

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

INTRODUCTION BY T. HOWLAND SANKS

As a theologian I have been concerned for some time now with a study of sociology, especially the sociology of knowledge, and with employing its insights in theological reflection. It seems to me that there is no question of whether or not there should be a relationship between theology and the social sciences, but rather the question is the methodological one of how these two partners in the dialogue should be related. At times in the past, theologians have seemed to be either entirely innocent of the social sciences, or promiscuous in their casual relationships. We are concerned to establish a more stable and solidly-grounded marriage.

The methodological question has become more urgent recently because of some of the criticism levelled at political theology and liberation theology. Some theologians have charged that such theologies have made political, economic and sociological analyses normative for the interpretation of the gospel, with the result that theology has itself become an ideology. In his book, *The Liberation of Theology*, Juan Luis Segundo explicitly takes up some of these criticisms and discusses the methodology of liberation theology itself. Hence, we felt that this was a good text to ground our discussion.

We do not expect to solve all the methodological questions in this discussion, but we would hope that we could clarify and specify further some of the issues involved. To help us in this task, we have asked Gregory Baum, whose recent book on sociology and theology, *Religion and Alienation*, is well known, to make some introductory comments on Segundo's book.

PRESENTATION BY GREGORY BAUM: THE THEOLOGICAL METHOD OF SEGUNDO'S *THE LIBERATION OF THEOLOGY*

Let me (1) offer a brief defense of Segundo's hermeneutical circle, and then, (2) formulate an important critical modification.

1. For Segundo, the hermeneutical circle begins with a new experience that shatters the theologian's inherited world view, connects the ills of society with a hidden cause, and makes him/her see society and culture from a new angle. Howard Griffin, traveling through the United States with his skin artificially darkened, did not recognize the cities he had travelled as a white man: from the new angle he saw his own country anew. Segundo suggests (but

does not adequately discuss) that such experiences, linked as they are with a commitment to values at odds with society, become available to people only through some form of action. Active involvement is able to sever us from our inherited social location and initiate us to a new perspective.

What is implied here (which Segundo does not develop in his present book) is that the inherited self-understanding of society is always to some extent falsified. The dominant perception of the world is partially distorted by self-deceit and ideology. The truth about life is, therefore, available to people only through some kind of conversion. The surface deceives; truth is hidden at the depth. In theological terms: we are born into a sinful world and the entry into truth demands conversion.

The hermeneutical circle thus defined is a challenge to academic theology and much of social science. It is true, of course, that theology presupposes faith and is thus based on a commitment beyond the wisdom of the world, while social science often prides itself of being based on an objectivity that overcomes bias from any direction and detaches scholars from the actual historical conflicts of their day. Yet traditional academic theology and social science agree that truth can be discovered by researchers if they only apply right reason in their investigation—quite independently of their social location. If theologians and social scientists purify themselves as much as possible from personal and group bias, then, whatever their historical situation, be they white or black, rich or poor, men or women, North American or Third World, they will produce the same science. Segundo denies this. From the perspective of Pharaoh, the Exodus was a revolt deserving of punishment; from the perspective of Israel, it was a liberation from injustice. Can a social thinker understand this event by weighing the relative interests of the Egyptian ruler and the oppressed people? The theologian holds that at least this event can only be understood through identification with the people of Israel. Segundo thinks the New Testament also teaches that the true perspective for looking at the world is through the same identification with "the poor."

The *second* phase of the hermeneutical circle is the suspicion that the inherited distortion and ideology have affected even the traditional reading of Scripture. This is the negative phase in which theologians unmask traditional religion as a sanction for the existing power relations.

The *third* phase of the hermeneutical circle is more positive. Here the theologian discovers that Scripture and tradition contain elements that confirm the shattering experience. Aspects of Chris-

tian teaching, previously neglected or regarded as marginal, actually corroborate the new perspective. The previous reference to Israel and New Testament are cases in point. In this phase, the theologian regains trust in Scripture and tradition as the locus of God's Word.

The *fourth* phase of the hermeneutical circle consists of a careful and systematic reinterpretation of the Church's teaching in the light of the new biblical discovery. Christian doctrine can be preached in support of the new experience and the new perspective. By intensifying the original commitment, this phase makes theologians see more clearly the society to which they belong and start out again, this time more deeply, on the first phase of the hermeneutical circle.

Segundo's hermeneutical circle, we note, is critical of much of theology and social science, but not wholly untraditional in Western social thought. There are Marxist and non-Marxist scholars who insist that commitment precedes science and demand a radical redefinition of scientific "objectivity." Ernst Troeltsch, the Christian (non-Marxist) social thinker held that the vision of what the human world ought to be affects the manner in which scholars perceive the historical reality. He therefore demanded that social thinkers abandon their stance of objectivity as illusory and commit themselves consciously to a more humane society. Where Troeltsch and other historicist thinkers differ from Marx is that for them the personal commitment is to a more humane cultural ideal, not to a new economic order.

Segundo's circle is also at home in theology. It articulates the method employed in the overlapping theological enterprises referred to as political theology, liberation theology and critical theology.

Whenever social thinkers and theologians are not committed to a more just society and the emancipation of the human race, their science makes a further contribution to man's enslavement. But what is only hinted at by Segundo and remains an issue demanding clarification is the problem of verification.

2. Segundo's hermeneutical circle is nonetheless defective. What he neglects is the critical impact of Scripture and tradition on the initial experience. According to Segundo's *The Liberation of Theology*, the initial shattering experience seems to demand no critical examination at all. It seems to bear within itself overwhelming self-evidence. Since Segundo has in mind his own experience which consisted of identifying with the most devastated class in Latin America, he takes for granted that this stands up

under any critique and is justified by the Scriptures. But what about other shattering experiences? We actually know of instances where shattering experiences that made people see society in a new light, connect the present evil to a hidden cause, and reach out for a new vision, were actually racist! A famous controversy in Germany of the early thirties between Tillich and Hirsch made this point very well. Both theologians were willing to see God's action in history and discern in certain historical movements a divine message addressed to the Church. How can these historical movements be detected? Tillich, the German socialist, took as norm the prophetic demand of justice, while Hirsch preferred the self-affirmation of a people, or race, against the forces of cosmopolitanism and decomposition. Tillich was banned from Germany; Hirsch supported the Nazi regime.

It will be necessary, therefore, to add a new, critical dimension to Segundo's hermeneutical circle. I insist that even if the originating experience should stand up under the verdict of Scripture re-read from the new perspective, the theologian must be careful lest he/she regard this experience as the only contemporary perspective through which God shatters the false consciousness of the people. Dialogue with other critical thinkers remains a methodological necessity. The perspective revealed by Segundo's experience must be complemented by others. This happened in fact at the "Theology of the Americas" Detroit Conference (1975), at which Latin American theologians were ready to hear from black theologians and women theologians that they had not paid enough attention to the oppression of races and women in their own countries. Phase two and three of Segundo's circle must be made much more complex.

Segundo's lack of critical attention leads to unfortunate results. Here is one example. While his own shattering experience makes him discover the social dimension of truth and the power of ideology, he falls into an error often, though not always, committed by Marxist thinkers: he neglects the subject. If he had submitted his original experience to a biblical critique—and to other Enlightenment critiques—he would have paid more attention to the person and found a language for expressing the dialectical relation between person and society. Neglect of the personal prevents a theologian from having anything to say about central features of human life such as birth and death, friendship and love. The neglect of the subject makes Segundo willing to speak of the people as "the masses." He shares this, as he well explains, with Ortega, the conservative social thinker, and Lenin, the Com-

unist, who, against Marx, regarded the people as masses that must be led to the revolution by a disciplined party that infiltrates their organizations and makes the correct decisions for them. It seems to me that people are never masses! There are even among the most deprived, elements of personal drama and personal depth that make them receptive of divine redemption and consequently addressable by the Christian message. Even for Marx, emancipation is always self-emancipation. Even for him, masses cannot be liberated, only people. Consciousness is only transformed if people become conscious of their plight and involve themselves in a struggle to rebuild society.

This criticism of Segundo's approach to theology does not invalidate his hermeneutical circle. There are in fact several such circles operative in theology, based on several shattering experiences in which God addresses the Church. While these circles are interconnected, I do not think that it is possible to define their relationship in a definitive way. The dialectics of their interrelation remains forever open. Why? Because theologians and social scientists belong to concrete historical locations which call for priorities, demand that one circle be given greater significance than another, and reveal that the only way to be authentic in history is to be in fact (even though not in principle) one-sided. There is no place in history from which theologians (or social scientists) could work out the harmony of the spheres. Only a transformed world will ground a wholly unified science.

What Segundo's theological method means for political engagement, whether he is right that there is no "third option," and what constitutes commitment in favor of emancipation—these things demand a detailed critical examination from the viewpoint of North Americans dedicated to world justice.

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