

## PROPHETIC-CRITICAL AND PRACTICAL- STRATEGIC TASKS OF THEOLOGY: HABERMAS AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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IN JANUARY of 1984, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger published a theological analysis of liberation theology in the Peruvian journal *Oiga de Lima*. Two months later, another Ratzinger article on the "phenomenon" of liberation theology was "leaked" to the press and appeared in a rather obscure Italian Catholic monthly *30 Giorni* ("30 Days"). Both articles were widely reported in the popular press as Rome's denunciation of liberation theology.<sup>1</sup>

The Ratzinger articles have now been followed up by a more formal Vatican declaration from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In the CDF *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* Ratzinger reaffirms and develops many of the critical themes set forth in his earlier articles while appearing to balance, to some extent, his basically negative assessment with a positive acknowledgment of the legitimate concerns and objectives of liberation theology. Thus, although expressing, in language as forthright as that of any liberation theologian, the view that "the church intends to condemn abuses, injustices, and attacks against freedom, wherever they occur . . . [and] intends to struggle, by her own means, for the defense and advancement of the rights of mankind, especially of the poor," the purpose of the Instruction is nevertheless made clear: to point out the "deviations" in certain forms of liberation theology, specifically those which use Marxist concepts "in an insufficiently critical manner."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "La teología de la liberación en debate," *Oiga de Lima*, Jan. 23, 1984. Cf. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza's discussion of this article along with a review of two books by Gustavo Gutiérrez in *Commonweal*, June 15, 1984, 375-77. The *30 Giorni* article, which Ratzinger later reportedly claimed was taken from his desk without his knowledge, was subsequently published in English under the title "From the Vatican, a Growing Concern" in the *National Catholic Register*, Aug. 5, 1984, 1 ff. Cf. also the accompanying commentary by Charlotte Hays, "Is Liberation Theology Heresy, or a Path to Freedom?"

<sup>2</sup> "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation," *Origins* 14 (1984-85) 193-204. Cf. Peter Hebblethwaite's analysis of the CDF Instruction, "Document Warns about Liberation Theology 'Abuses,' Does Not Condemn," *National Catholic Reporter*, Sept. 7, 1984, 1 ff. Unfortunately, although the CDF Instruction is ostensibly directed only to "certain forms of liberation theology," there will be a tendency on the part of some to read its critique as applying to certain aspects of all liberation theology.

Ratzinger not only charges liberation theology with deviations in theory but warns of the grave danger to faith which exists when such theology is used to encourage or support revolutionary political activity or class struggle. Liberation theology risks distorting the Christian message, according to Ratzinger, in two ways: by reduction and by subversion. It becomes reductive when it identifies Christian faith with particular historical forms of political praxis. This is evident, the CDF Instruction notes, in the "tendency to identify the kingdom of God and its growth with the human liberation movement" (IX, 3) and in the "confusion between the poor of the Scripture and the proletariat of Marx" (IX, 10), to cite two important examples. It becomes subversive when, once having adopted Marxist social analysis, liberation theologians are inexorably led to embrace Marxist ideology and political strategy as well (VIII). From that point on, as Ratzinger sees it, class struggle determines their thought and action, the church of the poor is pitted against the church of the rich, and the "people of God" are set at odds with the hierarchy (IX, 11).

The purpose of this essay is not to discuss Ratzinger's view of liberation theology. However, because the meaning as well as the truth of the charge that liberation theology is reductive and subversive rests on certain assumptions about the relationship between theory and praxis, science and action, theology and faith, the Ratzinger articles and the CDF Instruction serve to introduce and highlight the importance of this foundational question.

#### THE PROBLEM

In the first place, the charge that liberation theology is reductive follows from Ratzinger's claim that certain liberation theologians have "made a Marxist fundamental option."<sup>3</sup> It is a claim that only makes sense on the assumption, which Ratzinger seems to make, that Marxism is an integral system. Any use of Marxist social science by theologians thus implicates them in the materialistic and atheistic ideology of Marxism. In Latin America, as Gustavo Gutiérrez has pointed out, many liberation theologians do not make that assumption and have recently adopted Althusser's distinction between Marxist "science" and Marxist "ideology" as a way of distinguishing the *economic analysis* (which they accept as explaining their historical situation of dependence) from the *atheistic world view* (which they clearly reject as contrary to their Christian faith).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, both the scientific analysis and the ideological world view are further distinguished from a third aspect of Marxism, its

<sup>3</sup> Ratzinger, "From the Vatican, a Growing Concern," *National Catholic Register*, Aug. 5, 1984, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1973) 97.

revolutionary praxis or *political strategy* for transforming the world. While these aspects may be distinguished by some scholars, it is precisely the possibility of separating Marxist scientific analysis, atheistic world view, and political strategy that Ratzinger denies.<sup>5</sup> And yet, as Peter Hebblethwaite insightfully comments, this is less a matter of theological judgment than it is empirical and theoretical. "It is partly an empirical question—Has anyone managed to do it?—and partly an epistemological question—Can it theoretically be done?"<sup>6</sup> Both the empirical and epistemological questions (as well as a more specifically methodological question) of the relation between theory and praxis have been addressed by Jürgen Habermas in his attempt to provide a foundation for understanding the scientific character of Marxist critical theory and its relation to revolutionary political strategy.<sup>7</sup> The nature of the unity of Marxist theory and practice, as well as the unity of Christian theory and practice, is one of the major issues at the heart of the debate on liberation theology's "reductionist" (i.e., Marxist) tendencies.

In the second place, the claim that liberation theology is subversive raises still another question about the relationship of theory and praxis: the matter of primacy. The question of *how* theory and praxis are related (as distinct from the question of *whether* or not they can be separated) again has relevance for understanding not only Marxist theory and practice but Christian theory and practice as well, i.e., the relationship between reason (theory or science) and faith (praxis or action). What exactly the task of the scientist (Marxist theoretician or Christian theologian) is vis-à-vis the community of practitioners/believers is a question of fundamental importance for any science (theory) which is

<sup>5</sup> Whether Marxism is an integral (totalitarian) system has been a subject of debate within and without Marxism for some time. As Nicholas Lash observes, the insistence on Marxism as an integral system (a view similar to that taken by Ratzinger) can be traced back at least to Lenin's teacher Plekhanov. And although liberation theologians have given a paradoxical twist to Althusser's own distinction between Marxist science and Marxist ideology, Althusser himself regards true (scientific) Marxism as a closed and integral system. E. P. Thompson, on the other hand, distinguishes no less than four aspects of Marxism: doctrine, method, heritage, and tradition, further dividing the latter into a closed system of orthodoxy and an open system of investigation and critique. Cf. Lash, *A Matter of Hope: A Theologian's Reflections on the Thought of Karl Marx* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1981) 22–35.

<sup>6</sup> *National Catholic Reporter*, Sept. 7, 1984, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Habermas provides a summary statement of the "fragmentary and provisional" results (and remaining difficulties) from his threefold investigation of the relation between theory and praxis in the introductory article of *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon, 1973). There he distinguishes "1) the empirical aspect of the relationship between science, politics, and public opinion in advanced capitalistic social systems; 2) the epistemological aspects of the relation between knowledge and interest; 3) the methodological aspect of a social theory which aims at being capable of assuming the role of a critique" (3).

rooted in, and seeks to interpret, a lived tradition (praxis). To what extent does such a theory precede and promote praxis, and to what extent does it follow and reflect it?

The question of primacy has been discussed extensively by Marxist theoreticians, whose interpretations tend to run in two opposite directions, each building upon statements made by Marx himself. At one extreme is the "materialist" tendency to give primacy to praxis, subordinate consciousness to history, and interpret theory as a mere reflection of socioeconomic conditions. In short, this view affirms with Marx: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."<sup>8</sup> At the other extreme is the "idealist" tendency to give primacy to theory, emphasize the transformative power of ideas, and interpret theory as revolutionary consciousness. Marx's 11th "Thesis on Feuerbach" provides a "proof-text" for this interpretation: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps recognizing the inevitable dialectic of theory and praxis within the Marxist tradition, a further distinction has been made between two senses of praxis: "theory *for* practice" and "theory *of* practice." Lenin is seen as representative of the first approach and Gramsci the second. "In the first sense Marxism is viewed as a theory brought in by avant-garde leaders to guide workers. In the second sense Marxism is an expression of the workers' own praxis, of their own struggles and strategies."<sup>10</sup> In the first sense, theory has primacy in as much as it precedes and promotes praxis. In the second sense, praxis has primacy in as much as theory follows and reflects praxis.

Christian theologians have drawn similar distinctions in explaining the task of theology in its relation to faith. Ratzinger himself, in his critique of liberation theology, seems to regard theology fundamentally as a "theory *for* faith," that is, as a theory which precedes and promotes the praxis of faith. Liberation theology, in his view, claims as much for itself, presenting its own ideas as "a guide to praxis."<sup>11</sup> Yet a conflicting view of liberation theology's self-understanding in relation to praxis is also suggested by Ratzinger when he accuses it of overemphasizing praxis,

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, from the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), in Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (2nd ed.; New York: Norton, 1978) 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Marx-Engels Reader* 145.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur F. McGovern, *Marxism: An American Christian Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981) 180-81. McGovern cites Dick Howard's work *The Marxian Legacy* as the source of the distinction. He is critical of the first view because of its tendency to impose theory upon praxis in a way which negates the dialectic of thought and action that is the very meaning of praxis.

<sup>11</sup> Ratzinger, *National Catholic Register*, Aug. 5, 1984, 5.

making action not only primary but the "only decisive thing," to the point where theoretical truth is eschewed entirely and "ideas used for action" become "in the last analysis, interchangeable."<sup>12</sup> Ratzinger never adequately clarifies his own position regarding the relationship between liberation theology and Christian faith, theory and praxis, nor the view he wants to attribute to liberation theologians. Yet the primacy issue in conceptualizing the relation of theory and praxis is again at the very heart of the debate about the role of liberation theology in a revolutionary context. If, indeed, liberation theology gives primacy to praxis, it must answer the further question which any theory that reflects praxis faces: how it avoids becoming simply a rationalization of positions and commitments already taken.

Matthew Lamb has sketched a typology of not less than five different models of the theory-praxis relationship in Christian theology.<sup>13</sup> Among these, the first two, the "primacy of theory" and the "primacy of praxis" types, seem to characterize respectively the view Ratzinger himself holds and the view he attributes to liberation theology. If, indeed, that is the case, it would in itself go far towards explaining much of the recent criticism being directed at liberation theologians by Vatican theologians such as Ratzinger; for, as Lamb characterizes them, the two are clearly nondialectical and opposing types. Yet it is questionable whether liberation theologians themselves would accept such a nondialectical conception of the relation of their own theological reflection and the praxis of faith.

Perhaps Ratzinger himself would agree that any theory which is at once grounded in practice and conceived with practical intent (i.e., which both begins and ends in practice) develops in some dialectical relation to praxis and should understand itself as such. It could certainly be argued that one of the characteristics of contemporary Christian theology—not just liberation theology—is that in its self-understanding it is so grounded and conceived. And if Christian theology, because of its practical intent, can properly be considered a self-reflective critical theory of the Christian religion, then, I think, Habermas' methodological reflections on critical theory and praxis should prove helpful for understanding the relationship of theology and faith in a way which clarifies, if it does not resolve, some of the conflicts in the current debate on liberation theology. At any rate, it is a question which any theology that has become critically self-conscious of its foundations needs to address.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 65–88. Lamb's five types correspond to the five models of Christian theology David Tracy developed in his work on fundamental theology *Blessed Rage for Order*. Lamb's types are called (1) "The Primacy of Theory," (2) "The Primacy of Praxis," (3) "The Primacy of Faith-Love," (4) "Critical Theoretic Correlations," and (5) "Critical Praxis Correlations."

## HABERMAS' CRITICAL THEORY

While a "dogmatic" approach to either the Christian or the Marxist traditions, which views theory and praxis as a nondialectical unity and regards tradition as a closed system of orthodoxy, would seem to rule out any real dialogue between them, an alternative "critical" consciousness has, in fact, developed within both Christianity and Marxism. This critical approach reconceptualizes the unity of theory and praxis and understands tradition as open to investigation and critique and as subject to change. Habermas' development of a "critical theory" can be understood, first, as a response within the Marxist tradition to the limitations of dogmatic orthodoxy and the breakdown of the unity of theory and practice. It was the failure of Marxist practice to coincide with the expectations derived from Marxist theory which led the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school and later Habermas to regard as urgent the need to reformulate the relationship between theory and practice.<sup>14</sup>

Habermas' *epistemological* investigation of the relation between theory and practice and his distinction of three kinds of scientific knowledge (empirical, hermeneutical, and critical) shed some light on the question of the integral character of Christianity and Marxism, because they provide a foundation for appreciating the distinctive form of rationality appropriate to any scientific theory grounded in practice and developed with practical intent. His *methodological* investigation of the problems specific to self-reflective and emancipative theories of the critical type and his distinction between three levels of critique (theory formation, process of enlightenment, and strategic action) further help clarify the role of a critical theory in promoting and reflecting praxis.

*Knowledge and Human Interest*

In his epistemological investigations Habermas sets out to show the intrinsic relation between knowledge and "human interests," understanding "interests" not psychologically but quasi-transcendentally, as deep-seated invariants which constitute the a priori structure of human knowing. His aim is to unveil the objectivist illusion of "pure" disinterested knowledge and challenge the reductivist tendencies in positivistic accounts of scientific method. Such tendencies he discerns as prevalent in the dominant (orthodox) Marxist tradition and, in fact, traces back to Marx himself.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980) 19–20.

<sup>15</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1971) 7–63. Cf. also Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: MIT, 1978), and John B. Thompson and David Held, eds., *Habermas: Critical Debates* (Cambridge: MIT, 1982).

Through a Kantian-type transcendental reflection on the conditions of possibility of knowledge, Habermas seeks to demonstrate the irreducibility of several forms of scientific inquiry, each governed by a particular kind of "interest." He distinguishes three "knowledge-constitutive interests" (technical interest, practical interest, and emancipatory interest) and three corresponding forms of scientific rationality (instrumental reason, interpretative reason, and critical reason).

1) *Technical interest* in controlling one's natural environment grounds the *instrumental* rationality proper to "empirical-analytic" sciences. Such sciences presuppose a social context of "purposive-rational action" or labor, in which reality is experienced as that which is capable of being manipulated. According to Habermas, scientific knowledge constituted by an interest in technical control (*instrumental praxis*) is perfectly legitimate in itself. However, he attempts to show, through a critique of the work of Mach, Comte, and Pierce, how a "scientistic self-understanding" within positivist philosophy of science has led to the abandonment of self-reflection (i.e., a loss of critical consciousness of the limits of such knowledge) and to a false identification of empirical-analytic science with knowledge itself.<sup>16</sup>

2) *Practical interest* in mutual understanding makes possible the "historical-hermeneutic sciences" and grounds the *interpretative* rationality proper to these sciences. Habermas seeks to elucidate, primarily through an analysis of the work of Dilthey, the irreducible character of the cultural sciences. Such knowledge presupposes a framework of "communicative action" or interaction, and a social medium of language. Here again, however, Habermas wants to clarify the limits of knowledge governed by an interest in intersubjective understanding (*communicative praxis*). Historical-hermeneutic knowledge, though legitimate in itself, is susceptible to distortion. Thus he is critical of attempts to universalize hermeneutic understanding for exceeding the limits of validity established by practical interest.<sup>17</sup> Here the loss of critical consciousness means a tendency to overlook the fact that language is not only a medium of communication but can become a medium of domination and social control. A tradition, in other words, can become oppressive and its interpretation ideological. Such conditions require and give rise to a third form of knowledge: critique.

<sup>16</sup> Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* 71-139.

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*," in *Zur Logik der Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) 251-90; English tr. in Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy, eds., *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1977) 335-63. The ensuing "debate" between Habermas and Gadamer on this issue has been discussed extensively. Besides McCarthy, *Critical Theory* 187-93, cf. Anthony Giddens, *Studies in Social and Political Theory* (London: Hutchinson, 1977) 135-64.

3) *Emancipatory interest* in disclosing and overcoming forms of oppression aims at the pursuit of reflection as such and grounds what Habermas calls the "critical social sciences" and the distinctive form of *critical rationality* proper to them. Such knowledge takes the form of an analysis of power and ideology which seeks emancipation from unrecognized dependencies and relations of oppression. It thus presupposes social conditions in which action and communication are systematically distorted, while at the same time assuming the possibility of transcending such conditions from within by an act of critical reflection in which knowledge and freedom coincide. The concern of the social sciences, in other words, is ideology critique and liberation (*emancipative praxis*).

What distinguishes critical rationality, according to Habermas, is the dialectical unity of knowledge and interest (theory and praxis), i.e., the way critical theory consciously includes a cognitive interest in freedom as a constitutive aspect of self-reflection. While empirical-analytic and historical-hermeneutic sciences do not consciously include a cognitive interest in technical control or mutual understanding, Habermas argues that "the critique which Marx developed as a theory of society and Freud as metapsychology are distinguished precisely by incorporating in their consciousness an interest which directs knowledge, an interest in emancipation . . ." <sup>18</sup> In an attempt to show just how it is possible to transcend conditions of distortion and oppression by a self-reflective process of critique in which knowledge and liberation coincide, Habermas undertakes a reconstruction of the foundations of critical theory (i.e., Marxist ideology-critique and Freudian psychoanalysis). His insight regarding the dialectical bond between theory and praxis—whereby praxis determines the conditions for achieving knowledge, yet is dependent on those same cognitive processes—underlies his effort to account for the real meaning of critical reflection and its significance vis-à-vis tradition.

What Habermas and other critical theorists have done to establish the role of critical consciousness within the Marxist tradition, contemporary theologians have carried forward within the Christian tradition. Edward Schillebeeckx and Charles Davis, among others, have been quite explicit in drawing upon Habermas' epistemological foundations for the hermeneutical sciences and the critical sciences, to characterize the twofold

<sup>18</sup> *Theory and Practice* 9. Habermas believes that neither Marx nor Freud recognized the distinctive unity of insight and emancipation in the critical theories they developed, and they consequently underestimated their own achievements and sought to account for the scientific character of their respective theories on the model of empirical-analytic sciences. Cf. *Knowledge and Human Interests* 44–47.



task of Christian theology as "historical-hermeneutic interpretation" and "critical reflection."<sup>19</sup>

Because Christianity is a living tradition, a historical praxis, which communicates meaning, it requires and gives rise to hermeneutical reflection. A "practical interest" in sharing Christian faith (i.e., communicative praxis) thus generates and grounds the interpretative task of theology. But because the Christian tradition, as any tradition, is also subject to distortion, i.e., can become a praxis which conveys nonsense as well as meaning, it demands and gives rise to critical reflection. An "emancipative interest" in achieving freedom from ideological distortion and oppression (i.e., emancipative praxis) thus generates and grounds the critical task of theology. Christian theology, then, is both hermeneutical and critical. It provides not only an interpretation which retrieves the meaning and truth of the Christian tradition, but a critique which unmasks its illusions and distortions. Indeed, only if a tradition contains within itself resources for critical reflection are there grounds for distinguishing a theology (theory) which simply reflects or mirrors praxis (i.e., which rationalizes positions already taken) and a theology (theory) which critically reflects praxis (i.e., which provides a rational account of positions already taken). As Davis observes, the question whether or not critique or emancipatory self-reflection is intrinsic to the Christian tradition has been an issue for theologians since the Enlightenment.<sup>20</sup> The essence of all criticism of religion has been that it is incapable of such self-reflection.

Beyond this, the significance of Habermas' distinction between historical-hermeneutic consciousness and critical consciousness (and his attempt to reconstruct the foundations of critical theory) extends to the question of any tradition's capacity for self-transcendence and interaction with other traditions. If the unity of a tradition (e.g., Marxist or Christian) is a nondialectical unity of theory and praxis, then not only would that tradition be uncritically dogmatic in its self-understanding, but meaningful dialogue with alternative traditions would seem to be

<sup>19</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1974) 102-55; Charles Davis, *Theology and Political Society* (Cambridge: University Press, 1980) 51-74. Other theological appropriations of Habermas' critical theory for clarifying questions of method in theology include Helmut Peukert, *Science, Action and Fundamental Theology: Towards a Theology of Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT, 1984); Rudolf J. Siebert, *From Critical Theory of Society to Theology of Communicative Praxis* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1979); Dermot Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1984); Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity* (n. 13 above).

<sup>20</sup> Davis, *Theology* 73.

precluded. For any such dogmatic, integral, or totalitarian tradition, the hermeneutic circle would be closed. Then, only a Marxist (practitioner/believer) could understand and engage in Marxist theory, for such a self-understanding would require the acceptance of Marxist praxis. And only a Christian (practitioner/believer) could understand and engage in Christian theology, for again such theoretical self-reflection would necessitate the acceptance of Christian praxis. What Habermas' epistemological reflections suggest, I think, is an alternative conceptualization of the theory-praxis relationship, one which makes critical self-consciousness within a tradition, and therefore dialogue among traditions, a possibility.

### *Aspects of Emancipatory Knowledge*

Habermas undertook further methodological reflections on the social sciences because he recognized that the very fact that critical-emancipatory theory is self-reflective constitutes a changed relation to experience and requires that it include a kind of "methodological inner view" of its own relationship to praxis.<sup>21</sup> In order to clarify some of the methodological issues which arose concerning the unity of theory and praxis in an account of self-reflection which identifies emancipatory interest and critical knowledge, and in order to respond to certain unanswered questions regarding the political application of a theory conceived with practical intent, Habermas, in his foundational reconstruction of critical theory, distinguished three levels at which critique functions, and he indicated how each is governed by different social contexts and rational criteria.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Habermas, *Theory and Practice* 10. He also recognized the problems involved in constructing a critical theory which claims to provide a transcendental reflection upon its own conditions of possibility, and acknowledged the importance of distinguishing between "critical self-reflection," which makes unconscious aspects of experience conscious in a way that has practical consequences, and "transcendental reflection," which renders explicit the operations of critical self-consciousness. Marxist social analysis and Freudian psychoanalysis are critical theories in the first sense; Habermas' own critical theory is such in the second sense. In other words, Habermas' transcendental reflections constitute a critical theory of critical theories. Cf. "A Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 3 (1973) 182-85.

<sup>22</sup> Habermas, *Theory and Practice* 10-40. Cf. also McCarthy, *Critical Theory* 207-13, and Davis, *Theology* 71-73. One of the unanswered questions was Gadamer's: How appropriate is the analogy between the physician-patient model in a psychoanalytic context and the critic-society model in a social context? In other words, how does the critical theorist transcend the conditions of his own tradition and so attain the privileged perspective that enables him to render an interpretation of that tradition which enlightens and liberates others? Cf. Hans Georg Gadamer, "Reply to Habermas," in Joseph Bleicher, ed., *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics As Method, Philosophy, and Critique* (Boston: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1980).

There is, first, the *formation and development of critical theories* which are advanced and argued in "scientific discourse." At this level the criteria of rational discussion alone pertain for testing the legitimacy of a theory. Yet, while such theoretical criteria can result in the falsification of a theory, Habermas argues that a critical theory can never be confirmed or verified at this level. Verification takes place in self-reflective praxis, i.e., in the successful application of a critical theory to the process of enlightenment. At the second level, then, what Habermas calls the *organization of processes of enlightenment*, the appropriate model of interaction is "therapeutic discourse." An interpretation is presented which is self-authenticated as it is appropriated in a self-reflective process of emancipative understanding. Emancipative knowledge is validated, in other words, by those who recognize themselves in a given interpretation. Only at this level can theory be said to "guide" praxis, and then, only to the extent that it initiates a process of critical self-emancipation. At the third level of critique, *political strategic action*, Habermas contends, the model of interaction is "practical discourse," and the criteria for validity is the consensus of participants. In spite of its practical intent, in other words, no theory can guide or justify praxis at the level of strategic decision-making. Practical questions of that sort cannot be settled a priori. Here there is no risk-free or privileged access to truth, no substitute for engagement in practical dialogue. Thus, for Habermas, it is important to distinguish two forms of praxis, the process of enlightenment and the organization of action which follows:

While the theory legitimizes the work of enlightenment . . . [it can] by no means legitimize the risky decisions of strategic action. Decisions for the political struggle cannot at the outset be justified theoretically and then carried out organizationally. The sole possible justification at this level is consensus aimed at in practical discourse . . .<sup>23</sup>

If Habermas' epistemological insight regarding knowledge and interest elucidates the distinctive tasks of historical-hermeneutic knowledge and critical-emancipative knowledge, and has been found helpful in clarifying the twofold interpretative and critical tasks of Christian theology, his further methodological reflections on the theory-praxis relation in critical social theory suggest how theology as critique functions in dialectical relation to praxis in three distinct social contexts. Davis has drawn out some of the implications in Habermas' account of the levels at which critical theory functions (theory formation, consciousness raising, and strategic action) for clarifying the tasks of a critical theology. He sees those tasks as, first, the development of a critical theory (theory construc-

<sup>23</sup> Habermas, *Theory and Practice* 33.

tion) of society and history, and second, the promotion of the process of critical self-reflection (process of enlightenment) within the Christian community. Whatever political decisions (strategic actions) follow from such a critically self-enlightened Christian community could not be legitimated theoretically in advance. This could only be achieved by a practical consensus reached through free and open discussion among the participants themselves. What this indicates, as far as Davis is concerned, is the importance of creating conditions for such practical dialogue within the Christian community.<sup>24</sup>

In all this I agree with Davis. What he does not make sufficiently clear, however, in terms of the foundational question raised here, namely, how to conceptualize the dialectical unity of theory and praxis in Christianity, is (a) that the first-level task of theory formation (theological construction) is already conditioned to some extent by the historical praxis of the community from which it arises, and (b) that although theology *precedes* and guides the praxis of faith in as much as it initiates critically emancipative reflection (i.e., raises consciousness) within the community, theology also has a reflective task which can only *follow* the strategic action of the community once it has taken place. The former could be called theology's prophetic-critical task, the latter theology's practical-strategic task. If these are some of the implications that follow from Habermas' reconstruction of critical theory, they have a direct bearing on how one conceptualizes the critical task of Christian theology.

1) *Social science and the formation of critical theories.* In constructing a critical theory of society, a Christian theologian may draw upon and utilize social-scientific analysis. Indeed, as Schillebeeckx makes clear, he must do so, since the gospel itself offers no privileged knowledge in such matters and its inspiration is powerless and ineffective without the mediation of social-scientific analysis and interpretation.<sup>25</sup> And even if one agrees with Miguez Bonino that the choice of particular socioanalytic tools is itself conditioned to some extent by historical and economic factors,<sup>26</sup> theological use of social science is not thereby uncritical. There

<sup>24</sup> Davis, *Theology* 73-74. Schillebeeckx makes a similar point when he states: "No attempt should be made to devise a new theology without first creating the sociological and therefore also ecclesiological conditions for that theology" (*Understanding of Faith* 142-43).

<sup>25</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus As Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 782.

<sup>26</sup> José Miguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 46-47. While admittedly oversimplified, in Miguez Bonino's view there are basically two options with respect to the social sciences: functionalist sociologies, which understand society as a harmoniously functioning organism and reflect a vision "from the top"; and dialectical sociologies, which understand society as a structure of contradictions and conflicts and reflect a vision "from below." While theory cannot legitimate either approach, he believes the dialectical approach corresponds more adequately to the concerns of a Christian perspective that has opted for solidarity with the poor.

will be claims made on the basis of social analysis which can only be discussed at the level of what Habermas has called "scientific discourse." To argue the legitimacy of a particular social scientific theory at this level is neither to endorse nor to condemn a particular social praxis.

Solving tactical questions and selecting appropriate strategies is a matter for "practical discourse" and can only be resolved by those engaged in particular concrete social struggles. At the level of scientific discourse, the goal is "true statements" and should be distinguished from the goal of practical discourse, "prudent decisions," which occurs at a third level of critique. But before strategic action aimed at emancipation can take place, a second level of critique is necessary, where the goal is neither true statements nor prudent decisions but "authentic insights."<sup>27</sup> Here the praxis-oriented task of critical theology begins.

2) *Prophetic-critical theology and the organization of processes of enlightenment.* By interpreting and applying a critical theory of society in a way which raises consciousness and brings enlightened self-reflection, theological critique moves to a second level, where the appropriate model of interaction is what Habermas has called "therapeutic discourse." Here the relation of partners in dialogue is asymmetrical, since distorted consciousness or ideological blindness in some form is a presupposition for this kind of communication. Whether in exercising this prophetic-critical task the Christian theologian will refer, as explicitly as the Old Testament prophets of Israel did, to the confusion, blindness, or even oppressed consciousness of the community, the need for enlightenment or critical self-consciousness would seem to be a precondition for any prophetic-critical theology.

This does not mean that a theologian exercising a prophetic-critical function within the Christian community assumes a privileged perspective on the truth. On the contrary, the validity of any presumed critical interpretation will be judged by its effectiveness in promoting critical self-consciousness within the community, a process which is self-authenticating. Verification of a prophetic-critical theology, in other words, is finally a practical matter of achieving authentic insight. This is the point of Habermas' distinction between the specification of critical analysis of a given set of social circumstances and the appropriation of these reflexively by those to whose circumstances they refer. Theological critique at this level can guide the praxis of enlightenment, but the process of achieving a critically liberating self-consciousness is something which must be accomplished by the community itself.

3) *Practical-strategic theology and the political struggle.* Critical theology operates at a third level in performing its practical-strategic task. It originates in the praxis of a Christian community to the extent that the

<sup>27</sup> Habermas, *Theory and Practice* 32.

community has become critically aware of its situation of distortion and/or oppression and is moved to take action aimed at changing this situation. Here the appropriate choice of tactics is a matter of prudent decision-making to be arrived at by a consensus of those engaged in "practical discourse." Theology exercises its practical-strategic task reflectively after the community has acted upon the gospel mandate in a way deemed appropriate to a specific social context, whether this be through reformist or revolutionary measures. At this level, in other words, the critical task is not to promote a form of political praxis but rather to provide a rational critique of action already taken.

#### APPLICATION TO LIBERATION THEOLOGY

What has been said of critical theology in general now needs to be specified in terms of liberation theology. In other words, if liberation theology, as any theology, is both a hermeneutic and a critique of the Christian religious tradition, how does Habermas' account of the threefold structure of critique help to clarify how such a theology fulfils its critical task in a revolutionary context? Furthermore, how does it provide a framework for evaluating the criticisms which have been made regarding liberation theology's allegedly reductive and/or subversive tendencies? While generalizations about liberation theologians are not especially helpful in this regard, an examination of the writings of two of the more influential Latin American liberation theologians, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Juan Luis Segundo, reveals, I believe, that while they have not explicitly adopted the thought of Habermas, their view of the critical tasks of theology has affinities to, and is illustrated by, the threefold structure of critique outlined above.

1) *Liberation theology and scientific analysis.* Liberation theologians seek to construct a critical theory of the socioeconomic conditions of Third World countries and recognize the need for the mediation of social-scientific analysis. And although they have not, as a group, adopted Marxist scientific analysis as an exclusive or privileged tool,<sup>28</sup> Segundo, Gutiérrez, and others have employed elements of Marxist or class-struggle analysis. The use of Marxist scientific categories, however, has been neither uncritical nor unqualified when discussed at the level of scientific discourse. In this context Segundo considers the relative merits and limitations of Marxist analysis. His own criticism of orthodox Marxist sociology includes the claim that it is inconsistent in its application of the concept of ideology to religious phenomena, and that it is overly deterministic and mechanistic in its tendency to ignore the relative

<sup>28</sup> As McGovern points out, not one of the 13 authors writing in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America* speaks of Marxism as an essential tool for analysis.

autonomy of the superstructural levels in its methodology.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, Segundo acknowledges that final verification of a social-scientific theory is not something that can be established by means of rational proof in any positivistic sense. Scientific discourse, in other words, is not simply a matter of generating hypotheses to be empirically verified quantitatively.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that liberation theologians appropriate certain categories of Marxist social science does not in itself necessarily determine their position on practical issues of political strategy. When Gutiérrez emphasizes the importance of class-struggle analysis, for instance, this does not imply his acceptance of Marxist revolutionary strategy nor his endorsement of violent political struggle. It is one thing to speak of "class struggle" and mean a social reality, a fact of life as revealed by a particular form of analysis; it is quite another to speak of "class struggle" and mean a strategy for social change, a tactic for overcoming class division. As Gutiérrez points out in commenting on the French bishops' statement that "the class struggle is first of all a fact which no one can deny," those who speak of class struggle do not necessarily advocate it.<sup>31</sup>

2) *Dialectic of theory and praxis.* Liberation theology (as a critical theory of and for the Christian faith) will be misrepresented if not understood in dialectical relation with the praxis it serves and reflects. In performing its prophetic-critical task, liberation theology functions as a critical theory which precedes and promotes the praxis of faith, but the praxis it promotes is the praxis of liberating self-reflection on the part of the Christian community, or what Gutiérrez and Segundo, following Paulo Freire, characterize as "conscientization." On the other hand, in carrying out its practical-strategic task, liberation theology functions as a critical theory which follows and reflects the praxis of the Christian community, and here the praxis includes strategic activities and pastoral involvement in the political process.

The prophetic-critical task of conscientization involves a process of enlightenment brought about by a prophetic *annunciation* of the good news of God's kingdom and a critical *denunciation* of every dehumanizing social condition which is contrary to the universal brotherhood, justice, and peace of that kingdom. To announce the gospel is to proclaim the present reality of God's love in the world and promote an awareness of

<sup>29</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1976) 58-60. Segundo devotes three entire chapters of his more recent *Faith and Ideologies* (New York: Orbis, 1984) to a critical examination of certain "problematic aspects of Marxist thought" (177-248).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 62-64.

<sup>31</sup> *A Theology of Liberation* 274.

the dignity of all human beings, who together are called to become active subjects of their own history and thus participate in the fulfilment of God's kingdom. In Gutiérrez' view, the annunciation has an inevitably practical orientation and political dimension if only because it is addressed to people in concrete social situations. The denunciation takes place whenever the reality announced, God's love, confronts a given social situation of injustice, exploitation, or oppression with which it is incompatible. When, by means of evangelization, persons are made aware of the true meaning of their historical existence, yet are faced with oppressive conditions which prevent or deny the realization of the destiny to which they are called by God, critical consciousness becomes emancipative consciousness.

The annunciation of the Gospel thus has a conscientizing function, or in other words, a politicizing function. But this is made real and meaningful only by living and announcing the Gospel from within a commitment to liberation, only in concrete, effective solidarity with people and exploited social classes.<sup>32</sup>

Gutiérrez recognizes that this prophetic-critical task of evangelization (which precedes and promotes a process of self-reflection within the Christian community and brings about an emancipative consciousness) is oriented to strategic action. Indeed, he points out that the "conscientizing dimension of the preaching of the Gospel . . . should lead to a profound revision of the pastoral activity of the Church."<sup>33</sup> Yet he also acknowledges that specific practical or tactical response of a critically conscious community is not something that can be predetermined theoretically in advance. The theologian as critical theorist, in other words, "cannot establish ahead of time the specific guidelines" for the historical praxis of the Christian community. "The Church should rise to the demands of the moment with whatever lights it has at that moment and with a will to be faithful to the Gospels. Some chapters of theology can be written *only afterwards*."<sup>34</sup> At this level, then, the theological task is not to foster a particular form of political praxis but to provide a rational reflection of such activity. In the context of strategic action, a critical theory of faith does not precede praxis but reflects it. In Gutiérrez' words:

Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*; it is the second step. What Hegel used to say about philosophy can likewise be applied to theology: it rises only at sundown. The pastoral activity of the Church does not flow as a conclusion from theological premises. Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it.<sup>35</sup>

Gutiérrez understands theology, then, as a critical theory of the Chris-

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 269.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 270.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 272; italics added.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 11.



tian religion. As theory, its relationship to faith is neither idealistic nor materialistic, neither speculative nor mechanical. It is dialectical. "Theology in this context will be a critical reflection both from within, and upon, historical praxis."<sup>36</sup> In other words, liberation theology is not simply a "theory for faith" in an idealistic sense, not a theory which attempts to superimpose ideas from outside history. Rather, it seeks to understand faith from within the historical praxis of the Christian community. "Theology comes after involvement"<sup>37</sup> and is a critical reflection on the living faith of the community. But neither is liberation theology simply a "theory of faith" in a materialistic sense, not a theory which rationalizes or attempts to justify positions already taken. Rather, it presupposes a critical consciousness, an emancipative process of self-reflection. An authentic theology, according to Gutiérrez, can only exist once "the oppressed themselves are able freely and creatively to express themselves in society and among the people of God."<sup>38</sup> Hence the need for a prophetic and critical conscientizing of the Christian community.

A similar dialectic of theory and praxis is evident in Segundo's account of theological method. He conceives of liberation theology as an alternative to the detached and supposedly neutral methodology of traditional academic theology. Liberation theology is dynamic, involved, and committed because it is rooted in the ongoing historical praxis of the Christian community. He sums up his dialectical method in the concept of a hermeneutic circle in which there are four decisive factors.

*Firstly* there is our way of experiencing reality, which leads us to ideological suspicion. *Secondly* there is the application of our ideological suspicion to the whole ideological superstructure in general and to theology in particular. *Thirdly* comes a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion, that is, to suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account. *Fourthly* we have our new hermeneutic, that is, our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith (i.e. Scripture) with the new elements at our disposal.<sup>39</sup>

Theology is not an ahistorical or a priori system of ideas which are then applied to changing circumstances. Rather, liberation theology is for Segundo, as it is for Gutiérrez, "a second step."<sup>40</sup> The first step is commitment to liberation, and what this means is that "it is impossible to know what a specifically Christian contribution to liberation might be prior to a personal commitment to liberation."<sup>41</sup> But whereas Gutiérrez speaks of commitment in terms of solidarity with the poor and involvement with the masses, and thus regards the task of fostering a critical

<sup>36</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (New York: Orbis, 1983) 60.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 61.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 84.

<sup>39</sup> *The Liberation of Theology* 9.

consciousness among the people of God as a principal concern of liberation, Segundo emphasizes commitment as effective participation in an enlightened minority, an elite whose historical mission is to function as a core revolutionary vanguard in transforming the world.<sup>42</sup> The criteria of an authentic revolutionary praxis lie with the Christian community, but the ongoing dialectic of the hermeneutic circle means that the consciousness of this praxis will be self-critical and liberating. Thus Segundo warns against nondialectical simplifications which polarize Gutiérrez' "mass-oriented" liberation theology and his own "elitist" approach.<sup>43</sup>

There are, then, both similarities and differences in Gutiérrez' and Segundo's conceptualization of the critical task of theology. Habermas' methodological reflections on the theory-praxis relationship in a critical theory with emancipative intent reveal these similarities and suggest how a liberation theology can function in dialectical relation to the praxis of Christian faith at three different levels of discourse (scientific, therapeutic, and practical) or in three distinct social contexts (theory formation, process of enlightenment, and strategic activity). The differences between Gutiérrez and Segundo can be traced in part, I think, to the ecclesiological preconditions which ground their respective accounts of theological method. Gutiérrez' emphasis on the Church as a universal community (a Church of the people in solidarity with the popular masses) leads to his correlative emphasis on the prophetic-critical task of liberation theology, and his stress on the conscientization mission of the Church. The people of God must eventually become empowered to fulfil their own historical vocation, and theological reflection serves a liberating function when it promotes the emancipative praxis of consciousness-raising. On the other hand, Segundo's view of the Church as a particular elite (an enlightened minority, a revolutionary vanguard) leads to his correlative emphasis on the practical-strategic task of liberation theology. Only a minority Church is capable of the kind of critical consciousness necessary to resist the mass tendencies of modern culture and function as a transforming force in society, and theological reflection performs a liberating function when it critically reflects the emancipative praxis of revolutionary activity.

Such emphases, however, can only lead to misunderstanding if interpreted nondialectically. Liberation theology will then appear to be either reductive or subversive. It will tend to be seen either as nothing more than a "theory of faith" which rationalizes positions already taken, rather than critically interpreting them, or conversely as nothing more than a "theory for faith" which foments revolutionary struggle, rather than critically reflecting it.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 208-40. Cf. *The Community Called Church* (New York: Orbis, 1973).

<sup>43</sup> *The Liberation of Theology* 234-37.