

## A RESPONSE TO GREGORY BAUM

It is a pleasure to respond to the wide-ranging and properly provocative paper of my friend and *Concilium* colleague Gregory Baum. In the brief time allotted I will simply list some issues which seem to deserve further reflection from us all—myself and Gregory Baum included.

The paper of Gregory Baum is rich, provocative and, in its central insistence on all theology becoming an explicitly political theology, typically Baumian—i.e., open, even generous, to other positions, yet clear, direct and insistent in its convictions and commitments to radical political thought and to political theology. More than any theologian I know, Gregory Baum has, from his early theological work in ecumenical theology, to his more recent work in political theology, helped us all to see one believable path from the concerns of the sixties to those of the eighties.

His paper is indeed rich in its reflections across disciplines and topics. This same wide-ranging richness is also part of its problem. For it is not always clear, in reading this paper, what kind of question is being addressed and by means of what disciplinary criteria (social science or political theory or economic theory or theology proper?).

The paper begins straightforwardly with an announcement of a theme: the social context of North American, specifically United States, theology. It begins descriptively (via a sociology of participant observation) but later shifts to prescriptive discourse—viz., to a radical political theology and a form of critical social theory. The relationship between these descriptive and prescriptive discourses is not entirely clear. Sometimes Baum appeals to a sociology of 'participant observation.' At other times he is more clearly engaged in critical social theory. At still other times he is engaged in historical and cultural generalizations (e.g., on American 'pluralism' and on particular American thinkers and movements). At still other times he is engaged in explicitly theological judgments on 'reformist' or 'liberal' or 'pluralistic' proposals. I think that Professor Baum can agree with me that before anyone agrees with all his observations (descriptive and prescriptive and sometimes a combination of the two) further reflection on several issues is necessary: for example, on the historical and much-debated issue of 'American exceptionalism' on radical social movements; on the viability in the context of the United States (and, perhaps, as Apel and Habermas seem to suggest, yet more widely) of the tradition of American pragmatism as other than merely 'reformist' or 'middle-class'; and further clarification of the explicitly theological criteria involved in Baum's many value-judgments. All these further clarifications would help enormously. Otherwise a reader could be left aided, to be sure, by many penetrating individual insights but puzzled by how (by what criteria, especially theo-

logical) the descriptive and prescriptive components of this rich and often brilliant paper relate.

But rather than continuing this line of reflection, I will conclude with a few more substantive reflections on the ambiguity of the American experiment—ones that are, I believe, in fundamental continuity with those of Gregory Baum himself.

History is not only contingent: history is interruptive. All Western history is, through and through, an interruptive narrative with no single theme and no controlling plot. To be an American is to live with pride by participating in a noble experiment of freedom and plurality. But to be a white American is also to belong to a history which encompasses the near-destruction of one people (the North American Indians, the true native Americans) and the enslavement of another people (the Blacks). Not to honor the ancient Greeks as our ancestors is possible only for those who lack any sense of true greatness. But to honor and belong to the Greeks is also to recognize the interruptions in their, i.e., our history: the role of the other as barbarian; the vindictive policies of imperialist Athens towards Melos and other colonies; the unexamined role of women and slaves in the polis; the cries of the Athenians themselves in the quarries of Syracuse.

Indeed, the more one reads and loves our greatest Western classics—the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, the Greeks, the Romans, and all their later descendants including the American classics—their true claim to our attention becomes like the claim to attention of Greek tragedy itself. Those plays concentrate one's attention by their undeniable power and greatness. They stir one's conscience with their demands for nobility of thought and action. They expose our greatest inauthenticity and complacency. At the same time they also force us to resist their own half-concealed tragic flaws.

To see how ambiguous our history has been, however, is not simply to retire into that more subtle mode of complacency, universal and ineffectual guilt. Rather, as Abraham Joshua Heschel insisted: "Not all are guilty but all are responsible." Responsible here means capable of responding: capable of facing the interruptions in our history; capable of discarding any scenarios of not forgetting the subversive memories of individuals and whole peoples whose names we do not even know. If we attempt such responses, we are making a beginning and only a beginning in assuming historical responsibility.

To risk conversation with our classic texts should be more like meeting such characters as Amos and Isaiah, Ruth and Jeremiah, as Oedipus and Antigone, even Medea and Herakles, than it is like conceiving the classics simply as further examples of ideology. To suspect the presence of ideology is one thing. To face the actuality of the ideologies in ourselves and even in our most beloved classics is quite another.

Our best critical theories, on this reading, should always inform our readings of the classics but not be allowed to take that conversation over. We make things too easy for ourselves if classic texts become nothing more than occasions to illustrate general theory. We do not need to converse with Job's comforters or his critics. We are all too familiar with them in ourselves. We need to face Job. Resistance to the classics can also be as necessary a response in any conversation

with them as any recognition of their greatness. Any method, any theory of interpretation, any argument can aid that conversation. But none can replace it.

No classic text comes to us without the plural and ambiguous history of effects of its own production and all its former receptions. Nor does any classic event, be it the Renaissance, the Reformation or the Enlightenment. "Every great work of civilization," as Walter Benjamin insisted, "is at the same time a work of barbarism." Plurality seems an adequate word to suggest the extraordinary variety which any study of language shows and any study of the variety of receptions of any classic documents. Ambiguity may be too mild a word to describe the strange mixture of great good and frightening evil that our history reveals. And yet, at least until more adequate and probably new words are coined, ambiguity will have to suffice.

Historical ambiguity means that a once seemingly clear historical narrative of progressive Western enlightenment and emancipation including American has now become a montage of classics and newspeak, of startling beauty and revolting cruelty, of partial emancipation and ever more subtle forms of entrapment. Ambiguity is certainly one way to describe our history.

The good, the true, the beautiful, and the holy are present in our American history. These realities need continual retrieval by unrelenting conversation with all the great classics from the Puritans and the American Enlightenment forward. But we are in dire need of new strategies for facing the interruption of radical evil in our history. What kind of conversation can aid us here? What kind of arguments will help?

As before, so too here, the search should not be for the one and only way to move forward. Rather, in keeping with the pluralistic strategy defined so far, we can say again with Kenneth Burke: "Use all that can be used." Here, too, we can discover or invent new strategies to carry forward the struggle for some emancipation and some enlightenment. We can develop new and more complex narratives that elicit the subversive memories of those individuals and peoples whose stories have been distorted by the compulsive narratives of the Faustian victors. We should abandon any narratives empowered, however latently, by either new versions of Boussuet's optimism or Spengler's pessimism. Optimism and pessimism do not help us reach a true understanding of the plurality and ambiguity of American pluralism and ambiguity. Resistance, attention, and hope are more plausible and more theological strategies. That is, I believe, also the heart of Baum's own Christian theological prescription.

The twentieth century's American interpretation of language and history, has proved an unnerving journey including the discovery that our discourse is not only dispersed but bears within itself the whole ambiguous history of the effects of power. That history of effects can work silently but no less effectively to exclude everything except 'what goes without saying.' We may continue to try to persuade ourselves of our autonomy, our innocence, and our idealism. Our theories can become exercises in passive contemplation of mere possibilities, or deceptively hard exercises excluding anything not fitting an already determined model. Our theories and our conversations can become, however, what they in fact always were: limited, fragile, necessary exercises in reaching relatively adequate knowledge of language and history alike.

In one sense, what Gregory Baum and the other speakers at this conference help us to see anew is that this entire journey has brought us back to where we began: to reflect on the beginnings of modernity in what palimpsest of events, symbols, texts, movements and persons we must now hesitantly name the American experiment. We have not resolved our original puzzlement, how to interpret that event. And yet, perhaps through that very return we now know that we do not know that place—our American pluralistic and ambiguous place—for the first time.\*

DAVID TRACY  
*The Divinity School*  
*University of Chicago*

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\*Some of these reflections are taken, in emended form, from Tracy's forthcoming book *Plurality and Ambiguity: Religion, Hermeneutics, Hope* (Harper and Row, 1987).