

SOCIOLOGY AND THEOLOGY: RESPONSE (II) TO GREGORY BAUM

At the outset Gregory Baum signifies his awareness of the various kinds of sociology and sociological method. His preference rests with critical sociology, which studies society in a way that encourages insight, highlights relationships, links the present with the past, preparing the way for responsible action and commitment in the present. I would like to affirm my own interest in this kind of sociology, which as Professor Baum mentions stands in the tradition of the founders of sociology in the nineteenth century, such men as Marx, de Toqueville, Comte and Toennies.

Since Americans are preparing to celebrate the bicentennial, sociological study of the American experience according to this method is invaluable for fruitful action in the present to correct injustice and plan for the future. A recent book published by the Campaign for Human Development is, I believe, an excellent example of this kind of sociology. Its title is *Poverty in American Democracy: A Study of Social Power*.¹ It relates the facts of poverty as found among the very poor and also among the working class to the condition of powerlessness. It highlights the values of individualism and profit that guide American society and it puts them in question. This kind of sociology is therefore not "value-free" but, as Baum has suggested, the idea that sociology is value-free or totally objective is an illusion. The sociologist must be fair and thorough in all his research but as Baum writes, the "social scientist does not stand on neutral ground . . . he finds himself within the hermeneutical circle and before he can read correctly the empirical data he has collected, he must determine the precise place which he occupies in this circle." In other words, the sociologist himself/herself is part of the very society which needs to be judged and evaluated. I believe that this insight regarding the social sciences is today shared by many, despite the many sociologists who would equate the method of the social sciences with the method of the natural sciences.

In reality, as Baum points out, it is this insight that gave birth to sociology in the first place. Mighty world changes, grounded in scien-

¹Campaign for Human Development, *Poverty in American Democracy: A Study of Social Power* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1974).

tific discoveries, industrial development, political and cultural revolutions, new understanding of human freedom, made women and men aware of the birth of a new world. In the past change seemed to take place within an unchangeable framework, but now the very framework itself revealed new contours. As the first sociologists studied social structures in this new world and compared them with past structures, they realized that not only the structures had changed but the perceptions of men and women had changed. "Social reality creates consciousness" just as new thoughts and categories in turn re-shape the world. A dialectical relationship is present here. The historicity of human beings and of the world they inhabit and make was recognized. Human beings living in a different situation perceive their world under new categories.

All this raises a further question. A question that is important for sociology but even more important for theology. Is everything relative? Is nothing really true or false? Is there no final right or wrong? The questions of historicism which plagued the end of the nineteenth century are still unanswered today, even though various beginnings of a solution are present—this is true in the field of sociology as well as in theology. Baum speaks of the relationism stressed by the sociologist Karl Mannheim and the rejection of relativism—as a scepticism that would ultimately destroy sociology itself. Mannheim therefore affirmed a unity of truth that led towards a greater and richer humanization of life, but he did not explore this affirmation which "brought him to the edge of metaphysics."

The historicity of existence and of the human world as revealed by sociology has a mighty impact on theology. If society changes and the human categories of thought change with it, how then shall we understand the claims of Christian faith? Faith speaks of truth and error; Christian faith proclaims the God revealed by Jesus Christ and says that this Jesus, who was born at a particular time in history, yet has meaning for all human beings in every time and place. How are we to understand the claims of Christian faith when we perceive them now through changed categories of thought and we recognize that these categories are imposed through changed structures and institutions in society as a whole? In Baum's words: "How can we account for the difference in truth and values in various cultures without falling into relativism?"

This is the hermeneutical question as it touches theology. The first section of Baum's paper is not primarily concerned with this question.

Instead he emphasizes and makes clear that societal structures have a profound impact on thought. Therefore no history of doctrine alone is sufficient because doctrine is at all times intimately related to its carrier, the society with which it is in dialogue. The distinction between "theological factors" and "non-theological factors" made by the early literature of the World Council of Churches is "too neat," because the non-theological factors, i.e., the social and political factors are internally related to all the formulations of doctrine. Baum makes this point very clear and illustrates it by example.

In the second half of his paper, while he continues to show forth the impact of sociology on theology, Baum moves on unavoidably to the hermeneutical question. Affirming the continuity of faith under a relational orientation (similar to Mannheim's approach in sociology), he explores the relationship of sociology to theology under two headings: the historicity of truth and the historicity of error. Under the historicity of truth he deals with myth and symbol and believes that the understanding of symbol drawn from the sociology of religion can preserve and reshape the wisdom of faith in continuity with the past. Under the historicity of error, he deals with prophetic criticism of evil and injustice. Religion can become the ideology of those in power (Marx); a theology is needed which is sensitive to this misuse of religion; a theology which also criticizes the evil and injustice in society. He stresses that political and liberation theologies are particularly suited to this task.

It is at this point, as he deals more specifically with the hermeneutical question in the relationship of theology to sociology that I find myself uncomfortable with the approach of Gregory Baum, and I wish to raise some objections. He places the "historicity of truth" and the "historicity of error" in a polar relationship, a dual rather than a dialectical relationship. The two historicities proceed along parallel lines with each other and remain basically unrelated.

One difficulty, I believe, lies in the emphasis he places upon historical consciousness rather than on the historicity of human existence and of the world itself. When speaking of the historicity of truth and the importance of myth or symbol his approach is individualistic and unintentionally subjective. It is true that the symbols he would use are shaped into a new form by each society, but from that point on they are contained in the mind as imagination. They do not work in a

relation of theory and practice; their public frame is insufficiently developed. Baum is perhaps aware of this as he criticizes Greeley's understanding of symbol in his foreword to Greeley's *The New Agenda* when he asks if Greeley's symbol systems are "not a reduction of the Christian religion to the purely mental and subjective order."² Yet Baum himself in the present paper does not pursue the question he raised in Greeley's book.

When he turns to the historicity of error and the possibility of religion as ideology (in the pejorative sense of Karl Marx) Baum understands the work of political and liberation theologies as the denunciation of error and the rooting out of injustice. These theologies therefore perform a merely negative task. They are one-sided theologies, which if left to themselves would undermine the sources of wisdom inherited from the past. Under the second principle, therefore (i.e., the historicity of error) there is a relation of theory to practice, of society to thought, but it has only a limited scope.

A WIDER TASK FOR POLITICAL AND LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

I would like to suggest a wider task for both political theology and liberation theology, a task which ultimately embraces both the historicity of error and the historicity of truth. These theologies have a hermeneutical task (this is especially true of political theology), i.e., the task of interpreting and expressing faith for the world today.³ Political theology seeks to "develop a new context for the experience of transcendence"⁴ in the on-going relationship of theory and practice. Libera-

²Foreword of G. Baum, A. Greeley, *The New Agenda* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973), p. 21.

³"Properly speaking, the so-called fundamental hermeneutic problem of theology is not the problem of how systematic theology stands in relation to historical theology, how dogma stands in relation to history, but what is the relation between theory and practice, between understanding the faith and social practice." J. B. Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971).

⁴F. Fiorenza, "Political Theology and Liberation Theology," *Liberation, Revolution and Freedom*, ed. by T. M. McFadden (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 7.

tion theology as it comes from Latin America also seeks a re-understanding of all the aspects of Christian faith. While analyzing concretely the injustice done to the third world, it commits itself to an understanding of salvation which begins in "this world" here and now and which embraces the individual and society. In doing this it takes up the symbols of faith and interprets them anew.⁵

In approaching this wider task as it relates to Baum's paper, I would single out one point. Professor Baum notes that Marx believed that by identification with the most oppressed class, true consciousness is born and false consciousness is destroyed. Many liberation theologians have adopted this norm of Marx as relevant to theology itself. Baum finds this norm of Marx an exaggeration. He says that "wherever people are situated they are in need of an ongoing critique." It seems to me that this is exactly the point, that is, that all people are indeed in need of an ongoing critique but if we are situated in the wrong place we will not see. If we do not take sides with the poor, we take sides with the rich and have the consciousness of the rich. As Baum himself has pointed out, there is no such thing as a value-free sociology, nor is there a neutrality of consciousness.

The Christian theologian and the Christian people must try to situate themselves in the right place. Jesus identified himself with the poor and the outcast and throughout the whole of Scripture God reveals himself as near to all who are needy and oppressed as a help in time of trouble. There is no doubt that there are many kinds of poverty and need. Often the very rich can be poor and needy in a multitude of ways. Ultimately all people are in need, for we all face death. Yet in the world today, there is grave physical poverty, destitution and starvation. Injustice reveals itself to us and asks us on which side we stand. Let us look for a moment at the Christians in North America, wealthy owners, wage earners and poor alike, but with special attention to the body of wage earners who form the great base of the American people and who are in large part Christian by heritage. They are all those who are in some measure the beneficiaries of the affluent world. Although they are not policy makers in any real sense, they are beneficiaries of a system

⁵G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973). J. L. Segundo, *The Community Called Church, Grace and the Human Condition, Our Idea of God, The Sacraments Today, Evolution and Guilt* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973-75). This interpretation is scattered throughout these books.

which exploits the third world. This fact is often hidden from their eyes, but it influences their attitudes, values and moral sensitivities.

Where would a political or liberation theology grounded in such reflection/action lead in regard to Christian truth or, to use Baum's phrase, in regard to the development of the "historicity of truth"? It is possible that a renewed understanding of God, of Jesus Christ and of the Church could develop. Baum has emphasized the need for a Christian theology rooted in the North American experience; I will therefore bring forward two points regarding Christian truth which are directly related to American society itself.

The first point is stressed by Frederick Herzog, the Lutheran theologian at Duke University.⁶ He speaks of the individualism that plagues American society. Whether this individualism is atomistic or a type of group individualism, it sets human beings against each other and there is no care for the common good of all. Herzog points out that we have spoken often of the individual, heart-to-heart relationship with Jesus Christ; we must now explore at greater depth the corporate aspect of Jesus and we must do this with special attention to the racial question which confronts North Americans. How does Jesus Christ relate to all men, not only individually but as a body? Can we explore this symbol of Christian faith from Scripture but also explore it in relation to our own need? Herzog suggests that in doing this we may well be involved in a Christological struggle as crucial as the Christological struggles of the third, fourth and fifth centuries.

The second point comes from Bryan Hehir, the director of the Division of Peace and Justice of the U.S. Catholic Conference. He notes that the Catholic tradition has always had a concept of the "sociality of human beings"⁷ of our intimate relationship from the first with the human community for any genuine personal development. Earlier on in the Catholic-American dialogue the Catholic tradition had something to learn concerning religious freedom from the American tradition; perhaps now when we seek anew to express the public dimension of Christian faith, which can never in reality be separated from personal com-

⁶F. Herzog, "Liberation Theology or Culture Religion," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 29, 3 and 4 (Spring/Summer, 1974), pp. 233-44.

⁷B. Hehir, "The Ministry for Justice," *Network Quarterly* 2, 3 (Summer, 1974).

mitment, America can learn from the tradition of solidarity which has always been stressed by Catholics. We can add that the Church itself may understand its own tradition at a deeper level, as it widens that tradition of solidarity out beyond Church borders and embraces the concerns of all humankind.

In looking at this universal concern, it would seem that three options face us in a world where many are starving, population is growing and resources are limited. Will the affluent world force its will on the poor through pre-emptive wars? Will the poor led by small groups of desperate men wreak chaos by guerrilla tactics on a wide and as-yet-unthought-of scale? Or will the choice be made for a just distribution of the world's goods—a real possibility but one which demands a change in life style of the affluent world. I realize that these questions are exceedingly complicated. Yet if this last option is to be undertaken in any measure, it demands that the large base of the American people take sides with the poor against themselves and against the injustices of the rich world. In taking the side of the poor, would they not be really taking the side of a greater love, a love that helps the whole of humanity? Would not this be following the norm set by Jesus Christ? Could it not ultimately lead to a renewal of American society itself?

In conclusion, it seems to me that over the paths of political and liberation theologies, focused upon the American scene and incorporating the best sociological analyses possible, the two aspects, i.e., the historicity of truth and the historicity of error can dialogue with one another and thus come to a fuller development. They should not develop along parallel lines but should be woven in a dialectic that encompasses theology and sociology. This dialectic, especially as regards North America is only now beginning.

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