

## PANEL: POWER IN LIBERATION THEOLOGY— THREE THESES

As the title indicates, the reflection of this workshop focuses on power through the medium of liberation theology. The issue is approached from three different points of view by short thesis statements which seek to define the issue itself and thus lay down a fundamental position and a structure for further theological development.

The question of power in liberation theology is itself ambivalent for it can refer to what the liberationist interpretation of Christianity says about power or to the power exercised by the liberationist movement and theology themselves. And beyond this, the term power is so elementary that it can be viewed from multiple points of view and take on a variety of meanings. In spite of this openness of the topic and the different viewpoints represented here, there is a remarkable complementarity in the following three statements.

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### THESIS I

*Whether theology is praxis or ideology turns on these issues: a) Does it acknowledge that it is an exercise of power? b) On whose behalf does it determine the religious agenda? c) Where is it situated in regard to the conscientization and struggle of the oppressed within the church and the world?*

Steven Lukes in his book *Power: A Radical View* proposes three viewpoints from which power can be analyzed. The first viewpoint he calls the liberal view. For Lukes' liberals, power is the ability of some people to get others to do things that those others would not otherwise do. In this perception of power, the focus is on decision-making and observable conflict. In the liberal view, consensus is achieved whenever there is a lack of observable conflict. The second view Lukes calls reformist. For a reformist, power is the ability of some people to prevent others from participating in the decision-making process. In the reformist view, the focus is on not only decision-making, but also non-decision-making. Consensus is achieved wherever there is a lack of overt and covert conflict. The third view of power is that which Lukes himself espouses. He calls it the radical view. And it is the most important for our purposes. For Lukes, power is the ability of some people to get others to want what is in the interest of the powerful and not in their own interest. The focus in the analysis of power for Lukes is not merely on the decision-making process and participation in it, but also on the control of the agenda which sets those processes in motion. In fact, we might say that power is the ability to control the agenda and exclude conflict by influencing, shaping, and determining the thoughts and desires of those excluded from power. Power, then, shapes the

perceptions, cognitions, and preferences of the powerless in such a way that they accept their subservient role in the existing order of things. For Lukes, genuine consensus is achieved only when there is a lack of overt, covert, and latent conflict. (Latent conflict exists wherever there is a contradiction between the interests of those in power and the real interests of those excluded from power.)

I would now like to suggest some ramifications that Lukes' analysis might have for the doing of theology. First of all, power is not simply a physical thing such as getting someone to do something, nor does it merely involve the control of the means of production or the legislative process. Crucial to the exercise of power is the control of what is communicated. Desires, percepts, and ideas become the stuff of which power is made. Theology throughout its history has played a very powerful role in Christianity by its capacity to define how crucial Christian ideas are to be understood. In fact, conflicts which have emerged recently between the theological community and the official magisterium might very well be seen as conflicts over the determination of the agenda. One might consider the debate over the ordination of women. Much of that debate turns on such issues as: (1) is the ordination of women an open or closed question; (2) how are key concepts such as *priest*, *apostle*, *presbyter*/*bishop*, etc. in the New Testament and the eucharistic minister as representative of Christ to be understood? What Lukes would call to our attention is that the ability to get certain questions asked in the public forum and to set the terms which govern the subsequent discussion is a significant exercise of power.

Furthermore, the consensus which theologians endeavor to create can no longer be understood as a matter of bringing conflicting parties into agreement or of preventing church officials or theological peers from excluding nettlesome voices from being heard. The desired and desirable consensus is lacking until the voices of the powerless have entered the discussion. And that means that conscientization of the oppressed in the Church and the world is integral to the achievement of the consensus towards which theology strives.

It seems to me that the challenge which liberation theology poses to its more traditional counterparts can well be viewed in light of the above. Liberation theologians have called to our attention the role which theology plays in the exercise of power and the necessity of hearing the voices of the oppressed if we are to do truly Christian theology. To put the matter very succinctly, I would like to propose the following thesis for our consideration: liberation theology would say to us that our theology is praxis or ideology (and here I am assuming that no one of us would care to admit that we are doing ideology) depending on how we answer three questions: do we admit that theology is an exercise of power and is involved in the power struggles of the Church? Does it realize that its ability to determine the agenda at the outset of serious religious discussion in the Church constitutes that exercise of power? For whose benefit does theology exercise that power and is it in contact with those who are oppressed in the Church and the world, participating in their process of being conscientized and struggling to overcome that oppression?

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