

Juan Luis Segundo, trans. John Dury, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976).

[Segundo and a visiting African bishop] strolled through the city [Rio de Janeiro], its luxurious villas, its world-renowned beaches and night clubs, its gigantic statue of Christ looming above the city, and other landmarks. Eventually, however, they came to the hillsides encircling the city, which are also world famous for the fetid favelas (slums) that perch precariously on the slopes, whose inhabitants pray daily that rain or mudslide will not destroy their jerry-built hovels. Finally, the astonished bishop turned to his guide and blurted out: "You say that you are a Christian country and that you have inhabited this land for over five hundred years." He then threw open his arms to the hideous obscenities that swarmed over the cliffs and questioned angrily: "Is this what you mean by Christianity?" (Hennelly 1997, 26).

Segundo begins from a basic position of suspicion. He is suspicious of attempts to interpret biblical texts because he notes a strong tendency for these interpretations to align with the interests of the interpreter (8). He is suspicious of theology, and of ideas more generally, because "anything and everything involving ideas, including academic theology, is intimately bound up with the existing social situation" (8) and subject to unconscious bias. He further points out that theology as presently practiced leads to alienation by forcing people to understand themselves using alien concepts. He asks, therefore, how we might practice theology in a way that avoids these pitfalls. Let in this way to methodological reflection on the practice of sociology, Segundo (like Boff) defines liberation theology on the basis of its method rather than its content. Understood this way, liberation theology is a new way in which to practice theology – not academic, but revolutionary.

Beginning from the premise that our interpretation of the Bible is mediated through our contemporary reality, Segundo identifies a process he calls the *hermeneutic circle*. Although Segundo is not the originator of this concept (Bultmann 1950), he modified it by giving it a thoroughly social cast. He emphatically rejects Schillebeeckx's concern that a theology cannot be ideological¹ – he insists that it must be, because there is a strong tendency for allegedly non-ideological treatments to be suffused with unconscious politics (9).² This is why a new method of theology is needed. Past theologians have unconsciously ratified and supported the powerful against the weak. Segundo expresses considerable impatience with ideas that do not lead to action, and he argues that a theology that is not based on a pre-theological commitment to improve the world is intellectually inert (39).

For a hermeneutic circle to apply in theology, two preconditions must be met (11). First, we must be sufficiently challenged by the present to be forced to change our understanding of very basic concepts like "life, death, knowledge, society [and] politics".

¹ Of Schillebeeckx, Segundo writes "[h]e seems to hold the naïve belief that the word of God is applied to human realities inside some antiseptic laboratory that is totally immune to the ideological tendencies and struggles of the present day...a liberation theologian is one who starts from the opposite end" (7).

² Compare Boltanski (1990) on this point.

Second, we must be willing to allow these new ways of understanding to lead us to new interpretations of biblical texts. In the absence of these preconditions, Segundo argues that theology will be inherently conservative because it will lack a “here and now” criterion for understanding our present situation (9). If these preconditions are met, they lead to four “decisive factors” in the hermeneutic circle.

“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 there comes a new way of experiencing theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion...Fourthly we have our new hermeneutic, that is our new way of interpreting the fountainhead of our faith with the new elements at our disposal” (9).

After considering several attempts to complete this hermeneutic circle (rejecting, among others, Marx and Weber), Segundo identifies James Cone’s *A Black Theology of Liberation* as a successful example. Crucially, Cone fulfills the “requirement of hermeneutic partiality” by identifying with a particular community (29). He is led by turns into a discussion of theory and practice, and he places a great deal of stress on “confronting theory with *praxis*”. Despite the change in focus, Segundo is adamant that liberation theology as he understands it is well within the mainstream of Vatican II social thought (142, citing *Gaudiam et Spes*).

Without a proper understanding of the ideological mechanisms of established society, Segundo cautions that any theology that we form is likely to be an unconscious mouthpiece for existing power. This is the motivation for an extended critique of the *concept* of orthodoxy, as well as a digression about the pitfalls of a sociological approach to theology. Segundo believes that sociology, by its pretenses to objectivity, traduces the inherently political character of human interaction.³ This “false objectivity” is a major enemy for Segundo, and he identifies its manifestations in many fields. One particular point of criticism is attempts at locating a political “third way” (*tercerismo*). In Segundo’s view, we are forced to choose between siding with oppressors and the oppressed, and attempts to identify an alternative are merely opportunities for unconscious ratification of the existing power structure.

In Segundo’s view, the main utility of Marxist thought is to highlight existing social problems. In this very broad sense, he agrees that liberation theology is a Marxist project, but as we might expect, he is less interested in intellectual antecedents than in effecting positive change. Interestingly, Segundo locates a contradiction in Marx’s writing on religion. For Marx, he argues, religion is at once part of the superstructure that will be corrected and improved along with the state in the first revolutionary phase, and an explicit error impeding popular happiness (59). Segundo argues that although this second interpretation (found in Marx’s critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*) has dominated, the first is more consistent with the rest of Marx’s thought. I am inclined to agree.

³ One infers here that Segundo would likely approve of the explicitly political direction taken by sociology in recent decades. Boltanski (1990) is relevant here as well.

As we have seen, Segundo is very hesitant to accept anything resembling ideological neutrality. He assumes that all ideas are suffused with ideology (“the ideological infiltration of dogma” (40)), and that as a result there can be no autonomous, impartial theology (25). The suspicion noted above is a result of this attitude. As an example of this process, Segundo perceives that the church, in its attempts to “de-historicize” the sacraments, has made it more difficult for people to connect these sacraments to their daily lives (26). Noting (but discarding) Mannheim’s useful distinction between utopian and ideological reasoning, Segundo seems to have a pragmatic (non-normative) understanding of ideology – although he thinks it suffuses everything, this is not necessarily a drawback as long as its ubiquity is recognized. The connection between ideology and faith is intriguing – Segundo holds that while faith without works is dead, “[f]aith without ideologies is equally dead” (181) because it is only “faith incarnated in successive ideologies” that allow us to know God’s purpose in the world. Human development occurs in the provisional instantiation of ideology through faith: “we let the faith be fleshed out in human, provisional ideologies” (129).

Discussion

I found parts of Segundo’s argument quite moving. His (nationalist) yearning for an authentically South American theology recalls the early-nineteenth century hunger for a genuinely American intellectual and artistic tradition, and there is something profound in his desire to confront theory with practice and inform pale reason with the light of human suffering. The notion that unconscious action reinforces latent power structures is plausible, and finds considerable support in the (later) writings of Pierre Bourdieu. His notion of change, however, seems problematic. The idea that intellectual progress is a function of the uncritical embrace of a particular social group is deeply retrogressive. Segundo holds that the interests of classes in society are unalterably opposed, and when this attitude is combined with moral reification of “the people” he creates intellectual cover for violence. Segundo’s commendable suspicion deserts him at this point, and he uncritically adopts a zero-sum attitude that seems likely to result in fruitless struggle. Segundo, like Marx, makes the tacit assumption that the dialectic will end at its present stage.