

A RESPONSE TO JOHN P. MEIER

Professor Meier's paper makes a provocative beginning for our Society's reflections this year on the sources of theology.

The immediate purpose of his contribution is clear. He acknowledges liberation theology's great promise of renewal for theology and for the life of the church. So he desires to advance it by "fraternal correction"; that is, by pointing out the defects in its use of historical methods as it seeks to ground its program on "that scholarly will-o-the-wisp, the historical Jesus." To make his case concrete and specific, he discusses works of two theologians, Jon Sobrino and Juan Luis Segundo.

His analysis leads him to urge liberation theologians to broaden their base beyond the elusive "historical Jesus"; to draw instead upon the full christologies of the gospel writers; to follow the example of Schillebeeckx in his "nuanced, differentiated, many-tiered approach"; to "make the whole Bible—and the whole Bible's witness to the whole Christ—a true source for their theology."

In its starkest terms, the most significant question posed by Professor Meier's paper is this: Do the methods of historical criticism hold a veto power over anything which liberation theologians (or any other theologians, for that matter) may say about the "historical Jesus"?

I take it that Professor Meier would answer "Yes" to this question; that, in his view, such a veto power is the prerogative of historical criticism. For he not only argues that Sobrino and Segundo fail to meet the requirements of historical method in their portraits of the historical Jesus. He proceeds to charge Sobrino with "proof-texting" and Segundo with being "haphazard and eclectic." This, of course, is academic language which denies and dismisses the value of another's work.

Therefore, when they speak of the "historical Jesus," may responsible theologians now say only what can pass through the sieve of historical criticism? If so, an impasse—indeed, an unbridgeable chasm—necessarily separates the liberation theologians from the exegetes.

On the one hand, our Latin American colleagues are not likely to accept Meier's "fraternal correction" nor his proposal that they broaden their base beyond the historical Jesus. As elusive as he may be, Sobrino and Segundo are not about to surrender the "historical Jesus" as the basis and starting point of their christologies. They know only too well that dehistoricized Christs have been turned into idols which tolerate and even legitimate suffering in Latin America.¹ More-

¹Jon Sobrino, *Jesus in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987; original, 1982) 58-59.

over, they love Jesus too much to allow that religious manipulation to continue.² From their perspective, Meier's offer to help looks a lot like a Trojan horse.

On the other hand, who pays serious attention to "proof-texters," to those whose work is haphazard and eclectic? Theology that ignores fundamental demands of scholarship contributes nothing to authentic renewal. Those who acknowledge the indispensable contributions of historical criticism to contemporary theology will ignore liberation theologians like Sobrino and Segundo if they are guilty of these accusations. But then the great promise of Latin American liberation theology will not be fulfilled.

Perhaps the chasm can be bridged and the promise of liberation theology undimmed if we broaden our perspective on this debate. I suggest that Sobrino and Segundo are not inept amateurs in the academic game they have chosen to play. Rather, they are engaged in systematic theological reflection which, like all such reflection today, is based on a number of different but mutually related sources. These sources include but are not limited to the results of historical investigation.

In the nature of the case, footnotes do not disclose all the sources of a particular theological work. Footnotes may be downright misleading. They may purport to be comprehensive, but they cannot delineate precisely that critically important source for theology of which we have become acutely aware in our own time: experience—both individual and cultural.

Now the experience which constitutes the distinctive characteristic and source for Latin American liberation theology is a suffering which beggars description in kind and number. Those who suffer are not only a major source for liberation theology but they are also its primary audience.³ When we North Americans read liberation theology, we are overhearing an anguished communal exploration of the good news Jesus embodies and proclaims. Those explorers attend to but refuse to be governed by what Professor Meier calls "the rules of the academic game." Injustice, oppression, suffering, and death: these constitute the main lenses through which the Gospels are read in Latin America, not the methods of historical criticism.

But then should the Latin Americans always check their understanding of Jesus revealed by suffering against the Jesus revealed by historical criticism to insure the accuracy of their portrait? If they do not, are they shoddy in their work or guilty of making Jesus the instrument of their political programs? Not necessarily.

Historical methods are important but limited in their scope. The issue of their role and limits became inescapable for Roman Catholicism in the so-called

²Ibid. 12.

³Thus, for example, Sobrino: "It may be that the reader will find here some theoretical advance: a stronger emphasis on relating Jesus not only to the kingdom of God but also to the God of the Kingdom, a new effort to root faith in Jesus in the faith of the church in Christ. This certainly is my aim. But my aim has been above all to foster clear vision and bold courage in Christians who follow Jesus, who seek conversion, who battle for justice by struggling with oppression, who defend the cause of the poor and the oppressed. If these writings help these Christians a little, they will have more than fulfilled their purpose" (xiv; see also 10).

"Modernist crisis." In an illuminating correspondence with Alfred Loisy, Maurice Blondel argued that "the accumulated experience of generations of Christians and my own intimate experience" were reliable sources of knowledge of Jesus, in addition to historical methods.⁴ More recently, David Tracy has proposed that theologians today can and do believe in "the Resurrection of Jesus on the basis of some personal religious experience of Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen one."⁵

These necessarily undeveloped suggestions mirror the age-old and constant conviction and practice of the church itself. The Risen Jesus who is called upon in prayer, followed in discipleship, recognized in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24.35), and present in the church until the end of time (Matt 28.20) is also he who proclaimed the Kingdom of God from Galilee to Jerusalem and there was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Thus, Vatican II reminds us, "it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed" (*Dei verbum* 9).

Now if the methods of historical criticism do not provide the only access to the historical Jesus, if there are other forms of mediation (collected under the rubric of "Tradition" in *Dei verbum* 8) which yield reliable knowledge of him, the importance of historical criticism is certainly not negated. It is, however, relativized insofar as its methods and conclusions need to be brought into dialogue with the methods and conclusions of other mediations of the historical Jesus. The goal is a theology not less critical but more so.

The dialogue envisioned here would enrich liberation theology and North American theology as well. There are good reasons for the dominance of historical methods among those available to contemporary theology. Yet there are also good reasons why this dominance must not become a dictatorship. We can help liberation theology advance not by asserting a veto power for historical methods but by entering into dialogue with an eagerness to learn. For our Latin American sisters and brothers claim to encounter Jesus in "places" unfamiliar to us, the poor and suffering.⁶ They are confident in speaking about the historical Jesus in light of these encounters. If we listen carefully, perhaps we can collaborate with them in finding the ways to translate their knowledge into theology which squares with the canons of contemporary scholarship.

In a dialogue like this, we too could learn much. Few of us have mastered the art of translating our North American faith communities' experiences of Jesus into terms and genres that satisfy the requirements of scholarship. All too often our attempts come off as privatized, sectarian, or voluntaristic. It is not too much to

⁴See Richard J. Resch, *Christology as a Methodological Problem: A Study of the Correspondence Between Maurice Blondel and Alfred Loisy, 1902-1903* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1979) 175.

⁵David Tracy, "To Trust or Suspect," *Commonweal* 111 (1984) 533.

⁶Sobrinho identifies the places of the real encounter with Christ as liturgy, preaching, the community of believers and the "unequivocal place of encounter with Christ," the poor and oppressed of whom Matthew 25 speaks.

hope that our dialogue with Latin America will help us to meet some of the theological challenges we face here in North America.

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