

THE HERMENEUTICAL PRIVILEGE OF THE OPPRESSED: LIBERATION THEOLOGIES, BIBLICAL FAITH, AND MARXIST SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

The God of the lords and masters is not the same God in whom the poor and exploited believe.

— Gustavo Gutierrez

Pluralism is a central value in democratic societies. It stands over against "melting pot" notions of assimilation of diverse racial and ethnic groups in complex societies like the United States, affirming the integrity of each tradition while tolerating the differences among groups in the interest of the whole. Politics in the United States are most often described as preeminently pluralistic, involving struggles and accommodations among groups as each strives for opportunities, goods, and services. The result, it is claimed, is a relatively harmoniously functioning social order in which each group, sooner or later, is able to secure a place for itself.¹

But pluralism in politics is related to pluralism in values and beliefs. And indeed, many commentators today affirm pluralism in religious beliefs as itself a religious value among Christians in the United States. Thus, it becomes important to tolerate the religious beliefs of others, while affirming the integrity of our own. Though a relatively recent development, this trend toward the affirmation of pluralism is evident within Catholicism too, as Greeley and others have noted.²

In this political and religious context, it is not surprising that many label the wide diversity in theology in the United States today as pluralism, even if some of us also feel a "blessed rage for order."³ Others, however, label this diversity simply as chaos, and point to the widespread confusion in both the churches and academic theology.⁴ In either case, pluralism remains a central fact. And certainly, if we expand our horizons, it will remain a central fact of our experience in a culturally complex world which is increasingly unified by economic structures like

¹ Though the dominant perspective for interpreting politics within the United States, pluralist social theory may be criticized for its failure to pay sufficient attention to the issue of social classes in relation to power in advanced capitalist societies. Cf., for example, M. Mankoff, "Power in Advanced Capitalist Society: A Review Essay on Recent Elitist and Marxist Criticism of Pluralist Theory," *Social Problems* 17 (Winter 1970), 418-30.

² A. M. Greeley, *The Communal Catholic* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

³ D. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); cf. also Tracy's response to the question "Whatever Happened to Theology?" in *Christianity and Crisis* 35 (May 12, 1975), 119-20.

⁴ Cf. Van A. Harvey's and José Miguez Bonino's responses to the question "Whatever Happened to Theology?" in *Christianity and Crisis* 35 (May 12, 1975), 108-09 and 111-12.

the multi-national corporations even as it is increasingly divided along lines of rich and poor.

Undoubtedly pluralism is one of the most important values in the heritage of Western civilization. But these facts raise the question of the possible limits of pluralism. If, indeed, pluralism is itself becoming a central religious value,⁵ can we believe anything we choose, and act in any way we like? And what about those who claim that pluralism itself can serve as a mask obscuring the interests of those in power in societies like our own?⁶ At the most fundamental level, these questions involve the issue of the social ground or context for interpretation: where, in a diverse society and world, do we stand when we interpret God's revelation and our own world, the signs of the times?

Latin American liberation theology, black theology, and feminist theology all claim that the experience of the oppressed is a privileged hermeneutical ground, that identification with the oppressed is the first act in understanding either the Bible or our world today. They point, then, to a fundamental limit to pluralism. In this paper I would like to examine two grounds for making this claim. The first concerns biblical revelation; the second concerns Marxist perspectives on the social context of knowledge, what is known as ideology critique or Marxist sociology of knowledge.

There are two aspects of biblical revelation which are especially relevant to the issue of the hermeneutical ground: the social context of the revelatory events; and the theological content of this revelation. By and large, these two dimensions have been divorced in biblical studies; biblical theology has abstracted from the social context of biblical passages in interpreting their theological significance. For example, concerning trends in studies in the Christian Scriptures, Keck notes: "because Bultmann did not relate the theology of Paul and John very clearly to the communities for which they wrote, one has the impression that their theologies were not really affected by the hurly-burly of early Christian life."⁷ However, the price of this abstraction has been a theology

⁵Cuddihy claims, for example, that "pluralism is the de facto 'established' religion of America." Cf. J. M. Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), p. 7.

⁶Cf., for example, the critique of pluralism in the final document of the first Latin American Conference of "Christians for Socialism," the movement which is the political context of liberation theology, in *Options for Struggle: Three Documents of Christians for Socialism* (New York: Church Research and Information Projects, 1974), p. 19.

⁷L. E. Kick, "On the Ethos of Early Christians," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 (September, 1974), 439. Cf. also J. Z. Smith, "The Sociological Description of Early Christianity," *Religious Studies Review* 1 (September, 1975), 19. Concerning the study of the Jewish Scriptures, cf. N. K. Gottwald and F. S. Frick, "The Social World of Ancient Israel," in *The Bible and Liberation (a Radical Religion Reader)* (Berkeley: Community for Religious Research and Education, 1976), pp. 110-19. While the authors referred to here are not coming to identical conclusions, they are untied in promoting the use of the social sciences in constructing in more concrete detail the lived experience of particular communities, and with this a revitalized ability to unfold both the meaning and the function of particular religious symbols, practices and beliefs. The articles referred to here are, moreover, programmatic articles for the work of ongoing groups in the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion and reflect the direction of

removed from history and from questions of meaning in history. Liberation theologians, on the other hand, are asking theological questions which emerge out of an acute sense of historical change, change with life and death implications for millions of people. Inevitably, they seek to understand the historical context of biblical statements, and their historical significance, to see if these statements help to shed light on their own present historical situations.

This thrust in liberation theology reinforces and is reinforced by recent developments in biblical scholarship which stress the importance of relating context and content in biblical theology. The goal of this approach is to reconstruct earlier Hebrew and later Christian rituals, symbols and beliefs in terms of the conditions and processes of the actual lives of real people, as individuals and groups within concrete social contexts.⁸ Then as now, it is assumed, religious beliefs and practices emerge in response to very concrete questioning about the meaning of life in particular contexts, about the "right" or good ways to act; often interpretations of these issues by particular groups are in conflict with those of other groups, and sometimes even with dominant ideas and institutions. This approach seeks to unfold this ongoing social process in all its rich texture.

There are several foci for such studies. One is the ethos of particular communities; the concept ethos here refers to the practices, habits, assumptions, problems, values and hopes which characterize a community's style at a particular moment. The concern here is to unfold the ways in which the ethos of a particular community interacts with the larger culture; this approach seeks to understand, for example, how the ethos of a particular early Christian community interacted with the culture of Rome. Such studies also attempt to discern the ways in which a community comes to discover or create meaning and its social world through symbols. The concern is not so much with the logical connections among elements of a belief system, but with the actual juxtaposition of what might at times appear to a modern observer as logically incommensurate elements.⁹ This approach also seeks to uncover the ways in which an ethos is formed, the ways in which assumptions, values and habits which are not themselves produced by conscious reasoning actually shape the formation of theological principles and convictions.

A second area of focus concerns the social forces and institutions which impinge on the development of the ethos of Jewish and Christian groups. How did these groups organize themselves? What was the nature of their leadership? What was their social base? Questions like

research by significant groups of scholars. Each is necessarily methodologically self-conscious and thus includes an extensive bibliography; for further references cf. these bibliographies. For a related effort, cf. F. Fiorenza, "Critical Social Theory and Christology," *CTSA Proceedings* 30 (1975), 63-110.

⁸This approach assumes a genuinely interdisciplinary method which seeks to integrate findings from archaeology, cultural geography, demography, climatology, agronomy, etc. in the context of a sustained and systematic application of social scientific method from anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science.

⁹Cf. Keck, "On the Ethos of Early Christians," p. 441.

these concern the sociology of religion generally. But they cannot be separated from another series of questions concerning the socioeconomic and political contexts within which these groups developed. This forms a third focus of these studies. All too often social analysis is taken to consist narrowly of the study of symbol systems or ethos. Presumably, however, biblical groups too were concerned with the questions of food and shelter, and with the ways of obtaining these within existing economic structures. These needs, as well as those for status and power, undoubtedly impinged upon their understandings of themselves and their God, and helped to shape their beliefs and religious practices, even if these cannot be "reduced" simply to the operation of these factors.¹⁰ Analysis of political and economic factors too is essential for efforts to unfold the concrete meaning of biblical texts in terms of the lives of those who professed these beliefs and followed these practices.

Such an approach inevitably complicates biblical research and especially biblical theology for several reasons. First, no society is ever standing still; its ethos and institutions are in a continual state of flux, in response to both external forces, invasions by a foreign army, for example, or climatological change, and to internal developments, new technology or changed power relations among different classes, for example.¹¹ Biblical scholarship, then, seeks to discover some order amidst this flux of events. A second reason why this approach complicates biblical research is the recognition of the pluralistic nature of both Judaism and early Christianity. In other words, there is no single biblical theology or typical biblical community at many points in biblical history. Research, then, must sort out the different communities and the ethos peculiar to each, as well as seeking to understand the relations among different communities.

This endeavor is further complicated by a third factor, the fragmentary nature of much biblical evidence.¹² This means that there are significant gaps in the data concerning the life, practices and beliefs of particular communities. To some extent these gaps can be overcome by the hypothetical reconstruction of these communities by analogy with knowledge gained from the study of other similar communities at com-

¹⁰For example, Keck, *op. cit.*, reviews Kautsky's earlier work on the political economy of early Christianity (K. Kautsky, *The Foundations of Christianity*, trans. H. F. Mins [New York: Russell & Russell, 1953]); but he then proceeds to focus on the question of the ethos of early Christianity to the exclusion of political and economic issues. For greater attention to these issues, cf., for example, J. C. Gager, *Kingdom and Community* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975); N. Gottwald, "Biblical Theology or Biblical Sociology? On Affirming the Uniqueness of Israel," in *The Bible and Liberation* (a *Radical Religion Reader*) (Berkeley: Community for Religious Research and Education, 1975), pp. 42-57; and F. Belo, *Lecture matérialiste de l'Évangile de Marc* (Paris: Le Cerf, 1974).

¹¹Anthropologist Victor Turner insists, more than most theorists, on the dynamic or processual nature of society; cf. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

¹²Cf. E. Käsemann, "The Problem of New Testament Theology," *NTS* 19 (1973), 235-45.

parable stages of development. Study of early Christian communities, for example, will proceed directly through the study of different first century Christian communities; but it will also be supplemented by the study of non-Christian communities like that at Qumran, of later Christian communities as they actually evolved in the second century, and of non-Christian groups of minorities in other situations altogether. This approach might sound risky, and indeed it is. The risk, however, must be evaluated against other possible ways of proceeding. Keck sums up much current thinking about this danger: "despite many gaps in information and despite clear dangers in hypothetical reconstruction, one suspects that the result would nonetheless provide more controls for the overall reconstruction of early Christianity than we now have."¹³ The same conclusion applies to reconstruction of Israelite religion.

For all the dangers involved in this approach to biblical studies it promises to provide a more concrete sense of the lived meaning of Judeo-Christian rituals, symbols and beliefs.¹⁴ Theological reflection, then as now, would be seen as growing out of conflicts and confusion about meaning and value in everyday life.¹⁵ And, appreciating the concrete issues which stimulated theological reflection in the biblical communities, it will be easier to understand how these beliefs and practices are "applicable" to problems confronting Christians today. This, after all, is the major concern of liberation theologians, not abstract philosophical reflection on the compatibility of traditional Christian beliefs with modern "secular" attitudes.¹⁶

This revitalized effort to relate context and content in biblical studies is only just bearing its first fruits, and much work involving the interdisciplinary cooperation of many specialists remains to be done. Inevitably questions remain concerning many important issues in biblical studies which will have important bearing on a host of current theological issues, including those concerning the hermeneutical ground for interpreting both the Bible and "the signs of the times."

However, in the Judeo-Christian tradition there have been two foundational revelatory events: the Exodus event, and the life and teaching of Jesus. Recent scholarship concerning these events supports the claim for the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed.

Exodus 1:24 is a report, though greatly impaired, of what appears to be nothing less than a religious social revolution, perhaps the first ideologically based revolution in history. The exact circumstances surrounding this revolution remain unclear. Given this uncertainty, biblical

¹³Keck, "On the Ethos of Early Christians," p. 449.

¹⁴Kuhn suggests that it is the promise of new paradigms which wins them acceptance as much as actual accomplishment; cf. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

¹⁵Keck, "On the Ethos of Early Christians," p. 451.

¹⁶Cf. J. H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 45-61; R. R. Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth* (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. xi-xiii; G. Gutierrez, "Two Theological Perspectives: Liberation Theology and Progressivist Theology," in S. Torres and V. Fabella, eds., *The Emergent Gospel* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978), pp. 227-55.

scholars try, as far as possible, to remain faithful to the apparent framework of the biblical account.¹⁷ They agree that a group, at least, of people who were later to become Israelites, and who were of substantial significance to the emergence of the Israelites and of their religion, lived for a time in Egypt. In this interpretation, the experience of this group of oppressed people and their liberation from bondage in Egypt was crucial in the emergence of the Israelite religion, as Exodus 1-24 testifies. Indeed, the religion itself, focusing on the symbolism of Yahweh, a God previously unknown to them (at least by that name) who wants to change their social position, can be seen as the necessary ideological component of this movement. This ideology was necessary precisely because of what must have appeared as almost impossible odds of their ever achieving liberation.

In itself this interpretation already gives support for the claim for the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed, since Yahweh is revealed precisely in the midst of an oppressed people struggling for liberation. But this model of Israel as an immigrating or invading semi-nomadic people of a distinct ethnic type has recently undergone serious criticism.¹⁸ In particular, it is difficult to understand how the Egyptians would have allowed a significant group of Israelites to escape. There appear to be two possible explanations to account for this "miracle." One is that the group of Israelites was large enough to battle the Egyptians and win; but this explanation, besides contradicting the biblical account, requires an Israelite force numbering in the tens of thousands of warriors, and there is no historical evidence from any source which suggests that the Hebrews were able to fight their way to freedom. The second hypothesis is that a small group of Israelites was able to slip away unnoticed; but this interpretation encounters the difficulty of explaining how this small group was able to "convert" other, larger groups already existing in Palestine.

Considering criticisms like these of prevailing interpretive models, Gottwald concludes that they fail to provide a plausible account of Israelite beginnings. More convincing, he claims, is "the hypothesis that Israel burst into Near Eastern history as an ethnically and socioeconomically heterogeneous coalition of insurgent mercenaries and freebooters, tribally organized farmers and pastoral nomads, depressed, 'feudalized' peasants, assorted craftsmen, and renegade priests, all of whom joined in rebellion against the imperial and quasi-feudal socio-political structures of Egyptian-dominated Canaan."¹⁹ With the success of this religious and political revolution, the first Israelites established a roughly egalitarian socioeconomic order, in the sense that the entire populace was assured of roughly equal access to the basic resources.

¹⁷Cf. J. Dus, "Moses or Joshua? On the Problem of the Founder of the Israelite Religion," trans. N. Baily, in *The Bible and Liberation (a Radical Religion Reader)* (Berkeley: Community for Religious Research and Education, 1976), p. 26.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁹N. Gottwald, article on the Social and Economic Development of Israel, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Vol. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976).

Institutionally, the population was organized on the basis of extended families, protective associations, and tribes, federated as an intertribal community.

This explanation of the beginnings of Israel has the advantage of specifying the concrete social, economic and political dimensions of the struggles reflected in Exodus. In addition, it has the advantage of explaining the significance of the Israelite belief in Yahweh in the struggles surrounding the emergence of this new socioeconomic order.²⁰ In many ways, Yahweh was a god like other Near Eastern gods. These other communities, too, professed belief in a high god individuated and evaluated above other gods; they saw this god as active in nature, history and the social order; they conceived of this god in terms of natural and human analogies; they saw their god as powerful, just and merciful; they felt a strong bond with their god; and they affirmed the process of interpreting this god through human representatives.

Nevertheless, Yahweh is also unique. For the Israelites affirmed with unusual rigor the exclusive recognition of one deity in the life of the people. This God alone was active in the world. And Yahweh was conceived of primarily in terms of egalitarian sociopolitical analogies, in contrast to analogies drawn from the natural world, the elements of nature, or of heavenly bodies. Yahweh is the sole high God, coherently manifest in power, justice and mercy, revealed most fully in the richly elaborated history of deliverance of the people from bondage and their establishment in a liberated existence in Canaan. Most importantly, Yahweh is in bond with an egalitarian people, and not, in the beginning, associated exclusively with particular privileged groups through whom he is then secondarily linked to the whole of Israel. Yet Yahweh is pictured as intimately associated with particular groupings: the diseased, the barren, the famished, orphans, widows, slaves. Thus "only in the case of earliest Israel do we have a clearly articulated 'national' (i.e., culturally comprehensive) religious system wherein the interpreters of the deity do not recognize a central government or the division of society into privileged and non-privileged strata."²¹

The importance of belief in Yahweh in the early history of the Israelite nation becomes clearer in this interpretation. The Yahweh symbolism was essential to the very emergence of Israel; revealed in the struggles for the liberation of a bonded people, these struggles would not have succeeded without this symbolism.

The power of the religious symbolism in early Israel was, as Gottwald notes,

precisely its integration within and penetration of a total struggle situation, so that it articulated a wilfulness informed by the situation, illuminating a route for these divided Canaanite underclasses to follow as, step by step, they realized "the impossible possibility" of free communal life in hierarchic Canaan.²²

²⁰ Cf. Gottwald, "Biblical Theology or Biblical Sociology," pp. 45-51.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

This foundational revelatory event infused all of subsequent Israelite theological reflection with a profound sensitivity to the plight of the oppressed in an unjust society and with a motivation toward action on behalf of justice. The religious meaning of the Exodus event, then, is not set apart from its political and economic aspects. On the contrary, the religious event is the deepest meaning of the struggle toward justice and liberation. "You have seen with your own eyes what I did to Egypt. . . . If only you will now listen to me and keep my covenant, then out of all peoples you shall become my special possession; for the whole earth is mine. You shall be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation" (Exodus 19:4-6). As Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez insists: "Yahweh liberates the Jewish people politically in order to make them a holy nation."²³ The Covenant then, takes on its meaning in relation to the liberation from bondage; it points to the deepest meaning of this historical struggle toward liberation as a movement toward God.

Out of the foundational struggles for justice and liberation from bondage the Israelites articulated a theology which focused on a God of justice, who demanded of them the establishment of just relationships among people. Throughout all the vicissitudes of subsequent Jewish history these related themes remain prominent. Thus von Rad is able to write: "There is absolutely no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all relationships of human life as that of [justice/righteousness]."²⁴ Certainly Gutierrez can find strong support in recent biblical scholarship for his claim that biblical faith is, above all, faith in a God who is revealed through historical events, a God who saves in history, and for the claim that this history must be read from the perspective of the oppressed.

This kind of initial support for the claim of the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed, however, must be examined in light of subsequent developments in Jewish history and theology. We know, for example, that the biblical notions of justice and responsibility for it change.²⁵ Initially, it was a command given to the whole community; but with the rise of the monarchy it became a royal task, only subsequently to become Yahweh's special concern with the fall of the monarchy both ethically and politically. Subsequently the interpretation of justice itself changes. These theological shifts must be studied in terms of the changing sociohistorical context in which they occurred.

In particular, we know that the roughly egalitarian tribal organization of early Israel did not last.²⁶ Gradually the monarchy arose. At first simply a response to external threats, specifically from the Philistines, this centralized military leadership extended the state apparatus and embarked on wars of expansion. Inevitably, stratification also emerged

²³ G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. by C. Ina and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll: Orbis), p. 157. Cf. also Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 65.

²⁴ G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. by D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Bros., 1962), I, p. 370.

²⁵ Cf. J. R. Donahue, "Biblical Perspectives on Justice," in J. C. Haughey, ed., *The Faith That Does Justice* (New York: Paulist, 1977), pp. 68-85.

²⁶ Gottwald, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary*, pp. 466-67.

within Jewish society, as urban-based merchants and landlords concentrated wealth in their own hands, backed in this endeavor to a large extent by implicit state power, including the judicial system. Biblical research concerning later Jewish history, then, will have to take account of both the group and class struggles within Israel for access to resources, status and power, and the tendencies for the groups within the nation to unite in opposition to foreign intruders throughout the monarchic, exilic and post-exilic periods.

The task of sorting out these conflicts and their ramifications for our understanding of justice and of the claim for the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed remains to be done. We do know, however, that by the time of Jesus' ministry Jewish elites had emerged whose theology was distant from the plight of the oppressed. For, in collusion with Roman imperial forces, these elites were engaged in the oppression of the majority of Jewish people. Jesus' own life and death can only be understood in this context.

The social context of first century Palestine was indeed complex.²⁷ But some examination of this context is necessary to clarify the significance of Jesus' life and teaching for the claim of the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed. After the Exile of the population of Israel to Babylonia, Palestine was always subject to neighboring empires, at the same time that it was dominated from within by a rich class of landowners. Rome became master of the region under Pompeii in 63 B.C., and its domination of Palestine took several forms. First the people were exploited economically through taxes of various kinds. The official taxes drained from the Palestinian economy each year have been estimated at about 6,000,000 denaries, where one denarius is equivalent to one day of work for one worker. But there were also "unofficial" taxes collected by the Roman officials and their Palestinian allies. There was also political domination, as the Romans sought to coordinate, facilitate and legitimate their rule. Essentially these political ties were established through means of the existing political hierarchy. Of course, at the top was a Roman official; in Judea it was the procurator residing at Cesarea, and over Galilee it was the Roman Legate of Syria, who ruled through the intermediary of King Herod Antipas. But, the Romans ruled as much as possible by coopting the existing political hierarchy. Thus the Procurator of Judea appointed the high priest, choosing him from one of the four powerful families. Moreover, they enlisted the support of the large landowners and the aristocracy, if only through the threat of appropriating their property rights. And they actually recruited native Palestinians into the work of governing on their behalf; members of the high Roman administration were recruited in the aristocracy, and publicans of Jewish origin were recruited to collect the taxes. And finally, there was military domination, the ultimate guarantor of Roman rule.

²⁷ Cf. F. Houtart, "Domination Within the Palestinian Milieu During the First Century A.D.," mimeograph available from Case Studies for the preparation of the "International Study Days for a Society Overcoming Domination," Secrétariat d'appui des journées internationales, 14, Rue Saint-Benoit, 75006 Paris, France; Belo, *Lecture matérialiste de l'Évangile de Marc*.

Internally, Galilee was ruled by a high priest and the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was composed of seventy-one members, who belonged by and large to two groups: the Sadducee party, the families of the high priest and the elders of the aristocratic families, and the group of scribes, Pharisees and priests. The Pharisees, who figure so prominently in the Gospels as opponents of Jesus, were members of the urban middle class, craftsmen, small merchants, etc., and they were closely allied with the scribes, often in opposition to the Sadducees.

In Galilee the Sanhedrin played the role of the supreme court, and in Judea it represented the supreme political power. The temple, then, during this period can be seen as an important seat of political power. In addition, it was also an important seat of economic transactions. All Jews over twelve had to pay an annual temple tax equivalent to two days work; there was also a tax of ten percent of the harvest for the maintenance of the clergy. The Temple also received gifts and alms, and provided the stock market for commerce in victims for the sacrifices (the revenues of which were monopolized by the four families from which the high priest was chosen). Also associated with the Temple was the national treasury. So the seat of religious and political power was simultaneously an important economic power.

The impact of this system of economic and political domination on the majority of Jews was devastating. In the rural areas, there was no middle ground between the laborers and small landowners on the one hand and the rich farmers, who were often absentee landlords, on the other. The dual system of taxation promoted the increasing impoverishment of the masses, at the same time that the increased market for agricultural produce fattened the purses of the rich. In the cities, the workers and even the lower middle class suffered also from the double system of taxation, even as merchants and some other groups benefitted from the inflation and the role of big cities like Jerusalem as centers of consumption. There were, then, three social levels in this system: "the rich who benefit from taxation or at least escape it; the hardworking poor kept on subsistence by taxation; and the destitute who have given up the unequal struggle."²⁸

This exploitation had predictable effects in the lives of the people. There was widespread poverty and hunger. Many of the most widespread diseases can undoubtedly be traced to this condition; some of the blindness, for example, can probably be traced to glaucoma resulting from poor sanitation and the unsettled lifestyle of many poor people. Like heart disease and ulcers today, many of the psychomatic illnesses and cases of demon possession reported in the Gospel record were the natural social-psychological responses to an alienating and oppressive situation.²⁹ Inevitably, too, this situation spawned a resistance movement, the Zealots, who opted for a guerrilla solution against the Romans.

²⁸J. P. Brown, "Techniques of Imperial Control: The Background of the Gospel Event," in *The Bible and Liberation (a Radical Religion Reader)* (Berkeley: Community for Religious Research and Education, 1976), p. 77.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 78.

Their aim was to restore the Jewish state, in its theocratic dimension, in the line of a Davidic messianism; they also favored land reforms.

It is clear, then, that the economic, political, social and religious dimensions of Palestinian life in this period were profoundly inter-related. Inevitably, the theological perspectives of the different groups could not escape entirely the effects of their social locations.³⁰ The Sadducees, for example, included the conservative class of landowners and merchants who affirmed peaceful collaboration with Roman rule; not surprisingly, they, apparently, had no messianic doctrine and opposed contemporary eschatological and apocalyptic currents. The Pharisees, on the other hand, representative of the middle class of small merchants and craftsmen, promoted eschatological and apocalyptic trends, even as some, at least, promoted a pessimistic ideal of human nature, leading to a stress on the reality of the other world and belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Analysis of the Palestinian ethos and institutions is crucial, then, for understanding Jesus' ministry and death. For, in the Gospels Jesus is portrayed as standing with the oppressed in fundamental opposition to the dominant structures and values, and the groups which supported them. Thus, he is portrayed as opposing the Sadducees (Mt 16:1-12), along with John the Baptist (Mt 3:7). There are numerous references to Jesus' opposition to the Pharisees, and theirs to him. For example, they are scandalized by his association with publicans and sinners (Mt 9:-13), at his neglect of ritual absolutions (Mt 15:1ff), at his laxness in the Sabbath observance (Mt 12:2ff), and at his healing on the Sabbath (Lk 14:1-3). On the other hand, Jesus calls the Pharisees a wicked and adulterous generation (Mt 12:38ff), and he condemns their exclusiveness as harsh (Mt 9:9-13) and their rigor in the law as intolerable (Mt 12:2ff). In addition, Jesus is portrayed as driving the moneylenders and dealers in sacrificial animals out of the Temple (Mt 21:12-13), signifying opposition to what the dominant religious ideology and institutions had become.

These reports can only reflect a ministry among the outcast, among those on the margins of society. This claim finds support in studies of the development of early Christianity after Jesus' death. Gager notes, for example, that "Christian communities of the first several centuries derived their adherents from the disinherited of the Roman Empire—slaves, freedmen, freeborn Roman citizens of low rank, and non-Romans . . . of various nationalities."³¹ And Theissen, analyzing the Jesus movement of itinerant charismatics in Galilee immediately after Jesus' death, suggests that these preachers would have found a hearing only "among the laboring and heavy-laden, the poor and hungry whom they bless in their saying." He finds, then, in the wisdom sayings in the Synoptics, the "few ancient traditions in which groups expressed themselves who usually remained dumb. Here we see the world in a perspective 'from below.'"³²

³⁰Houtart, "Domination Within the Palestinian Milieu . . .," p. 4.

³¹*Kingdom and Community*, p. 94.

³²G. Theissen, "Itinerant Radicalism: The Tradition of Jesus Sayings from the Perspective of the Sociology of Literature," trans. by A. Wire, in *The Bible and Libera-*

As a spokesperson for the oppressed, Jesus was subversive of the existing structures and values, and a danger to those who benefitted from them. Not surprisingly, these groups perceived him as dangerous and plotted to execute him. In this they were successful.³³

But Jesus was not simply opposed to the status quo. He also announced the kingdom of God. Not surprisingly, given the social context of Jesus' mission and of the early Christian movement, this kingdom was promised especially to the poor: "How blest are you who are poor; the kingdom of God is yours" (Lk 6:20). And poverty itself appears as a condition for entry. As Gager notes, texts like this reflect "a clearly formulated ethic of poverty, with deep roots in Jewish tradition. They reflect the fact that early believers came primarily from disadvantaged groups and that in return they were rewarded with the promise that poverty, not wealth, was the key to the kingdom."³⁴ Moreover, given this context, it seems inevitable that the kingdom itself symbolizes liberation from sin in all its consequences: exploitation, injustice, hatred, disease—the concrete manifestations of living on the underside of history. Thus, Mary is recorded as responding at hearing that she is to become the mother of Jesus: "the arrogant of heart and mind he has put to rout, he has torn imperial powers from their thrones. The hungry he has satisfied with good things, the rich sent empty away" (Lk 1:51-53). And the author of the third Gospel portrays Jesus as articulating his own ministry in similar terms: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Lk 4:18-19). Of course, the theological meanings of kingdom, poverty, and justice in the Christian scriptures are rich and complex, and exploration of this range of meanings is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the claim of liberation theologians that these symbols include a very concrete historical reference to poverty and exploitation and the transcendence of them is well grounded.³⁵ Thus Sobrino can conclude that "the privileged locale that mediates God in the concrete" is "the oppressed person."³⁶

tion (a *Radical Religion Reader*) (Berkeley: Community for Religious Research and Education, 1976), p. 89. Moreover, because the social situation of these wandering charismatics was probably much like that of Jesus himself, Theissen suggests that more of these sayings should be accepted as authentic (p. 87). Cf. also, Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. by J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 3-4.

³³Bultmann claimed that Jesus was executed by the Romans by mistake, through a misunderstanding of the nature of his activity; cf. "The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus," in C. E. Braaten and R. A. Harrisville, eds. *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), p. 24. But it is easier to assume that the Jewish and Roman officials, and even the crowd that supported them, knew exactly what they were doing. Indeed, they were correct—Jesus was a political as well as religious threat; cf. E. Kasemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 50f.

³⁴*Kingdom and Community*, p. 24.

³⁵Cf. n. 15 above.

³⁶J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, trans. by J. Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978), pp. 394-95.

Clearly, in the context of the two foundational revelatory events in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the oppressed constitute a privileged ground for God's revelation, both as the locale in which this revelation is mediated and as the subjects of this revelation. In other words, the sacred Scriptures point to the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed, those on the bottom and margins of society like the early Israelites and the first Christians.

The above analyses of the early Israelite and early Christian communities are not meant to suggest that only poor people were participants in these movements. On the contrary, both movements undoubtedly included people who would today be included in the middle class: craftsmen, small farmers, etc. But the defining characteristic of this group was undoubtedly their disinherited status; in changing social circumstances they no longer enjoyed the security and status associated with dominant structures and values, and they came to oppose them.³⁷ Rich people too could come to stand for such revolutionary changes, though for them to come to such a position might be as difficult as a camel passing through the eye of a needle (Mt 19:23ff). Such are the pains of conversion for the privileged!

In addition to the biblical grounds, there are also social scientific reasons supporting the claim that, in terms of transcendence of present structures and values, the oppressed represent a privileged perspective. Closer examination of these reasons will also help to clarify why conversion to the perspective of the oppressed, by those who are not oppressed, is so difficult. In addition, it will point to some substantive reasons for the convergence of Christianity and Marxism among some liberation theologians.

It is best to begin concretely. Black, feminist and Latin American liberation theologians all report the experience of discovering that the dominant theological perspectives fail to respond to the experiences of oppressed peoples. More than this, they report that these perspectives actually distort their experience, promoting a picture of themselves and their world which actually inhibits their ability to act creatively in this world. For example, Valerie Saiving Goldstein observed that influential Protestant doctrines of sin and grace do not speak to the experience of women. Notions of sin as prideful self-assertion and grace as leading to self-giving, self-sacrificial love may be adequate to the experiences of many men in Western cultures, but they seem to promote an excess of self-negation among women. Indeed, if, as the feminist movement has clearly shown, the sin of most women is not self-assertion, but self-negation, then these doctrines encourage women to remain in their sin. Clearly a different doctrine of grace and sin is necessary for women.³⁸

³⁷Cf. Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, p. 106; cf. also Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, pp. 39-46.

³⁸V. S. Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* 40 (1960), 100-12. Comparable examples could be given from the perspectives of black theology and liberation theology. Cf. J. D. Roberts, *A Black Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), chap. 2; and J. Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), chap. 1.

These discoveries have led liberation theologians to a hermeneutic of suspicion concerning the social function of dominant theologies; indeed, these theologies are seen as forms of ideology serving the interests of the oppressors by encouraging attitudes of inferiority and subservience toward those in power, by encouraging the oppressed to accept their condition as inevitable, the result of fate or of God's will, and by distorting their perceptions of their world, thereby inhibiting their ability to change it.

But there is more to the rejection of these dominant ideologies than simply that they serve the interests of the oppressors. While they may reflect the requirements of a given social order, and in this limited sense be "true," these ideologies are rejected because they are ultimately irrational and destructive of human possibility in history for all people, destructive of the possibility of more loving relationships, of the possibility of a just society. Accordingly, these discoveries have led liberation theologians to stress a conversion to the experience of the oppressed as a fundamental requirement of doing theology. Both theologically and sociologically, then, dominant perspectives rooted in the experience of elite groups must be rejected by those who wish to serve God in history.

The hermeneutical suspicion of dominant ideologies has entered politics and the social sciences through the writings of Karl Marx. In so far as ideologies reflect the experience and interests of elite groups, the other side of this coin of ideology is the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed. But, if in Marxist theoretical and political traditions a great deal of attention has been paid to the critique of ideology, relatively little has been paid to the issue of the experience of the oppressed as a privileged medium of truth. It seems that there are two reasons for this oversight. First, there has been the Stalinist vulgarization of the notion of "working class truth" and the condemnation of Stalinism has contributed to neglect of the question of the ground of interpretation. Second, there is a tendency within Marxism, which can be traced to Marx's own writings, to assert that the opposite of ideology's distorted perception of truth is science's objective perception; this "solution" removes the issue of interpretive stance from consideration. Nevertheless, an option for the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed is evident in the practice of most Marxist movements; members identify with oppressed workers and others on the margins of society, and commit themselves to the unfolding of a more just society. For example, it was this common commitment to historical praxis with the oppressed that led Latin American theologians to their appropriation of Marxist analyses.³⁹

Clarification of these issues in Marx's writings ultimately requires nothing less than sorting through the meaning of notions like alienation,

³⁹J. Miguez Bonino, *Christians and Marxists* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1976), p. 29. In this connection, see also the liberation theologians' criticisms of German political theology; for example, J. L. Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, trans. by J. Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976), pp. 81, 144-49; and H. Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, trans. by P. Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976), pp. 30-40.

ideology, class, material forces, consciousness, history and science in the continually evolving framework of Marx's thought. Clearly, these concepts are at the very heart of disagreements among interpreters of Marx, and of disagreements over politics among Marxist movements. Resolution of these issues is clearly beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is possible to indicate briefly how a notion like the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed is at the heart of a Marxist perspective.

In Marx's writings the theories of alienation and ideology are very closely related, for ideology is ultimately nothing more than alienated consciousness. As Ollman notes, "the theory of alienation is the intellectual construct in which Marx displays the devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings, on their physical and mental states and on the social processes of which they are a part."⁴⁰ Marx begins his discussion of alienation in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 with a historical observation drawn from contemporary political economy. "We proceed from an actual economic fact. The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size."⁴¹ There are many implications of this fact; Marx discusses them in terms of four dimensions of alienation. The first, concerns the workers' alienation from the products of their labor. Workers become alienated from the products of their labor in the sense that these products are not available to them for their own use. "It is true that labor produces wonderful things for the rich—but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the worker, hovels."⁴² Even starvation does not give workers license to appropriate a greater share of the products of their labor than they receive in wages.

But there is another sense in which workers are alienated from the products of their labor. Potentially it is human nature to be creative, to shape oneself in the process of transforming the world outside oneself in cooperation with other people; but capitalism reduces workers to the status of passive receivers of both their means of subsistence and their very work itself. Cut-off from the process of allocating the results of their work, and perhaps even ignorant of what becomes of these products, they become servants of the objects they produce. Thus, in the process of production, "labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a commodity. . . ."⁴³ Not surprisingly, the worker falls increasingly under the sway of capital, which confronts the worker as "something alien, as a power independent of the producer."⁴⁴

Clearly workers are alienated also in the act of production itself; this is a second dimension of alienation. Marx notes: "The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside him-

⁴⁰ B. Ollman, *Alienation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 131.

⁴¹ *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), III, pp. 271-72.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 273.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

self."⁴⁵ This observation points to the fact that labor is external to the worker. It is external first in the sense that it is not part of the intrinsic nature of workers as productive human beings; in working workers deny rather than confirm themselves. Thus, work is not itself the satisfaction of a need, but "merely a means to satisfy needs external to it." Not surprisingly, as soon as there is no external compulsion, work is shunned like the plague; a second characteristic of the external quality of work, then, is that it is not voluntary but coerced. Finally, work is external to the worker in the sense "that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another."

Clearly, in this respect alienation is alienation from self:

This relation is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker's own physical and mental energy, his personal life—for what is life but activity?—as an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him. Here we have *self-estrangement*.⁴⁶

The third dimension of alienation concerns what Marx, following Feuerbach, labels alienation from species-being. Marx here is referring to the fact that it is in their work on the objective world that people produce themselves and their world. What should be a free, self-conscious, collective project transforming the whole of nature and human nature itself is instead fragmented and distorted. Instead of work's being a vehicle for the individual worker's participation in this collective project of the species, it turns man's species being into a means for his individual existence.⁴⁷

Inevitably, the dimensions of alienation already listed point also to "the estrangement of man from a man." This is a fourth dimension of alienation. "The estrangement of man, and in fact every relationship in which man stands to himself, is realized and expressed only in the relationship in which a man stands to other men. Hence within the relationship of estranged labor each man views the other in accordance with the standard and the relationship in which he finds himself as a worker."⁴⁸ This fact has special implications for one class relationship in particular, for the fact that the products of workers' labor and the productive process itself are alien to them means that someone else must control this activity and its products; someone else who is hostile, alien, powerful and independent is master over both the worker and the work process. Here we are confronting the issue of the division of social classes in capitalist society, and of the ways in which workers, through their very work, create "the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product."⁴⁹

Alienation, then, concerns all the dimensions of human existence. If it finds its origins in the nature of work in capitalist society, it neverthe-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 277-78.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

less pervades all of life in these societies. It is this total nature of alienation in capitalist societies, especially as experienced by those at the bottom of the social order, the workers, many of whom at this period of history were actually starving, that grounds Marx's hope for the future.

Since in the fully-formed proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the *semblance* of humanity, is practically complete; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in their most inhuman form; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need*—the practical expression of *necessity*—is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself. But it cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation.⁵⁰

Ideology is ultimately nothing more than alienated consciousness. And Marx's understanding of it at this period in his life was closely related to this understanding of alienation and of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat.

Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. . . .

We do not start out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.⁵¹

Several observations about the viewpoint outlined in this passage are relevant to our concerns here. First, while Marx had earlier shown appreciation for the range and depth of alienation in capitalist society, he and Engels are here curiously optimistic about the possibility of knowing

⁵⁰ K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), IV, pp. 36-37.

⁵¹ K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited with an introduction by R. Pascal (New York: International Publishers, 1963), pp. 14-15.

the truth. Undoubtedly this optimism is related to their optimism concerning the socialist revolution, which, at this stage, they imagine as not far off; this is the somewhat romantic enthusiasm of the *Communist Manifesto*. Secondly, this optimism is also related to the optimism, widely shared by the classic social scientists, that science, having broken away from the framework and methods of classical metaphysics and theology, was on the verge of great new discoveries. This optimism often took the form of a positivism which projected an understanding of science as the picture-perfect image of reality, the end result of the evolutionary development of knowledge.⁵² This optimism helps to explain the near transparency of material behavior alluded to in Marx's and Engels' comments on ideology. True, they are describing false ideas, but like the image in a *camera obscura* these ideas need only to be put upright to convey the truth, to adequately reflect reality. Marx's understanding of his own scientific project is clearly more subtle and complicated than this; but in passages like the above he certainly gives fuel to those who wish to interpret him as a positivist.

Thirdly, this naive and uncomplicated notion of science is related to a tendency toward a crude materialism in the passage quoted. Most importantly, the analogy suggests that material reality, like the object reflected in the *camera obscura*, is itself upright. It is merely consciousness that is distorted. This image suggests the dichotomy between base and superstructure, between material reality and consciousness, which plagues every interpreter of Marx.

If, in the passage quoted, Marx gives support to those who interpret his perspective as straightforwardly materialist, his writings as a whole may be seen as an attempt to unite what was essential to both idealism and materialism, thus transcending both.⁵³ Nevertheless passages like the above suggest that ideology is mere illusion, a mere "phantom" in the unfolding of history. As we shall see, it is only in his later writings that Marx definitely locates the distortions of consciousness at the very heart of economic activity itself, and thus points to a much more complicated understanding of the relationships between consciousness and material factors.

Finally, alongside the notion of ideology as mere illusion portrayed here, Marx put forward the notion of ideology as the perspective of the ruling class. "In every epoch the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas, that is, the class that is the ruling *material* power of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual power. The class having the means of material production has also control over the means of intellectual production."⁵⁴ While there is much truth in the notion that the ruling class, by virtue of its control over schools, churches, the media, etc.,

⁵²Cf. R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 18-19, 62-63.

⁵³Marx himself called his perspective "naturalism" or "humanism." Cf. D. McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 126.

⁵⁴K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, p. 39; cf. also K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. by S. H. Beer (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), p. 30.

shapes the content of these media to serve their own ends, this is not a very profound or complex explanation of ideology. In other words, ideology still appears on the surface, as if scientifically and politically it was about to be penetrated and the structures which support it overthrown.

Marx's optimism concerning the specter of communism haunting Europe and the new science of political economy in its service may help to explain these early perspectives on ideology alongside his clear awareness of the depth and breadth of alienation in capitalist societies. Similarly, the tendency toward materialism in his thought may be interpreted as a manifestation of his confidence in the historical inevitability of a just society; it may also be interpreted in terms of his own social context in which the apparently autonomous nature of the capitalist market and its independence of human control were widely felt.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, many of the most important questions remain unanswered. In particular, to claim that the power of the ruling class gives them power over ideas does not explain how control over the means of production results in the shaping of consciousness in a distorted way. Similarly, to claim that ideology is illusion does not explain why and how people come to accept these ideas of themselves and their world. Moreover, the copy theory of knowledge implied in the image of the *camera obscura* cannot explain which among the many aspects of reality are copied in the mind. Nor can it explain the source of error; if "consciousness can never be anything else except conscious existence, and the existence of men in their actual life-processes," as Marx claimed, there appears to be no way to explain ideology itself.

The central vision inspiring Marx's work remains unaltered throughout his writings: alienation and the hope of human emancipation in a communist society where people control their own destinies.⁵⁶ But it is only in his later work, in *Capital*, that he provides an analysis of alienation which roots it in the mode of production itself, decisively undermining the tendency to view consciousness as merely a phantom and ideology as merely an illusion. There are, of course, other currents in Marx's earlier thought which point toward a more refined understanding of the relationship between consciousness and material forces. However, without denying that there are these other trends in his early thought, and without denying that there are many intermediate positions between his early and late thought, I would like to turn to his understanding of alienation in *Capital*.

As we have seen above, the most basic issue at stake in the Marxist interpretation of alienation and ideology concerns the relationship be-

⁵⁵Cf. R. Lichtman, "Marx's Theory of Ideology," *Socialist Revolution*, No. 23 (April, 1975), p. 75.

⁵⁶There is much confusion, fueled by disagreements over the nature of science and the relationship between materialism and idealism in Marx's thought, concerning the significance of a utopian vision of future communist society for Marx's analysis. It seems to me that, while it remained at a largely unarticulated level, such a vision played a crucial role in the whole of Marx's thought. Cf. Ollman, *Alienation*, p. 132; McLellan, *Karl Marx . . .*, p. 128; M. Seliger, *The Marxist Conception of Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 50.

tween consciousness and material factors. Very simply, the claim that consciousness is a result of economic activity seems to suppose that economic activity itself is devoid of consciousness. But, if consciousness itself is viewed as an ingredient of production, as it must be; if productive forces cannot be separated from social relations of production because these forces are conscious human beings; if consciousness in the economic sphere, the sphere of work, cannot be separated from consciousness in other spheres, legal, moral, sexual and religious, because it is the same people who participate in these different spheres; then consciousness and the mystification of consciousness, as Lichtman notes, must be viewed as "ingredient in and constitutive of economic exploitation."⁵⁷ This is what is at stake in Marx's notion of the fetishism of commodities.

The fetishism of commodities refers to the misconceptions people have of the products of their own labor due to the fact that these products are exchanged as commodities. It refers to the basic form of social mystification, the tendency to see the relations among persons, the producers of commodities, as relations among things, the commodities themselves. Marx identifies the notion of value as the key which unlocks this mystery. Value, attributed to widely different kinds of products requiring widely different kinds and amounts of labor, expresses the apparently objective equality of all sorts of human labor. But, "it is only by being exchanged that the products of labor acquire, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility."⁵⁸ Commodities, then, are the medium through which apparently independent producers relate to one another.

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labor appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor.⁵⁹

In commodity production, then, workers produce independently of the needs and capacities of others, or of themselves for that matter. The focus of their endeavors is on calculating privately the ratios of exchange in the market place. But value itself is a social product just as much as language,⁶⁰ even if it comes to have a life of its own.

The character of having value, when once impressed upon products, obtains fixity only by reason of their acting and re-acting upon each other as quantities of value. These quantities vary continually, independently of the will, foresight and action of the producers. To them, their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them.⁶¹

⁵⁷Lichtman, "Marx's Theory of Ideology," pp. 57-58.

⁵⁸K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. by F. Engels (New York: Random House [The Modern Library], 1906), I, p. 84.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 86.

Commodity production, then, represents both the privatization of life and a newer, deeper form of mutual dependence. It is as if individuals had agreed, unconsciously, to treat each other as private through a social act.⁶² The process is mystifying precisely because it obscures its own social nature, because it appears to be unfolding according to its own laws, independently of the producers.

In these passages from *Capital* Marx interprets ideology as generated in the mode of production itself. No longer, as suggested in earlier analyses, is it mere illusion, or merely the result of the power of the ruling class over the media. Rather, the illusion becomes real; by attributing an independent life to commodities people succeed in giving them power for regulating their own existence.⁶³ Not surprisingly, money becomes the measure of all things, and people generally see it everywhere reproducing itself, in the rent from property, for example, or in the interest from lent or invested capital. Not surprisingly too, workers come to see "the relations connecting the labor of one individual with that of the rest, . . . not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things."⁶⁴ Here, Marx himself, to make his point, is asserting the reality of the very fetishism he is analyzing: social relations exist among people, but in capitalism they take on the form of relations among things!

The distinctive feature of the ideology generated in the production of commodities and the secret of its power is the illusion of permanence.⁶⁵ We see the laws governing the relations among commodities as natural laws, universal and immutable. The significance of this fact lies in the necessary connection between permanence and powerlessness. We are most profoundly alienated precisely in our conviction of our inability to change our situation, to throw off our alienation. We are blind to the fact that in creating a social world, we are also capable of changing it. As we have seen above, this kind of ideology is generated at the very heart of the capitalist mode of production itself.

There are important continuities between this view of ideology and Marx's earlier views. In particular, ideology is still understood as illusion, a false way of understanding ourselves and our reality. But it is not merely illusion, for it conveys a "truth," namely that concerning the preconditions for the existing capitalist society. For example, Marx points out that the categories of bourgeois economy "are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities."⁶⁶ The maintenance of this order requires that workers believe that it and their places in it are "natural" and unchangeable; and in Marx's view the categories and framework of conventional political

⁶²Lichtman, "Marx's Theory of Ideology," p. 61.

⁶³Ollman, *Alienation*, p. 202.

⁶⁴Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 84.

⁶⁵Lichtman, "Marx's Theory of Ideology," p. 67.

⁶⁶Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 87.

economy do just that.⁶⁷ In this sense, the dominant ideology expresses the truth of the ruling class whose interests lie in promoting the current order; their experience and interests conspire, so to speak, to promote their view of the world and to support their claims for its truthfulness even when they are not self-consciously manipulating the media to support their viewpoint. Indeed, the illusory nature of this ideology can only be penetrated from the perspective of the analysis of a different kind of society, feudalism for example, or, more importantly, from the perspective of a vision of a more human society, the communist society of the future.⁶⁸

There is not space here to explore the suggestions Marx gives throughout his writings for understanding the various ways in which the fetishism of commodities is transmitted to other institutions, affecting each in a distinct way; this is the arena of the ideology critique of the media, education, religion, etc. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the passages in *Capital* on ideology signal a different appreciation of the issues of consciousness and false consciousness from that involved in his earlier analyses. Undoubtedly this shift in views is related to the failures of revolutionary movements to bring forth a new communist society as quickly as first expected. In this perspective a crude materialism will no longer suffice. Now, more than earlier, the opposition between appearance and reality is a fundamental dimension of capitalist society.⁶⁹ A simple affirmation about science, a simple empiricism, is no longer sufficient to the task of demystifying capitalist exploitation. From this point of view the fundamental questions are those concerning the very possibility of penetrating the mystifications which obscure capitalist society and which inhibit the struggles for justice and a new society. This brings us to the notion of praxis.

Before turning to this notion, however, it is important to look briefly at the different ways in which capitalism alienates different classes. In his earliest writings Marx described the alienation of the working class as total; for this reason they were the bearers of the historical future. Capitalists are also alienated—everyone is in such a society. But their alienation is significantly different, because of their different relationship to the process of production. They determine the form and duration of the workers' work, but are not themselves directly engaged in this

⁶⁷In a similar way sexism and racism are manifested in constellations of attitudes which the oppressed themselves must internalize if the oppressive systems in which they live are to continue unchanged. Cf. Freire's notion of "the oppressor within" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. by M. B. Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 29-30; and F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by C. Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968).

⁶⁸The issue of a utopian vision of a better society is far from the concrete empirical issues the social sciences are accustomed to dealing with; indeed, it verges on theological issues of faith and hope. Here, it seems to me, theologians have an important contribution to make in helping to clarify the nature and significance of faith, hope, transcendence, in everyday life, in the struggles for justice, and in the social sciences. For a brief but provocative beginning in this direction, cf. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, pp. 232-50.

⁶⁹J. Seigel, *Marx's Fate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 317.

work. They are also not dominated by products in the same way as are workers; for they control, to a greater extent than do workers, the allocation of the products, although within the limits of a competitive market. Similarly, they enjoy greater ability to consume products than do workers, within the limits of what the market produces.

Not surprisingly, the different experience of the labor process results in a different way of seeing the world, and of themselves.

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognizes estrangement as its *own power* and has in it the *semblance* of a human existence.⁷⁰

In other words, the capitalist is alienated too, but is less likely to recognize this fact.

In Marx's thought the opposite of alienated activity and alienated consciousness is praxis. The significance of this term can only be understood in terms of the intellectual traditions with which Marx wrestled. I have argued above that the tendency toward a crude materialism evident in Marx's early comments on ideology is only one strand in his thought concerning the relationship between economic factors and consciousness, or between base and superstructure. His later analysis of the fetishism of commodities supports this claim; but, in fact, a deeper appreciation of the active role of consciousness in history was present from the beginning. Thus Bernstein can point to the theory of praxis as the key to understanding Marx's basic outlook from his early speculation to his mature thought.⁷¹

This theory involves the transcendence of both traditional materialism and traditional idealism, for it promotes the view that people themselves make their own history through producing their own means of life.⁷² Thus, nothing could be farther from the overall thrust of Marx's thinking than a crude materialism which sees the forces moving history in terms of some kind of matter regulated by mechanical laws. Rather, at the most basic level people are involved in making history; actuality is active, not passive. In this view human nature is seen as goal-directed or purposeful, and as embodied in the products of human activity. And consciousness is understood to be an aspect or movement of praxis itself. People make history, then, but in an important sense they also make themselves; they are what they do.

In this perspective alienation occurs when people become the slaves of their own embodied activity, when the products they produce gain mastery over and dehumanize them. As we have seen, in his early writings Marx described the pervasive nature of alienation in capitalist societies, and in *Capital* he located its sources in commodity produc-

⁷⁰ K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Holy Family* . . . , p. 36.

⁷¹ R. J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. xi. Cf. also Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p. 19.

⁷² Cf. Marx's First Thesis on Feuerbach, in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. by L. D. Easton and K. H. Guddat (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday [Anchor], 1967), p. 400.

tion, that congealed form of human activity in which the products of human labor appear as impersonal entities ruled by impersonal laws. But this analysis of the alienation of thought and action, and of its roots in the system of capitalist production itself, stands in Marx's thought in tension with a vision of a more human society. Yet this possibility becomes a real possibility, Bernstein notes, only "though a radical transformation of this objectified alienated condition—by revolutionary praxis."⁷³ A new integration of thought and action in a revolutionary project is, then, Marx's response to capitalist exploitation and oppression.

But as we have seen, alienation is experienced differently by different classes. Accordingly, while revolutionary praxis aims at the overcoming of alienation as it is experienced by each class in capitalist societies, while it aims at the liberation of all people, its fundamental starting place is the experience of the exploited themselves. Of course, it is not impossible for capitalists, or members of other classes, to join in this project for a new society. But it is unlikely not only because of the personal stakes such people enjoy in the system, but more importantly, because their experience and social context promotes only a fragmented and incomplete understanding of the impact of capitalism on workers and others at the margins of society, and, usually, only a distorted and ineffectual response to it.

Certainly after the 1840's at least Marx did not naively believe that the exploited in capitalist societies will soon rise up. Nor did he specify, even in his later writings, the process by which some become radicalized and actively committed to unfolding a new society, and others remain inactive or become actively reactionary. Nevertheless, his ideas have become so historically influential, in part because he pointed to the historical context for understanding exploitation and overcoming it: the experience of those exploited within the capitalist mode of production. Thus, we find in the Marxist perspective, too, support for the claim of the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed.

It is clear that Marx's analysis of alienation and ideology is incomplete. Yet, the elements of his analysis remain as signposts guiding subsequent research. It is not possible to review here the development of the sociology of knowledge as it has been informed by Marx's insights. One example, perhaps, will give an indication of the centrality of his concern in continuing discussions of these issues. Karl Mannheim, in what is probably the most influential book on ideology, *Ideology and Utopia*, picks up important threads of the approach to the problem of ideology outlined by Marx. He is particularly concerned with the whole of society and with the possibility of a truth which transcends the particularities of the perspectives of particular groups;⁷⁴ nevertheless, he acknowledges that "political-historical knowledge is always partial and sees things only from certain perspectives, that it arises in connec-

⁷³Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*, p. 75. Cf. also K. Axelos, *Alienation, Praxis, and Techné in the Thought of Karl Marx*, trans. by R. Bruzina (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 149.

⁷⁴K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, trans. by L. Wirth and E. Shils (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936), p. 161.

tion with collective group interests, and develops in close contact with these. . . ."⁷⁵ Thus, he insists that research into the interrelations of social position, motives and points of view is crucial in understanding the socially unconscious determinants of knowledge.⁷⁶

Perhaps because of the brand of Marxism dominant in his own day, Mannheim was less concerned with the problem of ideology and social power than with the general issue of the social factors shaping all knowledge, and he was more optimistic about the ability of intellectuals as a distinct social stratum to see more clearly and universally in the efforts toward a more human society. However, a sympathetic reading of Mannheim points toward important conclusions reached by Marx. Thus, in his review of Mannheim's work Baum concludes that "we must construct the unity of the human family before we will be able to formulate truth and values in a manner that is truly universal."⁷⁷ And he notes that the first move "in overcoming the social dependency of knowledge is to listen to the oppressed."⁷⁸

Increasingly, among Christians, there is a growing sensitivity to Marx's insights—insights which are coming to be seen as crucial to the understanding of our faith itself. One of the most important points of convergence between these two streams of thought concerns the notion of praxis. As we have seen above, one of the most important elements of the legacy of Marx is his understanding of praxis, his insistence that theory can not be separated from praxis.⁷⁹ The implications of this notion for theology are far-reaching. Dulles, for example, has pointed out that Christians are increasingly aware that their faith involves certain social commitments; this recognition, in his view, involves a mutation of the concept of the faith itself.⁸⁰ In the past, notions of faith tended to emphasize the passivity of the believer before God. But an understanding of faith informed by the notion of praxis, such as that articulated by liberation theologians, insists that the activity of God in shaping the content of faith includes the activity of believers, so that this action feeds back into their perception of the word of God.⁸¹ This understanding of faith, Dulles suggests, has a solid biblical basis, and it is a definite advance over other ways of understanding the faith.⁸²

But a theological perspective informed by the analysis of biblical texts and the Marxist perspective presented here will also want to insist that a truly Christian praxis must be informed in the first place by the

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁷⁷ G. Baum, *Truth Beyond Relativism: Karl Mannheim's Sociology of Knowledge* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1977), p. 72.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁷⁹ Cf. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*; and J. E. Smith, "The Reflective Turn, the Logical Turn, the Pragmatic Outcome," *The Monist* 53 (October, 1969), 588-605.

⁸⁰ A. Dulles, "The Meaning of Faith Considered in Relationship to Justice," in J. C. Haughey, ed., *The Faith that does Justice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 12.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸² Cf. also Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, chap. 10.

experience of the oppressed. As we have seen, this claim can be made on two grounds: (1) analysis of the social context and theological content of the foundational revelatory events of the Bible, and (2) Marxist social scientific analyses of the social forces shaping consciousness.

It is important to recognize that this convergence of a biblically informed Christianity and Marxist analysis on the point of the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed is itself a historical fact with profound implications. For a Christianity committed to the struggles of the oppressed for justice would change the very nature of our world. Indeed, it is this convergence between Christians and Marxists concerning this starting point of commitment to the oppressed in the context of an emancipatory praxis that has led some Christians to opt for Marxism; only this social scientific approach in the context of organized struggles for justice, they feel, enables them to live out their Christian commitment to justice in a knowledgable and effective way.⁸³

These developments make us aware that recognition of the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed is no mere methodological starting point. It is a starting point, but it involves commitment to the struggles of the oppressed which imply a whole life-style, and a whole way of doing theology. Sobrino makes this point well. He suggests that "we cannot do Christology at all except within the framework of the trinitarian reality of God."⁸⁴ Recognizing that the most important contribution of liberation theology is to have shifted the basic issue from the content of theology to the precondition for doing any Christian theology,⁸⁵ Sobrino articulates the implications of this claim:

We are trying to attain an understanding of Jesus based on a praxis that follows Jesus in proclaiming the coming of the kingdom, in denouncing injustice, and in realizing that kingdom in real life—even if only partially. That, in turn will lead to a new round of discipleship. Insofar as we keep that process alive and operative, we effectively express our hope in the mystery of the Father and the coming of his kingdom. We also provide the most radical and thorough verification of the truth of Christology: i.e., that Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father. For we thereby show that through his Spirit he is continually capable of raising up followers and shaping other human beings in his image.⁸⁶

In conclusion, this perspective suggests absolute limits to the claims of pluralism. To make this point black liberation theologian James Cone returns to the notion of heresy. Wishing to avoid any suggestion of a renewed persecution of heretics, he nevertheless insists that this question is important for the very life of the Church in our time. "We need to be clear," he maintains, "about the subject to which our proclamation points and the relation of our words about that subject to

⁸³ Cf., for example, D. Sölle, "Beyond Mere Dialogue: On Being Christian and Socialist," the 1977 Earl Lectures at the Pacific School of Religion, available in mimeograph from ACTS, 3540 14th St., Detroit, MI 48208.

⁸⁴ Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, p. xxiv.

⁸⁵ Clearly this claim can be attributed to black theology and feminist theology as well.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xxv-xxvi.

our actions in the world."⁸⁷ In his view, any interpretation of the Gospel which fails to see Jesus Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed is heretical; and "any view of the gospel that fails to understand the Church as that community whose work and consciousness are defined by the community of the oppressed is not Christian and is thus heretical."⁸⁸ In the light of our investigation of the biblical and social scientific grounds for the claim of the hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed, this is the context within which we must debate the nature of faith and the limits of pluralism in our own time.

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⁸⁷Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 36.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 37.