sup> Segundo uses the term in the more common pejorative sense of a "cloak over one's malice," i.e., giving a certain justification for one's actions while simultaneously hiding their real meaning. On the other hand, he also employs a more neutral sense of the term as "the system of goals and means that serves as the necessary

<sup>18</sup> This principle applies to all the human sciences. I have tried to demonstrate its applicability to history in relation to faith knowledge in "The Call to Faith of the Historical Jesus," *TS* 39 (1978) 683, and in *The Jesus of Faith: A Study in Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1981) 23.

<sup>19</sup> Segundo, *Liberation* 81.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 87.

<sup>21</sup> Alfred T. Hennelly, *Theologies in Conflict: The Challenge of Juan Luis Segundo* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 135.

backdrop for any human option or line of action," or as "a logical system of interconnected values."<sup>22</sup> In this sense, while faith is not reducible to ideology, neither can it exist without some ideology. What is important to note in this connection is that ideologies, which are always changing in a changing world and so relative, are concerned with the effectiveness of means and become specific as to content. The great danger is to absolutize the content, e.g., the two natures of Christ.<sup>23</sup> Faith, on the other hand, is concerned with the total process, with meaningfulness as the final goal, and so is absolute not in terms of its content (ideologies) but solely as a liberative process that is pedagogical in nature. "Faith, then, is a liberative process. It is converted into freedom for history, which means freedom *for ideologies*." And again: "Faith . . . is the total process to which man submits, a process of learning in and through ideologies how to create the ideologies needed to handle new and unforeseen situations in history."<sup>24</sup> Thus neither any value (morality) nor any doctrine (dogma) is absolutized but rather an *educational process*, that "learning how to learn" which is continually communicated by God through the whole process of history and to which we freely entrust the meaning of our lives. In summing up, Segundo puts it this way:

Faith, then, is not a universal, atemporal, pithy body of content summing up divine revelation once the latter has been divested of ideologies. On the contrary, it is maturity by way of ideologies, the possibility of fully and conscientiously carrying out the ideological task on which the real-life liberation of human beings depends.<sup>25</sup>

The implication for theological method of this relationship between faith and ideology is that one must continuously engage the concrete situation in order to discover what God is revealing here and now. At the third stage of the hermeneutical circle, the level of "exegetical suspicion," the important question in the light of the previous "ideological suspicion" is: What does God have to say and what is He doing about this concrete situation? This is how James Cone approaches the black condition in the United States. What such a method can guarantee is not the "correct" position or answer but that an adequate analysis, drawing upon all the resources of personal and communal experience in the light of a proper use of the social sciences, will allow the right questions to emerge.<sup>26</sup> The

<sup>22</sup> Segundo, *Liberation* 102, 105.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 108-9. I understand Segundo to mean that the *symbolum* of two natures is methodologically heuristic. It gives rise to thought that is not simply reducible to any specific content but must be continually retrieved within the concrete and ever-changing situations of history.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 110, 120.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 122.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Hunt, *Feminist* 9, 179.



faith is continuously being incarnated in history by means of successive ideologies. It is the role of the theologian to deideologize the faith (hermeneutic of suspicion) by means of that which is an intrinsic element of the faith itself: a political option in favor of liberative change (hermeneutic of hope based on engagement).<sup>27</sup> Such engagement is the very basis of the hermeneutic circle. Key to this is the conviction that human, historical causality (free decision-making) is necessary and efficacious in constructing the kingdom of God.

This brings us back to the essential methodological issue with which we began: Who does theology? Segundo, in his final chapter, phrases the issue in terms of "mass man" and "minority elite." "Was the original Christian message aimed at masses as such, so that it must be thought out and propagated in those terms; or was it rather aimed at minorities who were destined to play an essential role in the transformation and liberation of the masses?"<sup>28</sup> In the final analysis, masses and minorities are a basic constant in humanity, reflecting the universal law in nature of the economy of energy. The very process of conscientization in order to create active subjects of history is an indefinite process that becomes ever more complicated and difficult. This is what creates minorities. Unlike the mass mechanisms of Christendom with its goal of numerical universality, the cross calls one to a heroic style of life that "only a minority can bear in a continuing way. Indeed it is what *constitutes* a minority as such."<sup>29</sup> The important issue, then, is whether such minorities can create new forms of energy that will be in service to the liberation of the masses, on both a societal and a personal level.

Does this position contradict Gutiérrez' concern that the popular classes and their vanguard become "the historical subject of a new understanding of the faith"? No, because for Gutiérrez as well a certain maturation of praxis is necessary from within the movement of the base. Thus, to return to our original question whether an indigenous Christology is possible, the answer will depend on the degree to which the popular movements of the base can create active subjects of theology. For liberation theology, those who *ultimately* do theology are the conscientized poor (themselves a minority). And, *transitionally*, only those professional theologians (and others) who actively align themselves with these same poor can do effective theology, i.e., a theology that will make a difference in the present-day reality of the world by helping those who have had "no voice" in history perform their appropriate role as privileged bearers of the gospel.

<sup>27</sup> Beatriz Melano Couch sums up the hermeneutics of liberation theology as "a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of hope born of engagement" (= "political commitment") in her "Statement" in *Theology in the Americas* 306.

<sup>28</sup> Segundo, *Liberation* 209.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 231.

Such was, claim the liberation theologians, both the "theological method" and the personal life style of Jesus, not the "Word become flesh" which gave rise to much philosophical speculation, but the "God become poor" (*Dios hecho pobre*) who lived at the periphery, far removed from the center of world domination, and who called for the transformative praxis of taking up one's cross and following him. As Jon Sobrino emphasizes, *the* method in theology is not critical reflection upon the way of knowing Jesus, but upon the way itself, i.e., upon the actual, concrete experience of following him on the way (Mk 10:52), whereby, as in Mark's Gospel, one comes to discover both the identity of Jesus and one's own. Thus we turn to our second question: Have the liberation theologians produced results commensurate with their methodological claims in the Christologies they have constructed so far?

CONTENT: THE ACTUAL STATE OF CHRISTOLOGY IN LATIN AMERICA,  
REINTERPRETATION OR APPLICATION?

Does the actual state of Christology in Latin America show it to be truly different from Western progressive theology or is it too dependent on European theology and method? To put it another way, are the Christologies that have been produced so far truly reinterpretations in the light of historical praxis or are they merely applications of traditional theology to the Latin American situation? Has a truly original Latin American Christology appeared or are the works that have appeared so far at best transitional? From a personal survey of the literature between 1970 and 1980, my conclusion is that the two authors who remain the best representatives of Christology in Latin America are Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino. A closer look at their contributions will be sufficient to answer the questions just posed.

*Boff: A View from the Periphery?*

"Where is Latin America in it all?" This is the cry of Jürgen Moltmann, who takes to task José Míguez Bonino and other Latin American theologians for criticizing European theology and then writing books that affirm their positions.<sup>30</sup> A reading of Boff's *Jesus Christ Liberator*, minus the Epilogue of the 1978 English translation, would seem to confirm that criticism. Boff does say that "severe political repression" in Brazil at the time of the first appearance of the book in 1972 did not allow him to say all he wanted to say. Thus we must look to the Epilogue for "a more open and straightforward type of socio-analytic thought" (Preface). I propose to offer some brief remarks on the book itself and then engage Boff's approach more critically by discussing the Epilogue.

<sup>30</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, "On Latin American Theology: An Open Letter to José Míguez Bonino," *Christianity and Crisis* 36 (1976) 57-63.

Boff offers an initial disclaimer to the type of criticism being proposed here: "The predominantly foreign literature that we cite ought not to delude anyone. It is with preoccupations that are ours alone, taken from our Latin American context, that we will reread not only the old texts of the New Testament but also the most recent commentaries written in Europe."<sup>31</sup> He cites five characteristics of such a Christology. The first is the primacy of the anthropological over the ecclesiastical, i.e., "models and structures imported from Europe." The focus is on the "new human being," which is "a new incarnation of the church outside of the inherited traditional framework of a Greco-Roman understanding of the world." He grounds this possibility in the historical Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. What Jesus really wanted was to realize the fundamental utopia of the human heart through personal conversion and a restructuring of social relationships.

The second characteristic is the primacy of the utopian over the factual, i.e., the colonized past. The determining element is a permanent openness to the future, to change, to ever-increasing transformation. He grounds this, as a reality, in the resurrection of Jesus as the "place" of the definitive realization of all human utopias, but which must still be brought to realization in the ongoing process of human history.

The third characteristic is the primacy of the critical over the dogmatic. The goal is a new self-understanding that can only come through dialogue and openness to the possibilities inherent in one's concrete situation. He grounds this in the extraordinary good sense, creative imagination, and originality of the historical Jesus, who placed all dogmatisms in crisis by his appeal to ordinary, concrete human situations and experiences as revelatory of the profundity of the human person.

The fourth characteristic is the primacy of the social over the personal. In Latin America structural evils simply overwhelm, but do not exclude, mere personal conversion. The call is for the conversion of society. This again is grounded in the message of Jesus, whose proclamation of the kingdom "implies a revolution of the human world."

The fifth characteristic is the primacy of orthopraxis over orthodoxy. Following Christ is more fundamental than correct thinking about Christ. This, too, is grounded in Christ and the primitive Church, for whom the essential was not the reduction of the message to "systematic categories of intellectual comprehension" but "creating new habits of acting and living in the world." This "praxiological moment of the message of Christ" is perhaps the most characteristic of the five elements in Latin American theology.

<sup>31</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978) 43. Cf. Dussel's remark that the meaning of theology in Europe (the center) changes dialectically in the periphery. See n. 5 above.

A new human person, a new future, a new self-understanding, new social structures, indeed a new revelation insofar as orthopraxis implies a new way of understanding God's action in the world—just how new is all this? As one reads through Boff's treatment of the historical Jesus, the cross, the Resurrection, and the Incarnation, one finds oneself squarely within the intellectual world of European theology. One might debate various elements of his treatment, e.g., his uncritical use of historical-Jesus material to include everything he wants to demonstrate.<sup>32</sup> But the more telling criticism is the simple lack of any concrete reference to the situation in Latin America. In Enrique Dussel's terms, where is the movement of the base communities without which liberation theology is simply unintelligible? That Boff's approach is a presentation of a rather contemporary Christology derivative from Europe but applicable to Latin America becomes clear when he finally arrives at the chapter entitled "What Can We Call Jesus Christ Today?" Jesus is called omega point, conciliator of opposites (mediator), reformer, revolutionary, liberator, archetype, brother, God with us—all true and applicable to a variety of concrete situations. But what is distinctively Latin American in all this?

What we have is Christ as the "absolute reference point"<sup>33</sup> whose humanity is the bridge to our contemporary understanding of him. Christ, as always, is a challenge to our contemporary situation, but has the image of God and Christ been affected by the contemporary situation itself? Has "hermeneutic suspicion" led Boff to a radical reinterpretation, a true rereading grounded in a redoing of history, such that God in Christ "shows up in a different light" (Segundo) in this very different historical situation? In the Epilogue, "A Christological View from the Periphery," Boff uses more of the language of Gutiérrez, Assmann, and Segundo, and so appears closer to their methodological claims. In speaking of the "relevance of the social setting and liberation for Christology," he emphasizes the social context as the point of departure and so determinative of Christology, such that there is no neutrality. "Every given type of Christology is relevant in its own way, depending on its functional relationship to the socio-historical situation; in that sense it is a committed Christology. . . . Hence the real question is who or what cause is

<sup>32</sup> This is a problem with the liberation theologians in general. Their desire to ground their theologies in the historical Jesus leads them to identify that Jesus with their Lord. But if one accepts for methodological purposes the assumption that historicity in the Gospels must be demonstrated, then one must drastically curtail the amount of historical Jesus material. This does not make such material any less indispensable, but it does subordinate it to the primacy of the faith relationship. For further discussion of this point, see Cook, *Jesus* 1–34, and the discussion of Sobrino's position below.

<sup>33</sup> Boff, *Liberator* 229.

served by a given Christology."<sup>34</sup> However, his position appears to diverge from Gutiérrez *et al.* when he goes on to claim epistemological "autonomy" for Christology in terms of "its own methodology."

A Christology is not better or worse epistemologically because it was produced in the metropolitan center of power or in the dominated periphery. The same holds true when a Christology is designated as "traditionalist" or "progressivist" or "liberation-oriented." None of these adjectives can determine the correctness or "truth" of a Christology. They point outward to the social reference of a given Christological production.<sup>35</sup>

Thus Boff sees the social setting as a matter of "external dependence," of "outward reference." He recognizes that the political effectiveness of a Christology demands a "socio-analytical articulation," which is hermeneutical insofar as such social analysis has theological relevance, but the movement is from the light of Jesus Christ to the socio-analytical text. The option for the dialectical approach to social analysis and for the revolutionary project comes from the discernment of faith, which sees this type of analysis as in better accord with "the demands of a faith that is to be fleshed out in practice."<sup>36</sup>

But what about theology? Does theology change in the light of praxis? Speaking of the urgent need to reflect upon and change the cultural ethos of capitalism, Boff seems to imply that it does.

This kind of urgent reflection is presupposed in the liberation Christology now being elaborated on our continent. It is rarely written down or presented in theoretical detail; instead it is being bruited about in discussion groups and passed along in mimeographed texts.

That brings us to a basic question. What image of Jesus appears when we examine him in the light of this liberation interest? What interpretation do we get of his message and his salvific praxis?<sup>37</sup>

The implication is that a new Christology is developing out of such concrete reflections. But when Boff goes on to elaborate some basic theses of such a Christology, he merely repeats in summary form the essential content of his book. Jesus' proclamation and praxis, culminating in the definitive liberation of the Resurrection, remains the absolute reference point. The actual situation in Latin America recedes into the background, only to reappear in the form of an exhortation to put the basic vision of Jesus in the service of the political, social, economic, and religious liberation of the oppressed people in Latin America. In the final analysis, "the function of Christology is to shape and work out a Christian option in society."<sup>38</sup> For Boff, the assumption seems to be that we already

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 266.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 278.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 267-68.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 293.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 274.

know what this option is and then we apply it to the situation. This is in contrast to Segundo, who does not see the "specifically Christian" option to lie in a prior evangelical ideal or in a priori principles of social thought, but only in the act of making a concrete political commitment.

With Gutiérrez, all our authors agree in principle that commitment is the first step. The only way to actualize the liberation of Jesus is to follow him on the way. This is the point of departure for Jon Sobrino, whose Christology seems more resolutely committed to embracing the consequences of such a position.

*Sobrino: Following the Historical Jesus*

Sobrino, in the "Preface to the English Edition," recognizes explicitly that his book is transitional in the move toward a Christology truly original to Latin America. "It is a Christology at the crossroads. Behind it lies a long tradition, part of which it proposes to reject. Before it lies a *new and authentically Latin American Christology which does not yet exist*, which yet remains to be formulated, and toward which this book points."<sup>39</sup> The book proposes to reject any Christology that in one way or another would ignore or forget the historical Jesus. This is squarely based in much of current European Christology and it is clear throughout the book that Sobrino is heavily indebted to Moltmann. What Latin America adds is "the weight of clear-cut evidence and the urgent necessity of engaging in some other sort of Christological reflection." Besides the structuring of certain data and the emphasis placed on some aspects, what might be considered novel according to Sobrino is "the basic intention to give a new direction to Christology." He spells this out in terms of a Christology that is ecclesial (the ongoing historical experience of Christian communities which Christ has continually unleashed), historical (the grounding of all Christologies in the history of Jesus), and trinitarian (theologizing itself as trinitarian process in the concrete praxis of following Jesus, who reveals the Son as the way to the Father). This new direction is most clearly seen in the priority given to the praxis of following Jesus in announcing the kingdom, denouncing injustice, and seeking to embody or realize the kingdom, at least partially, in real life. Such discipleship is the only way that one can come to a true understanding of who Jesus is. It is "the most radical and thorough verification of the truth of Christology, i.e., that Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father."<sup>40</sup> Such praxis, one assumes, could eventually result in a Christology truly indigenous to Latin America.

Sobrino recognizes two major deficiencies in his book. First, it is directed to those already seriously committed to the process of liberation

<sup>39</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (Maryknoll; Orbis, 1978) xv (italics mine).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* xxv-xxvi.

(an elite minority?) and so offers no analysis, criticism, or direction to the Christologies held by the popular masses. While this is a legitimate limitation, the reverse side is that the book does not clearly reflect any positive contributions from the movement of the base communities. As with Boff, we are squarely within the intellectual world of European theology.

Given this deficiency as defining the present state of Christology in Latin America, one must still ask whether the Christologies of Boff and Sobrino are successful in their own terms. The second deficiency noted by Sobrino is the need for more solid exegetical grounding if one wishes to base Christology on the historical Jesus. Yet, it is not just a question of working out the exegetical analysis in greater detail, as Sobrino would have it. It is rather the question of what constitutes an adequate starting point for Christology.

A Christology that is adequate to the tradition based in Scripture and understandable in the world of today must seek to integrate the four fundamental dimensions: historical Jesus, cross, Resurrection, and Incarnation. One must seek "the proper key to an understanding of the total Christ." For Sobrino, this is the historical Jesus. He insists that the logical procedure is not to reflect directly on the Christological dogmas but to retrace the path by which the dogmas were formulated. "Thus the logical procedure of Christology is nothing else but the proper chronological procedure."<sup>41</sup> It is Jesus' own history and destiny that gives content to our profession of faith in Christ as the eternal Son of God. While agreeing that there can be no Christology *apart from* the history of Jesus and that any focus on the risen Christ in isolation or in abstraction from that history changes faith into "religion," the question remains whether Sobrino is not confusing chronological analysis with synthetic judgment. One may seek to reconstruct and so retrace the movement from the historical Jesus through the cross and Resurrection to its consummation in the early Church's understanding of Jesus as incarnate Son of God in an analytic fashion, but the question still remains: What is the *decisive factor* in this development that allows one to integrate all four elements synthetically? The basic weakness in Sobrino's approach is that it wants to claim too much about the historical Jesus without sufficient evidence. For example, how do we know that Jesus remained faithful to the Father in unconditional trust and absolute obedience? We can know historically that Jesus in word and deed proclaimed a loving and caring Father and called for such a response of trust, but Bultmann's famous objection about the possibility that Jesus himself broke down and went to the cross railing against his fate cannot

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. xxi-xxii, 384.

be glossed over historically. Sobrino's chapter on the faith of Jesus is illustrative of the problem. He wishes to maintain two stages in the life of Jesus: the springtime in Galilee and the crisis in Galilee that led to Jerusalem, the latter involving a real shift for Jesus himself in terms of his understanding of his mission. But can this be established on historical grounds? Sobrino's desire "to see Jesus in the historical process of change and development," to recover "the totality of the historical Jesus," to concentrate on "the history of his faith,"<sup>42</sup> is impossible without a chronological biography of Jesus—precisely what exegetes have denied since the work of Karl Ludwig Schmidt on the framework of Mark's Gospel.

It strikes me that Sobrino's approach, methodologically, is closer to the Gospel of Mark than to the historical Jesus. What he means by historical is kerygmatic.<sup>43</sup> He refers to the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt as "a historical statement about God" insofar as "the whole historical process of liberation is attributed to God's intervention."<sup>44</sup> But as soon as the idea of God's intervention is introduced, one moves from strictly historical to kerygmatic statements, i.e., the proclamation of God's saving action in history. The Gospel of Mark is clearly written in the light of such a divine intervention, viz., the resurrection of Jesus. It identifies the Christ of faith with the Jesus of history. So, apparently, does Sobrino, but then it would be better to drop the adjective "historical" when speaking about Jesus in this manner. We know that Jesus remained faithful to the Father because the Father raised him from the dead and so vindicated him against his enemies. This is a theological, not a historical, statement, insofar as it is talking about the action of God as vindication of Jesus.

It is only in the light of the total Christ as risen that we can affirm with theological certitude that Jesus lived to the end a life of unconditional trust and absolute obedience to the Father's will. Sobrino's Christology, it seems, is fundamentally a restatement of Mark's Gospel. There is no question that the rediscovery of the historical Jesus has had a direct impact upon our contemporary consciousness. There is a constant reference in Sobrino and most of the other liberation theologians to the "structural similarities" between the situation of Jesus' ministry and the

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 84–86.

<sup>43</sup> In discussing the kind of language about God used in Scripture, Sobrino employs the distinction of E. Schlink used by W. Pannenberg between doxological statements and kerygmatic statements. He remarks, as if such a change were immediately obvious: "I call the latter [kerygmatic] 'historical' statements for the sake of a more readily understandable nomenclature" (*ibid.* 344, n. 6). It is readily understandable only if he in fact equates kerygma and history.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 322.



contemporary situation in Latin America. I suspect that this is the real motive for the incessant appeal to the historical Jesus. Yet, the image of Jesus that finally emerges is relatively indistinguishable from the Jesus of Mark. Both Mark and Sobrino employ historical materials, but by not distinguishing clearly between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, both are able to say much more about Jesus than strictly historical judgment would allow. This is legitimate, but clarity on this question is needed for the sake of theological discussion, i.e., one cannot use the adjective "historical" indiscriminately.

On the positive side, what Mark and Sobrino say about Jesus has powerful relevance for the contemporary situation. There are, of course, many elements in Sobrino's book that are not simply derivative from Mark, e.g., the historical material on Jesus in service to the kingdom. But the central and crucial focus upon following Jesus which goes through two distinct stages as Jesus is confronted with the crisis in Galilee is, at least structurally, pure Mark. Unquestionably, for Mark, who Jesus is is inextricably intertwined with who we are as disciples. The identity of Jesus is revealed dialectically in the abandonment and death of Jesus on the cross, and we will only discover that identity, and so our own as well, insofar as we take up the cross and follow Jesus "on the way" (Mk 10:52). These are all themes that Sobrino develops in a masterful way; and it is this that gives a "new direction" to Christology. Commitment (praxis as the following of Jesus) remains the first and last act. Such commitment, the very process of the liberation of creation itself, leaves us always open to the future as God's future, to the God of surprises who reveals Himself dialectically in the limit experience of the cross as the human mediation of salvation.

This last point, on human mediation, is crucial for liberation theology. God's self-involvement, indeed immersion, in the human and the historical—above all, in the poor, the oppressed, and the marginated: Jesus was condemned as a blasphemer, crucified as a rebel, and died as one forsaken by God (Moltmann)—forces one into a dialectical awareness of "God" as one who is in solidarity with, present and active in, the negative, the other side of history. Salvation is mediated through the human freedom of Jesus (1 Tim 2:5). God has created a world in which the human response to the divine initiative of creative love is constitutive of salvation. What has happened in Jesus is at the same time a call to faith and mission, a call to give shape to our world as cocreators with God through creative imagination and loving service. Salvation in Christ does not exempt us from personal responsibility for our world. Rather, it is a challenge to us to follow Jesus in his service of the kingdom, thus mediating his salvific love in and through concrete praxis. For Sobrino,

the final question is: "*What must be done in order to establish the kingdom of God in history?*"<sup>45</sup>

But which is prior: the situation of Jesus or our own? Boff and Sobrino give priority to Jesus and so apply the insights derived from Jesus to the situation in Latin America. But the theorists on methodology—Gutiérrez, Assmann, and Segundo—seem to be making a quite different claim, viz., that our image of God, and so of Jesus, will appear differently in different historical situations. Can such a claim be taken seriously? Is a new Christology, one truly indigenous to Latin America, really possible? What are the conditions for such a possibility?

PROJECT: THE POSSIBILITY OF A CHRISTOLOGY TRULY INDIGENOUS TO  
LATIN AMERICA

"What kind of Christs are currently being invoked in Latin America?"<sup>46</sup> Assmann's provocative question raises three interrelated issues: the question of consistency within a multifaceted pluralism in Latin America, the crucial issue of power as the final determinant of the concrete situation (Whose side is Christ on?), and the proper understanding of universality in reference to global concerns vis-à-vis the specific context of Latin America. A brief word about each of these, since they provide the principles which frame the discussion that follows.

Aside from the obvious fact of cultural, historical, and socio-economic pluralism on a continent as vast and diverse as Latin America (including Mexico and Central America as well as South America), the focus here is on theological pluralism. It should be clear from the preceding sections that there is not only a pluralism which can be broadly demarcated between reactionary and revolutionary approaches with liberalism somewhere in-between, but also a pluralism among liberation theologians themselves. The more radical implications of method as proposed by Gutiérrez, Assmann, and Segundo do not appear in the Christological productions of Boff and Sobrino, although the latter seem to recognize that a truly original Latin American Christology has yet to appear. While recognizing legitimate pluralism, our question here is one of consistency within liberation theology in the light of what the more radical expositors of method are proposing. If there is anything really new and unique about Latin American liberation theology, it lies in the claim that the poor and the oppressed can and should speak Christ in ways that heretofore have not been heard, that they are "the historical subject of a new understanding of the faith" (Gutiérrez). My purpose is not to speak Christ *for* them

<sup>45</sup> Sobrino, *Christology* 113.

<sup>46</sup> Assmann, "The Power of Christ" 139.

(an impossibility) but simply to ask what the conditions for realization of such a possibility might be.

Connected with pluralism is the crucial issue of power. There have been many images of Christ throughout the historico-cultural experience of Latin America (which must include the period prior to the Spanish conquest), and the image adopted by the people has always been and will continue to be a powerful force either for preserving the *status quo* or for shaking it to its foundations. Where is the power of Christ operative? Whose side is he on? Does Jesus incarnate here and now, in the faces of the poor and oppressed, God's preferential love? This is more fundamental than, although not disconnected from, whether he did so in the past. Various Christs have been influential in history. Some have mediated and some have obstructed our access to the Christ of the Gospels and even more to the Jesus of history. Both the legitimate use and the abuse of power have been "in the name of Christ." The resultant conflicting Christologies, as Assmann and many others insist, demand a process of theological discernment. The theologians "can and should give consideration to the 'concrete influence' and the 'dynamics of historical power' that are embodied in these varying christological ideologies."<sup>47</sup> But discernment is not sufficient if it ends in a mere analysis of the situation. True discernment always leads to a concrete and specific option with its corresponding strategies. Only so will it be historically effective and so determinant of the concrete situation. This is to discover ever anew the power of Christ operative in the historical, socio-political reality of the here-and-now, in the particularity of human mediations.

Is this too restrictive? What about universality? Can we have a definitive image of Christ's power in history? Only, it would appear, if we replace the active dynamism of the "coming" kingdom with an "established" kingdom which has clearly demarcated and immutable spheres of influence. But Jesus proclaimed a kingdom taking place in the midst of human life (Lk 17:20-21). It is an ongoing process whose definitive realization in Jesus' resurrection did not terminate the process by removing it from human history but rather unleashed into history the power of Christ's Spirit as a call and challenge to each succeeding generation. For the liberation theologians, true universality does not reside first and foremost in global and cosmic considerations (although Boff shows a great deal of interest in this theme Christologically). Such questions are important but secondary. True universality lies in the concrete particular, in the radicality or rootedness in the real-life context of "grass-roots language." The basic reference point for doing theology,

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 143.

that which is directly accessible, is not Scripture and tradition but the immediate and irreplaceable experience of the people's praxis. It is only by entering ever more deeply into the concrete particularity of one's own life-situation in all its human and historical relationships, actively participating in and living to the full the gift of one's own life, that one can truly experience and so be sensitive to the universality of the human condition. Any other approach simply produces abstract ideologies about "our common humanity." Charles Schulz's Linus speaks for many when he says: "I love mankind; it's people I can't stand." Thus the criticism of Asian and African theologians,<sup>48</sup> that the emphasis of Latin American liberation theology upon class struggle ignores such issues as racism, sexism, and geopolitical distribution of land resources, is valid but misdirected if it distracts from the concrete and immediate situation. It is only by committed engagement in very specific options that a true universality becomes possible at all.

With these considerations on pluralism, power, and universality in mind, we will now look at the concrete and specific conditions in Latin America that are making a truly indigenous Christology possible. Such a possibility revolves around two inseparable factors: indigenization and conscientization. By indigenization I mean simply a particular people getting in touch with their own uniquely proper roots ("radicalization" in the best sense of the word) through a profound *recognition* (memory) of *themselves* in their history, their culture, their spirituality, and their communal (ecclesial?) experience. By conscientization I mean that such a recognition, in order not to be romanticized or idealized, must be *critically appropriated* through a specific politico-communal commitment. This is an experience that remains rooted in memory but moves beyond it to imagination, i.e., to the concretely imaginative creation of a new humanity. It is a necessary move; for the experience of the people in Latin America has too often been one in which their history has been suppressed, their culture despised, their spirituality alienated, and their communal values of solidarity and co-operation devalued.

The two concrete and specific realities in Latin America that embody these two factors are popular religiosity and popular Christian communities. As Segundo Galilea notes, popular religiosity (or "popular Catholicism") is more extensive in numerical influence and more immediately in continuity with the life of the masses, whereas the popular

<sup>48</sup> Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, eds., *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* (Marynoll: Orbis, 1981) 253-64. The challenge of Tissa Balasuriya from Asia that focuses upon the enormous inequity between land distribution and population is one that needs careful attention in any analysis of center-periphery geopolitics, for it relativizes the situation of one periphery (e.g., Latin America) when compared to another (Asia).

Christian (or ecclesial) communities are less extensive numerically and more intense and prophetic, thereby creating elites.<sup>49</sup>

*Popular Religiosity: A Truly Indigenous Theology?*

The first thing to note about popular religiosity in Latin America is its massive character. Popular Catholicism may be its most numerous form, but it includes Afro-American syncretic sects and Protestant Pentecostalism as well. One can likewise speak of a threefold regionalization: indigenous (Mexico and the Andes), African immigration (the Caribbean and Brazil), and European immigration (Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile).<sup>50</sup> For our purposes, it will be necessary and sufficient to confine the discussion to the indigenous experience of the Indians in the Andes. In the interaction between autochthonous cultures and religions (the Inca and Maya civilizations) and "colonial Christianity" as an all-embracing religious, political, social, and economic system transplanted from Spain (with its own liturgy, buildings, laws, feasts, and devotions), one sees most clearly what popular religiosity means. "Popular religiosity is, in effect, to a certain degree, the protest of the indigenous and mestizo consciousness submitted to a foreign culture, religion, and morality, which reconstitutes under their [foreign] names and forms the elements of its own proper religious and cultural identity."<sup>51</sup>

Most liberation theologians would agree with Míguez Bonino that this protest has been absorbed by religiosity as a substitute and so has been deprived of its transforming potential. The conformism and passivity of popular religiosity has been put to "political use" in order to keep the masses far from any attitude of protest, rebellion, or social transformation. Thus it is alienated and alienating and in need of a true *metanoia* through the praxis of liberation. In Galilea's terms, the evangelization of popular Catholicism will give rise to "a truly indigenous theology" whereby, through cultural liberation, human beings become "active and free agents of their own Christian vocation within the framework and spirit of a given culture."<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Segundo Galilea and Raul Vidales, *Cristología y pastoral popular* (Bogotá: Paulinas, 1974) 15, 51-52. Galilea's concern is that we need both intensive and popular pastoral care. Without the mutual interaction of the two, such care will vacillate erratically between elitism and massification. Cf. also Segundo, *Liberation* 208 ff., on the relationship between masses and minorities.

<sup>50</sup> José Míguez Bonino, "La piedad popular en América latina," *Concilium* 96 (1974) 440-47. For Peru specifically, see Manuel Marzal, "La religiosidad popular en el Perú," in *Panorama de la teología latinoamericana* 1 (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1975) 27-42.

<sup>51</sup> Míguez Bonino, "La piedad popular" 442 (tr. mine).

<sup>52</sup> Segundo Galilea, "Liberation Theology and New Tasks Facing Christians," in *Frontiers* 163, 174.

Thus the question at its most radical becomes: Is the Christ of the Andean people a "veiled Christ" who was already present in the pre-Columban religion of the people, so that the work of evangelization is properly to assist the Andean people to unveil *their own proper face of Christ*?<sup>53</sup> "Christ was made a prisoner in Spain" (Miguel de Unamuno). This was a Christ in service to the mystic idea of the *unidad española*, a temporal messianism of masochistic-redemptive character which believed that the universal kingdom (= the *reino católico* of Spain) would come only after all the tribes had been evangelized (= "civilized" by Spanish religiosity).<sup>54</sup> *Cristo-bal* (= Christ-bearer) *Colón* (= settler) was such a religious mystic. The image of Christ which the conquistadors brought with them into the New World was derived from this temporal messianism.

Saul Trinidad lists five images of the Spanish Christ that propelled them into the New World and overwhelmed the Indian civilizations: (1) a conquered and suffering Christ, reflecting eight centuries of struggle with the Arabic world but simultaneously finding a kind of tranquility in the ecstasy of romantic mysticism; (2) a Christ as an innocent child adopted by his protectors (Trinidad remarks on these first two types: "With respect to the historical Christ only these two dramatic aspects appear: that of the defenseless and inoffensive child and that of a humiliated and conquered victim. He was born and he died, but he never lived."<sup>55</sup>); (3) a Christ of the "mysteries," possessing magical powers especially in the sacraments; (4) a Christ as "celestial monarch," rich and powerful, adorned with gold, like the masters and lords of the New World (pope and king and, through them, the landholders, colonizers, etc.); (5) a nonviolent, nonexploitative Christ of benefaction, kind and paternal, a "philanthropic monarch" using the tactic of love to win conversion but still legitimating the dominance and exploitation of the conquest.

It is clear, in the diversity and complexity of these images, that some would prove more appropriate for the oppressors and some for the oppressed. The failure to recognize even the possibility of Christ incarnating himself by transforming the Indian culture from within led to the massive rejection of everything indigenous and the imposition of a foreign Christ. Trinidad suggests that only three Christologies remained possible

<sup>53</sup> Enrique Jordá Arias, "El Cristo velado del pueblo andino," *Pastoral Andina* 12 (1975) 15-25.

<sup>54</sup> The ideas in this section on the Spanish Christ are taken from Saul Trinidad, "Cristología-Conquista-Colonización," in *Cristianismo y sociedad* 43-44 (Buenos Aires: Tierra Nueva, 1975) 12-28. He refers to John A. Mackay, *The Other Spanish Christ* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1932).

<sup>55</sup> Trinidad, "Cristología" 14.

for the Indians: (1) a Christology of resignation symbolized by the crucified Christ and the sorrowful Mother: this is a Christology in which the impotence of the oppressed is interiorized as inevitable, and so it functions to sacralize the system of conquest and oppression; (2) a Christology of domination symbolized by a glorious Christ, rich and powerful, adorned with gold and silver, and an image of the Virgin as *la conquistadora*: this is a Christology made inevitable by the fact that the god of the Indians was not able to prevent the profanation of his sanctuary, so homage was due to this new god; (3) a Christology of marginalization symbolized by the "marginalized Child": this is a Christology that creates the passive and conformist Indian, forever weak and immature and so in constant need of protection by "benefactors." Trinidad concludes by asking: In all of this, where is the "other Christ" of Luke 4:16-21?

Pedro Negre Rigol says that we need to liberate the Christs of popular religiosity from colonial and neocolonial domination. The question is how. A real possibility exists that could be surfaced in the ironic sense of popular culture which expresses both the originality of the people and a subliminal protest that is potentially subversive.<sup>56</sup> He notes that Jesus used irony to great effect both to avoid co-optation by the "enlightened" socio-religious structure of the powerful and to carry out a religious transformation that was truly revolutionary and indeed contrary to much of the popular religiosity of his day as well. What is ironic in Jesus' ministry is that people look with their eyes but do not see, listen with their ears but do not hear, i.e., they do not recognize the time of their visitation, because they are searching in the wrong places and so do not perceive the kingdom already in their midst. There is no more ironic scene in all the Gospel literature than the wise men from the East discovering the one who had been born king of the Jews "seated on the knees of a peasant woman, a worker's wife" in a peasant worker's rustic hut (Mt 2:1-12).<sup>57</sup> The good news proclaimed by the Eastern sages does not appear as such to the religious and political establishment of Jerusalem and so they fail to participate in the discovery of their own king, the one who is already in their midst. Those who had seen and recognized the light of Christ in the East embarked on a long journey westward to a "city on a mountain," only to discover that the guardians of the city did not see what they saw. Thus, after their unique discovery, they departed alone and returned to their own country by another way.

<sup>56</sup> Pedro Negre Rigol, "Cristología popular: Alienación o ironía," in *Cristianismo y sociedad* 43-44 29-43.

<sup>57</sup> Aloysius Pieris, "Contemporary Ecumenism and Asia's Search for Christ," *Teaching All Nations* 13 (1976) 30.

I find a remarkable similarity, fraught with possibilities for our discussion here, between what Aloysius Pieris, a Jesuit from Sri Lanka, says about Asia's search for Christ and what José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930), one of the national heroes of the Peruvian social conscience, had to say about the situation of the Indian in Peru. Pieris is seeking that which is truly indigenous to Asia. He finds it in a subtle combination of contemplation and action that he calls "Buddhist socialism." The Asian search for Christ is a complex process that involves "four different and, at times, contradictory movements," two "religious" and two "secular." The religious forces are: (1) "*gnostic soteriologies* represented by the higher forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc.," and (2) "*biblical theism*: Islam and Christianity." The secular forces are: (1) "*Western technocracy* based on the capitalist model of development," and (2) "*socialism*, particularly of the *Marxist* variety." It is most interesting to note how he sees the relationship among the four in terms of Asia's image of her own destiny.

. . . liberation of Asia lies on the other, unseen, side of an imminent convergence (or collision?) of *gnostic soteriology* and *socialist revolution*, these being the two major forces, apparently antithetical to each other, but equally opposed to their common enemy, the *techniculture* of the *capitalist* mould, a hostile force which the *church* would do well to dissociate herself from, if she wants to join Asia in her quest for total liberation.<sup>58</sup>

Buddhist gnosticism and Marxist socialism, "spiritualism" and "activism," an individual's interior renewal and the structural transformation of society are combined in a unique way in that inviolable locus of the Asian mystique, the hearts of peasants, as both Mahatma Gandhi and Chairman Mao recognized. "The Indian sage made Hinduism socially meaningful; the Chinese leader made Marxism spiritually challenging." Yet, each was so highly successful because each, in his own way, located Asia's future in the deeply-rooted experience of her past: the hands and hearts of the rural masses. "The star that appeared in the East has led both these Asian pilgrims to the same shrine: the rustic hut of the peasant worker." Thus what constitutes "the Asian face of Christ" will only be discovered at the point of confluence of the gnostic and socialist streams "in the *Asian peasantry* which truly embodies the spirit of Asia." Only at this point does a Christology truly indigenous to Asia become even a possibility. If Western Christianity wishes to participate in this discovery, it must be divorced from Western technocracy.

The similarities to the current struggle with capitalist imperialism in Latin America seem patent. Our concern at the moment is less global

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 31 (italics in text).



than the whole continent. It is the experience of the Indian in the Andes, specifically in Peru. Several complicating factors make even this limitation extremely complex. The first is the unique, distinctive fact that Latin America is "the only group of nations in the Third World that is generally Christian and culturally mixed."<sup>59</sup> This means that the experience of the Indians is irrevocably conditioned by the "Christianizing" process of colonialism. The second factor is the existence of at least four cultures in three distinct regions of Peru.<sup>60</sup> Although there is obviously intermingling, one can generally distinguish (1) a modern (Western technocratic) and traditional (transitional from colonial to neocolonial) culture primarily located in the coastal region and consisting for the most part of *blanco* (Spanish) and mestizo ethnic roots; (2) an Andean culture located in the highlands of the Andes (most clearly defined around Cuzco, the ancient capital of the Inca) and consisting for the most part of Indians, though not without a strong representation of mestizo ethnic roots; and (3) a selvatic culture located in the jungle, especially around the Amazon, which represents a separate and independent cultural problem. Finally, given the above two factors, it will be difficult to draw clear and distinct lines between a truly indigenous experience and the other influences mentioned, especially the two most powerful factors of Spanish Catholicism and Western technocracy. Nonetheless, we can speak in generally accurate terms of the differences between the urbanization problem<sup>61</sup> and the agrarian problem in relation to popular religiosity. As Mariátegui notes, the problem of the Indian is a problem of land.

"All that survives of Tawantinsuyo is the Indian."<sup>62</sup> Thus the concern is not so much with the religion of the Inca as such but with that which has survived and so is effective in the present. The past can be thought of as an origin but never as a program. "The blow that felled the pagan

<sup>59</sup> Juan Carlos Scannone, "Theology, Popular Culture, and Discernment," in *Frontiers* 225. Unlike Pieris, he sees a positive mediating value that this cultural mix can have between Western tradition and the Third World.

<sup>60</sup> Manuel Marzal, "Evangelio y mitos populares: ¿Es posible una iglesia indígena en el Perú?" in *Panorama de la teología latinoamericana* 2 (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1975) 143-60. José Carlos Mariátegui offers a similar analysis in his essay on "Regionalism and Centralism" in *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (Austin: University of Texas, 1971) 153-81.

<sup>61</sup> For an interesting study of popular religiosity in an urban setting, see Raul Vidales and Tokihiro Kudó, *Práctica religiosa y proyecto histórico* 1-2 (Lima: CEP, 1975, 1980).

<sup>62</sup> Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays* 274. For an interesting analysis of the contemporary religiosity of the Quechua Indians in the southern Andes of Peru (near Puno), see Manuel Marzal, *Estudios sobre religión campesina* (Lima: PUC, 1977); T. Mattingly Garr, *Cristianismo y religión quechua en la prelatura de Ayaviri* (Cuzco: Instituto de Pastoral Andina, 1972).

gods destroyed the theocracy. What survived of this religion in the Indian soul could not be a metaphysical concept, but agrarian rituals, incantations, and pantheism."<sup>63</sup> What is important here, it seems to me, is the Indian's closeness to and identification with the land. If you disengage the Indian from his land, you disengage him from his tradition, his family, his very spirit. The Indian of Peru, analogously to the peasant of Asia, combines an agrarian spirituality with a practical socialism. It is worth noting that the strongest element to survive the destruction of the Inca religion (which primarily worshipped Inti, the Sun) is the goddess of the earth, the Pachamama (Earth Mother), who still receives tribute in the practice of what is called *pago a la tierra*, a payment to the earth by pouring part of the contents of whatever one is drinking upon the earth.<sup>64</sup> There is in this a profound feeling for the sacredness of the land, which also comes to expression in a strong sense of communal ownership, what Mariátegui calls "practical socialism." Even where this has been taken away by the system of feudal colonialism, the deeply-rooted values survive: "in Indian villages where families are grouped together that have lost the bond of their ancestral heritage and community work, hardy and stubborn habits of cooperation and solidarity still survive that are the empirical expression of a communist spirit."<sup>65</sup>

This communist spirit is agricultural, not industrial. The promise of Yahweh to the Israelites that they would inherit the land is an inalienable right to which the Indian must lay claim if his spirit is to survive. "We are not satisfied to assert the Indian's right to education, culture, progress, love, and heaven. We begin by categorically asserting his right to land."<sup>66</sup> This is an assertion, however, that the Indian must make and is making for himself. A powerful and ironic image of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel has profound resonance in this context. It is the image of the "meek king" (*basileus praūs*: Mt 21:5) mounted on an ass, coming to take possession of the land (Zion). If for the Asians there is irony in the King of the Jews sitting upon the knee of a peasant woman in a laborer's rustic hut, perhaps for the Indians of Peru it lies in the blessing of the meek (*hoi praeis*) who shall inherit the land (Mt 5:3). But *praūs* does not carry the connotation of "meek" in English, i.e., passive, conformist, fearful. Only Matthew uses the term and it has dynamic Christological

<sup>63</sup> Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays* 127.

<sup>64</sup> Marzal, *Estudios* 109.

<sup>65</sup> Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays* 58.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 31. In the report by Juanita Vásquez, Manuel Amboya, and Gregorio Vásquez ("Indigenous Mobilization and the Theology of Liberation," in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* 38-45), the most striking factor is the emphasis upon possessing the land and its equation with true power. It is considered to be a fundamental element in the process of conscientization and identification by the Indians themselves.

implications. In the only other use, Jesus cries out: "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek (*praūs*) and humble (*tapeinos*) of heart, and you will find rest. . ." (Mt 11:28-29). Here we are at the very heart of the gospel. For Matthew, throughout his Gospel, Jesus is not only the one who proclaims the Father's will, but more profoundly he is the one who embodies that will in a dynamic and active way. This is what *praūs* means in the total context of the gospel.<sup>67</sup> And the blessing of those who follow him in this way is that they shall indeed inherit the land, symbol of all the promises of God.

When the Quechua Indians of the southern Andes (near Puno) are asked "Who is Christ for you?" the most frequent response is *Cristo humilde*. When asked "How many do you know?" the answer is one or maybe two; for *humilde* is symbolically a highly-charged word. Such a designation is an honor reserved for the most respected people, those who are just, kind, and compassionate. It is, moreover, an ironic term; for, like their dances, which "mask" a deeper meaning, it expresses as well a hidden form of resistance to oppression.<sup>68</sup> Thus it is an ironic protest of the popular culture against the *status quo* and it implies a kind of imaginative challenge similar to the scene of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

In all of this the influence of Spanish mysticism upon the consciousness of the Indian must not be forgotten. The colonizing missionaries opposed the popular agrarian religion, and yet, wittingly or unwittingly, the consequent "Catholic" religiosity assimilated much of it by reason of Spanish Catholicism's appeal to the material, concrete nature of the Indian in its Masses and other devotions. The result, on the reverse side, has been a subtle assimilation by the Indians of a Spanish mysticism that is ambiguous: on the one hand, authoritarian and passive; on the other, incapable of ever separating the aspirations of socialist activism from a deeply contemplative spirituality that appreciates the movement of God in each and every movement of the earth, from the smallest leaf to the mightiest bird to the 'am ha'aretz, the lowly people of the land, claiming their birthright. Only the process of conscientization, the critical

<sup>67</sup> For the interpretation of *praūs* as dominating the Christology of Matthew, see Gerhard Barth, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law," in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. J. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 103 n. 1, 123, 129, 148, 158.

<sup>68</sup> The insight on the use of *humilde* is from a private conversation with Stephen Judd, a Maryknoll missionary working with popular Christian communities among the Quechua Indians near Puno. After *Cristo humilde*, the second most common response is *justo juez*, Christ as judge who will bring justice where it is lacking. Contrary to what might be expected, the favorite term of the liberation theologians, "Jesus Christ Liberator," has little or no meaning for the Indians, another indication of the European roots of the term.

appropriation of that heritage through a specific politico-communal commitment, will ensure that the Indian will have a future as well as a past.

*Popular Christian Communities: An Irruption of the Poor*

Where is Christ's power operative? The liberation theologians would say: in the memory of the poor, the oppressed, the marginated and despised, of those who have had "no voice" in history. But this memory, to have effect, must give rise to creative imagination, to the building of the kingdom by opening the future as real possibility. The "place" where this is happening in Latin America today is in the base communities, which are referred to either as "Christian" or as "ecclesial." It is, in Gutiérrez' terms, an "irruption of the poor," of the "absent ones" making their presence felt in the historical process of Latin America and in the churches.<sup>69</sup> To talk about the poor is to talk at one and the same time about collective solidarity and social conflict; in the context of Christian community, it is to talk about one and the same people as oppressed and believing, as caught in a situation of exploitation while possessing "an immense possibility for liberative faith," i.e., for "the truly fruitful and imaginative challenge" of contemplation in action that will transform history. The *comunidades cristianas de base* are giving rise to a new model of the Church: a Church springing from the "uninvited" (Lk 14:15-24 par.), from within the poor people who, by liberating themselves, are evangelizers of all nations (Mt 28:18-20). "Only these base-level Christian communities, rising up out of the oppressed but believing people, will be in a position to proclaim and live the values of the Kingdom in the very midst of the common masses who are fighting for their liberation. The practice of these communities continually leads them beyond themselves."<sup>70</sup> Conscientization creates minorities, as Segundo has noted, but these minorities cannot survive by turning in on themselves in an exclusivist sense. Arising from the poor, they are "evangelizing cadres" constantly in service to Christ poor in our needy fellow humans.

At least three elements strike me as essential for the historical effectiveness of such communities: politico-communal commitment, life-giving witness, and subversive joy. There is much one might say about the genesis and nature of popular Christian communities,<sup>71</sup> but in the final

<sup>69</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Irruption of the Poor in Latin America and the Christian Communities of the Common People," in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* 107-23.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 118.

<sup>71</sup> Besides *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, see J. B. Libanio, "Experiences with the Base Ecclesial Communities in Brazil," *LADOC* 12 (1981) 1-20.

analysis the real issue is one of historical effectiveness in the here-and-now. The most essential factor is a form of commitment I term politico-communal. It is an affective commitment to one another on all levels of communal interest—historical, cultural, social, economic, religious—that strives to be effective in the actual world. Such a commitment is by its very nature political as a form of organization among human beings, but it must give expression to concrete choices that will transform society. This is the position of Segundo that we have seen. The pedagogy of God is operative only in and through a specific political commitment in the concrete situation. “The God of Jesus, hidden in history, cannot be discovered by anyone who does not engage in the practice of justice, a practice looking forward to a new society and a new human being.”<sup>72</sup>

Such praxis involves specific ethico-political choices. Such choices in turn lead inevitably to life-giving witness, a bearing witness on behalf of life in all its fulness, touching every level of life but especially the most primary levels, by offering up one’s own life. For Sobrino, this witness on behalf of life “constitutes the deepest root of the church’s activity in Latin America.”<sup>73</sup> Giving up one’s life for others is the epitome of holiness. The efficacy of martyrdom is that it is a love that is concretized in history, that affirms the goodness of being human and proclaims the fullness of life in the face of its denial, death itself.

Such love gives rise to the “subversive joy of the poor.” Gutiérrez, in a striking passage, underlines the desperation of the oppressors, whose vile cruelty cannot even admit the existence of their victims’ bodies. The corpses themselves are subversive. “Those exercising domination fail to realize that it was the experience and crisis of the ‘empty tomb’ that enabled the friends of Jesus long ago, as it does his followers today, to comprehend the fullness of life of the risen one that conquers death completely.”<sup>74</sup> What will arise from these empty tombs and the effect they will have on subsequent history will only be known with the passage of time.

David Tracy observes that the classic of liberation theology will not be that of a text but of an event.<sup>75</sup> Of course, Jesus himself was first the

<sup>72</sup> Juan Hernández Pico, “The Experience of Nicaragua’s Revolutionary Christians,” in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* 72. He draws an interesting parallel between the “God of revolutionary Christians” as a “God hidden in history” and the “earth of non-believing revolutionaries” as also an “earth hidden in history.” The revolutionary desire for a new heaven and a new earth is, in the concrete order of decisive action, one and the same.

<sup>73</sup> Jon Sobrino, “The Witness of the Church in Latin America,” in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* 163.

<sup>74</sup> Gutiérrez, “The Irruption of the Poor” 112.

<sup>75</sup> Tracy, *Analogical* 398.

Christ-event who later came to narrated expression in the Gospels. There is always a dynamic prior to any textual expression. "It is the dynamics of a God who became poor first and foremost, rather than male or female, and who overcomes death to create a new humanity devoid of divisions by class, race, or sex (Gal. 3)."<sup>76</sup> Jesus as the ultimate symbol of Christian consciousness always transcends any attempt to bring him to expression, even that of calling him "Christ" and "Son of God." Each culture participates in its own unique way and therefore analogously in this Jesus who as symbol always remains primary.<sup>77</sup> The particular experience of Europe can no longer lay claim to an abstract universality; for the concrete and particular experience of Latin America, child of a European conqueror and Indian mother, must by its suffering for the sake of others complete in its own distinctive way what is still lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body (Col 1:24). The body of Christ in Latin America today images forth the face of a people in captivity, at one and the same time cruciformly aware of the crushing weight of their own impotence under the nails of oppression and yet daring to "have a dream," a yearning for freedom that refuses to accept the world as it is. Their prophetic voices cry for the right to be the active subjects of their own historico-cultural project. In doing so, they will unveil to the world their own proper face of Christ, a Christ that has been hidden for centuries.

In disagreement with Tracy, I do believe that this event will eventually come to textual expression. It must do so, lest we too easily and too conveniently forget the memory it embodies; but it will do so only after a long and complicated historical process of maturation at the "base," among the poor and oppressed people themselves, as Gutiérrez rightly insists. Jose Carlos Mariátegui, commenting on the development of an indigenous literature by those who embody its experience (especially César Vallejo, whom he calls "a mystic of poverty"), remarks: "Nor should one deny its vitality because it has so far failed to produce a masterpiece. A masterpiece can only flower in soil that has been amply fertilized by an anonymous multitude of mediocre works. The genius in art is usually not a beginning but the end result of a vast experience."<sup>78</sup> The same can be said of all authentic theology.

<sup>76</sup> Cora Ferro, "The Latin American Woman: The Praxis and Theology of Liberation," in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities* 35.

<sup>77</sup> Enrique Dussel, "Historical and Philosophical Presuppositions for Latin American Theology," in *Frontiers* 192, 194. On p. 195 he criticizes the "surreptitious pretension and ideological manipulation" of European theology, which "'consecrated' the theology of one culture as the 'universal' theology." On Jesus as the ultimate symbol of Christian consciousness, see Cook, *Jesus* 4-7.

<sup>78</sup> Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays* 269.