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READING THE BIBLE IDEOLOGICALLY: SOCIOECONOMIC CRITICISM

FERNANDO F. SEGOVIA

Liberation hermeneutics is the interpretation of biblical and related texts from a self-conscious perspective and program of social transformation. It is understood and practiced in any number of ways, depending on how the situation of oppression and the agenda of liberation are formulated and addressed. As such, a full introduction to the topic would call for an account of liberationist interpretation as conceived and practiced from the point of view of class, culture, ethnicity and race, gender, and politics. Such an introduction would also require an account of how such different angles of vision relate to and interact with one another, historically as well as theoretically. Imperative and instructive as such a task would be, it lies well beyond the scope of the present chapter.

The size of the topic as well as its complexity render it impossible for me to pursue such a comprehensive introduction here. Besides, a number of similar approaches are touched upon elsewhere in this volume. My aims and parameters must, perforce, be more modest. In effect, what I want to do in this article is to explore that particular strand of liberationist hermeneutics that focuses on socioeconomic matters. This focus is readily identified with the emergence of liberation theology in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. To be sure, the emphasis on oppression as material poverty finds its way into most if not all other liberationist discourses, but as it does it is also gradually expanded and hence decentered as other dimensions of oppression are problematized and theorized as well.

Given the breadth of the socioeconomic approach itself, I shall focus on the work of two figures who have played a prominent role in the formulation and grounding of this reading strategy, Clodovis and Leonardo Boff.[1] It will be useful, however, to begin with an overview of the irruption and impact of this type of liberation hermeneutics within the discipline of biblical studies.

Biblical Criticism and Liberation Hermeneutics

Like feminist hermeneutics, liberationist hermeneutics of the socioeconomic type was a harbinger of things to come in the discipline, pointing to and helping to bring about the collapse of the methodological and theoretical consensus that had been operative in biblical criticism for a long time. To understand this, it is necessary to trace the course of the discipline from its inception in the early nineteenth century through its present configuration. Elsewhere I have described this disciplinary history in terms of four paradigms or grand models of interpretation, each with its own distinctive mode of discourse and broad spectrum of approaches. These models are reproduced here by way of summary.[2]

From the early 1800s through the mid-1970s, historical criticism was the paradigm that reigned supreme in biblical studies. Its main opposition came from outside the academy in the form of antimodernist responses such as traditional ecclesiastical theologism, fundamentalist literalism, and pentecostal spiritualism. Historical criticism called for the reconstruction of the ancient (biblical) world and the recreation of the original message of the (biblical) texts as intended by the authors, and for the adoption of a universal and objective reader beyond contextualization and perspective—the scientific reader construct.

It was not until the mid-1970s that the historical consensus began to be challenged and disrupted from the inside. Growing frustration with this longstanding historical paradigm led a number of voices within the discipline to look for inspiration and guidance elsewhere in the academy, especially in the human and social sciences. In the process two new paradigms began to coalesce. On the one hand, literary criticism turned to such fields as linguistics, narratology, rhetoric, and psychoanalysis; on the other hand, sociocultural criticism looked to sociology and anthropology. While literary critics focused on the internal dynamics of texts, sociocultural critics emphasized the external dynamics of the world behind a text and encoded in it. In both cases, however, the operative reader-construct remained, by and large, that of the universal and objective reader beyond contextuality and perspective. Both paradigms underwent swift expansion, broad internal diversification, and increasing sophistication through the 1980s and 1990s, ultimately establishing themselves within the discipline of biblical studies as alternative approaches to historical criticism.

Toward the end of the 1980s, the first signs of yet another paradigm—known as cultural studies—began to appear. As literary criticism and sociocultural criticism focused more and more on the role of the reader in interpretation, the discipline of biblical studies was eventually forced to come face to face with the real or flesh-and-blood reader—a reader-construct that

was no longer universal and objective, no longer beyond contextualization and perspective but inextricably situated and ideological. Within this model the reader was no longer above history and culture but fully implicated in the various layers of human life and fully interested at all times—a reader immersed and engaged in history and culture. Interpretation within this paradigm was regarded as construction on the part of such readers, with respect to the world of (biblical) antiquity (re-constructions of history) and the world of the text (re-creations of meaning). For cultural studies, therefore, the interpreter became as important as the text. While this model is still very much in the making, it has already become a viable alternative to historical criticism. Moreover, the model has already spawned a series of rapidly expanding and highly sophisticated discourses, often in dialogue with one another.

In the course of the last quarter century, therefore, the fairly unitary conception and practice of the discipline of biblical studies has yielded to a situation of radical diversity in method and theory. A further point is in order: Over this same period, the discipline has experienced another and not unrelated sort of diversity. Biblical criticism has become much more socioculturally diverse as more and more critics from the outside have joined its ranks—voices from the non-Western world, the world of Western women, and the world of non-Western minorities in the West. It is in the light of this twofold scenario that the irruption and impact of Liberation Hermeneutics should be situated and analyzed.

In effect, the presence and influence of liberation hermeneutics began to be felt in the discipline in the 1970s. It was introduced into the discipline from the outside and by outsiders on two fronts: on the one hand, from the point of view of Latin American critics and theologians in the form of socioeconomic criticism; on the other hand, from the point of view of Western women in the form of feminist criticism. Although the relationship between these liberationist strands of biblical criticism is certainly worth tracing, my focus here is on socioeconomic criticism. Its irruption and impact I would describe as follows: First, a concern with biblical hermeneutics in general and socioeconomic hermeneutics in particular followed naturally upon the formation of liberation theology in the 1960s and early 1970s; second, such a concern led to an increasingly systematic and sustained exposition of socioeconomic criticism through the 1970s and 1980s; third, this concern with matters socioeconomic foreshadowed the much later focus of the discipline on real readers in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

For Latin American theologians and biblical critics, the fundamental question of massive material poverty, with its roots in the conflict between socioeconomic classes, became the point of departure for a new way of doing theology. This was readily extended to the realm of biblical studies in

the form of a search for the stance of the Bible and its proper interpretation. As this search unfolded, a consensus gradually emerged. On the one hand, the Bible was seen as a text against oppression and for liberation; on the other hand, a twofold interpretation was posited: The Bible can be read either from the perspective of continuing oppression, as it has been, or from the perspective of liberation, as it should be. Consequently, the interpreter was called upon to read the Bible on the side of the oppressed and thus for their liberation from socioeconomic oppression.

Liberationist interpretation of the socioeconomic sort appeared on the disciplinary horizon just as the discipline of biblical studies itself was undergoing certain radical changes from within, changes that would ultimately lead to a thorough overhauling of its conception and practice. As such, socioeconomic criticism, along with feminist criticism, played an early and crucial role in undermining the existing methodological and theoretical consensus of the time. It challenged in particular the established myth of the scientific reader-construct: first, on account of its assumptions regarding the relationship between socioeconomic standing and interpretation; second, because of charges leveled at the academic tradition in general as bourgeois and elitist, buried in the past and divorced from the present needs of Christian communities.

Socioeconomic criticism foreshadowed the later position of cultural studies regarding the character of all reading as contextualized and perspectival. It argued that socioeconomic class had a direct and decisive impact upon interpretation—there was an interpretation of the poor-oppressed and an interpretation of the bourgeois-oppressor. However, the position taken by socioeconomic criticism was, in the end, but a variation of the historical-critical position. This is because for socioeconomic criticism it remained feasible (1) to recapture the past, to reconstruct (biblical) history and recreate the meaning of (biblical) texts; (2) to do so by adopting a privileged hermeneutical perspective, no longer that of the scientific reader-construct but rather that of the informed and committed reader-construct, in consonance with the people and the oppressed; (3) to bring such meaning and such history to bear on the present in the face of their long consignment to the past on the part of traditional historical criticism. Socioeconomic criticism amounted, therefore, to historical criticism from the ground up—from the underside of history, from the perspective of the oppressed, advanced as the perspective of the Bible itself.

To illumine these basic principles of socioeconomic criticism I have opted to use the work of Clodovis and Leonardo Boff, which is both thorough and clear. In what follows, then, I shall unfold their position on socioeconomic criticism in three steps: I begin with the theoretical grounding provided for a hermeneutics of liberation, as advanced by Clodovis Boff; continue with the basic principles of critical practice, as formulated by both Clodovis and Leonardo Boff; and conclude with the view of the historical Jesus that emerges from such an approach, as presented by Leonardo Boff.

Socioeconomic Criticism: Theoretical Grounding

By far the most extensive theoretical grounding for socioeconomic criticism is provided by Clodovis Boff in his major work of 1978, *Teologia e prática*.[3] In this work Boff sets out to correct what he perceives as the serious lack of a proper and informed theoretical grounding for liberation theology.[4] Boff observes that in seeking to provide a new way of doing theology, liberation theology has advanced a series of postulates meant to guide and inform theological practice. Yet these principles have remained at the level of pronouncements and, hence, of rhetoric. Consequently, Boff argues, it is necessary to move beyond this initial phase of formulation in order to provide a sound critical basis for the postulates of liberation theology.[5] Among such postulates lies the practice of biblical interpretation; thus the discussion of hermeneutics is to be located within this much broader reflection on theological practice.

This reflection encompasses three main "question areas" identified within liberation theology (C. Boff, xxi-xxii). The first, *socioanalytic mediation*, concerns the relationship of theology to the social sciences: its demand for a contextual knowledge of society and hence for interaction with social theories. This area addresses the *material* object of such a theology—the realm of the political—through the use of the social sciences. The second area, *hermeneutic mediation*, addresses the relationship of theology to scripture: theology's call for a contextual reading of scripture with emphasis on the political character of salvific events and the subversive nature of the biblical message. This second area addresses the *formal* object of this theology—the realm of theology—through an interpretation of the material object, the political, in the light of the scriptures. The third area, *practical mediation*, deals with the relationship between theology and praxis: its call for an engaged and liberating theology, a theology with a political option that is subordinated to praxis. This third area addresses the *concrete* object of liberation theology—the praxis of faith[6]—through an analysis of the multiple interfacing between theory and practice.

From the point of view of hermeneutics, it is the second area that proves crucial, for it is here that the "political" receives a proper "theological" reading, that the "material" object becomes a "formal" object, that the findings of the social sciences are appropriated theologically. This process of theological appropriation, or pertinency, is carried out on the basis of the Christian scriptures and calls for a discussion of biblical hermeneutics. The

discussion involves three steps: (1) a definition of the hermeneutics involved in hermeneutic mediation; (2) an exposition of the theoretical model proper to such hermeneutics; (3) a delineation of the reading strategy proper to such hermeneutics.

Definition of Hermeneutics

Boff defines the hermeneutics involved in the process of hermeneutic mediation in terms of three fundamental principles (132–33). First, theological pertinency, the process of theological appropriation, implies the notion of a Christian "positivity"—a realm of the given in matters dogmatic or historical. Second, such positivity resides in the Christian scriptures, in the canon of the church, which constitute the "font" of all other Christian writings. Third, the meaning of these foundational texts requires a process of interpretation given the distance between these texts and present readers. The process of overcoming this distance—the process of decoding and reappropriating the original meaning of the scriptures—is what constitutes hermeneutics proper. For Boff such a hermeneutic is "an interpretive activity bearing on *written* texts" (133). Moreover, such a hermeneutic is also profoundly theological in nature, circumscribed as it is in both object and method. It applies only to the Christian scriptures and has to do only with the interpretation of the scriptures.

Proper Hermeneutic Model

So understood, the process of hermeneutic mediation calls for the adoption of a specific theoretical model: the hermeneutic circle, which is best described by contrasting it with other models (135–39). One such model is that of hermeneutic improvisation, whereby the text is subordinated to the self-interest of the reader, yielding a "riotous carnival" of readings (136); in this model biblical passages are approached as prooftexts for any given project or practice. Another model is that of semantic positivism, whereby the text is confined to the past, yielding a depository of meaning in history; in this model biblical passages are approached as frozen items in a "refrigerator," exhibition pieces in a "museum," or bodily remains in a "cemetery" (136). The hermeneutic circle moves beyond such pragmatism and positivism, respectively, by positing a sustained dialectical relationship between texts and readers.

The hermeneutic circle posits a fundamental difference between two concepts that are generally considered identical—scripture and Word of God. According to this model, the Word of God is to be found neither in the letter of scripture (as positivism would have it) nor in the spirit of the hearing or reading community (as pragmatism would have it), but rather in the mutual relationship between community and scripture. Thus the meaning of scripture—the Word of God—can be apprehended only within the context of the "living spirit of the living community"—the church (136).[7]

The hermeneutic circle advances a middle way, therefore, between the options of pragmatism and positivism. Against positivism the text is regarded as open, always directed toward the present—interpreted by the reader but also interpreting the reader. Consequently, hermeneutic technique can never establish the meaning of scripture once and for all. Against pragmatism the text is not viewed as wide open, subject to any interpretation by the reader. To the contrary, hermeneutic technique can establish boundaries of meaning beyond which interpretation cannot proceed.[8] What hermeneutic technique cannot do, however, according to the model, is determine which is the "right" meaning within the boundaries in question. That is a decision calling for a creative act on the part of the reader, a response to scripture within the context of the hermeneutic circle. For Boff, therefore, interpretation is always "innovative, more or less arbitrary, and always personal" (138), but certainly not without limits or constraints. In other words, while the overall boundaries of interpretation can be set, the particular stance to be adopted within such boundaries—what one might call the discernment of the Word of God in the present situation—is not.

The hermeneutic circle clearly involves a very particular view of revelation and scripture: Revelation is regarded as canonized but never closed; scripture (the canonization of revelation) is viewed as an "exemplar, model, or code" (140), a "spring" of meaning (141), a "font" for all later Christian reflection and writing (132). Thus revelation is canonized, but only for the sake of making possible a multiplicity of readings in subsequent historical periods. Consequently, scripture as canonized revelation contains not a prescriptive meaning for all time but a meaning that may be characterized either as "negative" (ruling out a certain range of meanings) or "inductive" (alluding to a certain range of meanings) (140). According to the hermeneutic circle, scripture becomes what one might call a guiding horizon for interpretation or, as Boff puts it, a "model interpretation," an "interpreting interpretation," a "paradigmatic message" (140). As such, scripture allows the ongoing hermeneutic tradition of the church to become ever richer through the manifold interpretations offered over time within the hermeneutic circle. According to the model, furthermore, revelation takes place in the present, and it does so by means of and in the light of scripture, as the church looks for the Word of God within the parameters established by scripture and its tradition of interpretation in the church.

Proper Reading Strategy

Given its adoption of the hermeneutic circle, the process of hermeneutic mediation calls for the acceptance of a proper methodological approach to or reading strategy for the Scriptures, a strategy that allows readers to determine the "right" meaning of scripture (the Word of God) in the present, in their respective political situations. Such a strategy is illuminated by way of contrast with two other competing strategies (142–46).

On the one hand, there is the *gospel/politics strategy*, which regards the relationship between gospel and politics (scripture and community) as one of rule to application, with the gospel as a code of norms to be applied to the situation at hand. Such a strategy of "application" is deemed defective on two counts: first, because the relationship between scripture and situation appears quite mechanical; second, because it completely bypasses both historical contexts in question. It is a strategy, Boff argues, that leaves itself wide open to improvisation and positivism, and hence to both manipulation of the gospel and mystification of the political.

On the other hand, there is the *correspondence-of-terms strategy*, which looks upon the relationship between gospel and politics in terms of an equation involving two ratios, with equivalence posited between the terms in question: Scripture is to its political situation as the theology of the political stands to its present political context. What applies in scripture, therefore, applies directly in the present. The position of Jesus then, however conceived, should be the position of the church today. Unlike the gospel/politics strategy, this strategy does have the virtue of taking historical context into account; nonetheless, it is deemed defective, insofar as the distance in historical context between gospel and politics is neither sufficiently acknowledged nor problematized.

In the face of such competing methodological approaches, Boff argues for a *correspondence-of-relationships strategy*, which he believes is evident in the hermeneutic practice of early Christian communities as well as of Christian communities in general (146–50).

Historical criticism has shown that the canonical writings are the result of a process of redaction and accretion, so that in them one finds already a distance between the words and deeds of Jesus and the biblical texts, which contain reflections or commentaries on Jesus' words and deeds in the light of the community's own situation and exigencies. The attitude governing this process was "creative fidelity": Following the principle of identity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, later developments of Jesus' message and work were attributed to Jesus (147–48). Such a practice of reflection and commentary has continued within Christian communities to the present time. Christian communities have thus sought to apply the gospel to their situation, just as the early communities did. In this process the operative attitude continues to be one of creative fidelity; all such applications are characterized as Word of God.

The basic principles of the process are clear. First, both text and situation preserve their respective autonomy; neither is completely subsumed by the other. Second, together they yield a "spiritual" meaning, "a basic identity of signification" (148). Such a sense of "spiritual" identity between text and reader is what Boff proposes to capture by way of the correspondence-of-relationships strategy.

This strategy looks upon the relationship between gospel and politics in terms of an equation involving two ratios; however, equivalence is posited not between the terms but between the relationships within pairs of terms. In other words, the relationship of scripture to its context is equivalent to the relationship of the theology of the political to its context. Identity is sought, therefore, not at the level of context nor at the level of message but at the level of the relationship between context and message on each side of the equation, at the level of "spirit." What applies in scripture, therefore, does not apply directly in the present. Scripture is not a "what" but a "how," a horizon of meaning that allows for interpretation in the present in creative fidelity to the gospel. In the end, this strategy does not dispense with the normal procedures of hermeneutics, but calls for a "spiritual" reading of scripture.

In sum, the socioeconomic type of liberation hermeneutics, as advanced by Clodovis Boff, presupposes the use of a correspondence-of-relationships strategy, the deployment of a hermeneutic circle model, and the exercise of hermeneutic mediation. From the theoretical grounding supplied for liberation hermeneutics, I turn to the basic principles at work in the practice of socioeconomic criticism.

Socioeconomic Criticism: Principles of Critical Practice

In 1986, eight years after the publication of *Teologia e prática*, Clodovis Boff coauthored with his brother Leonardo a small volume entitled, *Como fazer Teologia de Libertação* (ET: *Introducing Liberation Theology*).[9] As the title indicates, this volume was intended as a beginning manual for "doing" liberation theology.[10] It touches upon the various constitutive dimensions and components of this theological movement: its driving question—how to be Christian in a world of destitution (chap. 1); the levels of activity within liberation theology—the professional, the pastoral, the popular (chap. 2); its method of analysis—the three critical mediations at work (chap. 3); its resultant key themes (chap. 4); a concise history of the

movement (chap. 5); a sense of its worldwide reach (chap. 6); and its vision of the future—a new humanity (chap. 8).

The volume also provides an account of the principles involved in the liberationist approach to biblical texts, but these must be culled from the overall description of the movement. What follows, then, is my comprehensive construction of these critical principles on the basis of information provided in the various chapters of the Boffs' book.

1. The fundamental or grounding principle—indeed the point of departure for the entire enterprise of liberationist biblical interpretation—is the perception of massive poverty, the scandal of crushing oppression and consequent suffering, present not only in Latin America but in the whole of the Third World (Boff and Boff, 2–3). This scandal, which affects the vast majority of Christians in Latin America and the vast majority of the world's population, has three interrelated dimensions: From a social point of view, it involves collective oppression, exclusion, and marginalization; from an individual point of view, it involves injustice and the denial of human rights; from a religious point of view, it involves social sinfulness. Liberation reacts in vigorous protest to this scandal and commits itself to the life, cause, and struggle of the oppressed and marginalized. It seeks thereby to suffer with the poor in their present situation of injustice and to work with them to put an end to such inequity and suffering.

Liberation theology looks upon such protest and commitment as a confrontation between the injustice perpetrated on the poor and the Christian faith. Liberation sees in the suffering poor the face of Jesus Christ, its own crucified who weeps and cries out in the faces of these newly crucified, and as a result of this vision commits itself to the struggle for their liberation through service in solidarity with the poor and as an act of love for the suffering Christ. Since the scandal of massive poverty lies at the core of the liberation theology movement, it will have pride of place as well in the hermeneutics of liberation. Thus the socioeconomic interpretation of the scriptures has as its driving impulse the scandal of poverty that affects and afflicts most of humanity. It is from such a vantage point that socioeconomic criticism approaches the Bible.

2. A second principle follows immediately from the first. Since massive poverty constitutes the driving force behind the liberation theology movement, it becomes imperative to define the actual parameters of "the poor." For the Boffs this category consists of two different though related groupings, one of which is primary and the other secondary.

In keeping with the socioeconomic tenor of the liberation movement, the primary grouping consists of the materially poor (46–47), in whose ranks the authors include several groups: the traditional proletariat—the industrial workers who, without capital or productive means of their own, have nothing to offer but their labor in exchange for wages; all workers exploited by the capitalist system; the underemployed, pushed aside by the production process but always available to take the place of employed workers; those who labor in the countryside; and migrant workers, for whom there exists only seasonal work (3–4).[11]

The second grouping encompasses those discriminated against on the basis of race, culture, and sex—blacks, indigenous and other minority groups, women (47)—or age—children, juveniles, and the elderly (29). The Boffs immediately add that those who belong to the second grouping more often than not also qualify under the first grouping, since they generally belong among the socioeconomically destitute as well. Indeed they are often the poorest of the poor, since they suffer under the weight of multiple oppressions (47). They further argue that while conflicts of a sociocultural character are in principle reconcilable, conflicts of a socioeconomic nature are beyond resolution, rooted as they are in a class-divided society marked by exploitation (29). Within such a context socioeconomic oppression constitutes the infrastructural expression of oppression, while noneconomic forms of oppression represent its superstructural expressions. In the end, however, socioeconomic criticism of the Bible provides no critical apparatus for the analysis of noneconomic forms of oppression, even though it argues that such forms require their own specific forms of liberation.

3. The emphasis on socioeconomic matters in general and on material poverty in particular immediately raises the question of the relationship between liberation and Marxism. The question is not whether such a relationship exists, for it does and is openly acknowledged, but rather the nature of this relationship, which I would characterize as a third principle of socioeconomic criticism.

In an earlier essay I located socioeconomic criticism within the paradigm of cultural studies, arguing that critics within this paradigm of interpretation are influenced not only by sociology and anthropology but also economics.[12] Historically, socioeconomic criticism also emphasized the external dynamics of the world behind the text and encoded in the text, though from a strictly socioeconomic point of view and with a neo-Marxist view of the text as an ideological product and a site of struggle. However, socioeconomic criticism also went on to see the critics themselves as contextualized and perspectival, again from a strictly socioeconomic point of view and with a specific neo-Marxist view of the critic as an ideological product and hence as a site of struggle. As a result, critics were called upon to become sophisticated in economic theory (informed critics) as well as committed or engaged (interested critics), able to recognize the ideological character of biblical texts and to read them for liberation and against oppression.

I proceeded to characterize this vein of cultural criticism not as "economic"—alongside "sociological" and "anthropological"—but as "neo-Marxist." Such a designation merits further explication, since the relationship between Marxism and liberation has always been far more subtle and complex than generally acknowledged. The Boffs themselves go out of their way to place considerable distance between Marxism and liberation.

Three basic principles define this relationship (Boff and Boff, 27–28). First, Marxism is to be treated not as a subject on its own but as always subject to the perspective of the poor; in other words, liberation must submit Marxism to the judgment of the poor and their cause. Second, Marxism is to be used only as an instrument, not as an end in itself; liberation may borrow from Marxism whatever should prove useful from a theoretical or methodological point of view. Third, Marxism must be viewed critically as a companion on the way. The end result, ironically, is a rather triumphalist view of liberation vis-à-vis Marxism. Liberation, the Boffs argue, has not only displaced Marxism from its position of monopoly with regard to social commitment and historical change but has done so with enormous success among the religious masses. In so doing, moreover, it has shown tremendous appeal at a time when Marxism, like all traditional revolutionary ideologies, has found it increasingly difficult to communicate. For the Boffs, liberation, with its view of religion as an agent for social change rather than as a source of alienation (87), stands as a sharp refutation of the modern atheism represented by Marxism.

From the fundamental vantage point of material poverty, the socioeconomic interpretation of the scriptures turns to Marxism as a primary tool in its reading strategy, borrowing from it a good many of its guiding theoretical concepts and methodological moves. At the same time, this neo-Marxist angle of vision and analysis remains a tool, to be employed critically, subject at all times not only to the needs and interests of the poor themselves but also to the Bible, the message of God for the poor.

4. Mention of the Bible and its message leads to a fourth principle of socioeconomic criticism—the actual approach employed by liberation in its reading and interpretation of biblical texts. This principle has to do with the second mediation of liberation theology as a political theology—the hermeneutic mediation. Upon examining the scandal of material poverty in the world through the critical lens of the social sciences and prior to adopting a praxis of faith in the face of such poverty, liberation turns to the scriptures for inspiration and guidance—for theological *pertinency*, validation, and appropriation—regarding God's plan for the poor. This turning gives rise to socioeconomic criticism proper, which in itself involves a variety of constitutive dimensions.

a. The first of these, an indispensable prolegomenon for socioeconomic criticism, has to do with the lifestyle of the theologian in the society at large. Liberation theologians must not only have the scandal of poverty in mind when turning to the scriptures but must also experience in some way this scandal in their own life (22–24). It is not sufficient to reflect on material poverty from the outside, as it were; it is essential to live it from within, to share with the poor their experience of oppression and their struggle for liberation. If not from among the poor, theologians must join the ranks of the "evangelically poor"—those who, regardless of social class, opt to join the poor in bringing about change.

It would be fair to say that the principle of living commitment to the poor proves far more important than the actual mode or extent of its application. Thus theologians may work alongside the poor in organizations such as base communities, Bible societies, evangelization groups, human rights movements, or social agencies. Similarly, their activities may vary widely, from sporadic visits to base communities, to regular pastoral work on weekends, to alternating periods of scholarly and practical work, to living permanently with the people.

b. A second indispensable prolegomenon for socioeconomic criticism pertains to the lifestyle of the theologian in the church at large. Theologians within the liberation movement must not regard themselves as a separate class—isolated in academic centers, removed from the people in conflict with the institutional church. They must not view themselves as a privileged circle of readers, responsible for determining the meaning of the scriptures. On the contrary, theologians must see themselves as comprising but one level of activity in the church, alongside and closely tied to two other levels (11–16).

At the base or popular level of the church are the poor, gathered in base communities and Bible study groups; at the top, or professional level, are those with academic training and expertise in the theological disciplines; the middle, or pastoral level, encompasses the entire gamut of the institutional church. At all three levels the ideal is close contact as well as a constant interflow of ideas. To be sure, liberation theology's official formulation occurs at the top but only as ultimately grounded in the base and in harmony with the center. Indeed, the main movement must be from the base up, with the poor or popular classes as the basic constituent and spring of liberation theology, as they seek to live their faith by confronting oppression and struggling for liberation, aided by both professional theologians and pastoral representatives.

For the Boffs, therefore, theologians emerge as "organic" and "militant" intellectuals, with deep roots in and active links with the church (19). They must listen to and, above all, participate in the life of the popular church. Consequently, "doing" liberation theology presupposes a fundamental ecclesiastical dimension: Theologizing becomes an academic activity carried out

for the sake of the church, informed by the popular church, and permeating the church, in all of its venues and activities. Thus theologians must be present and active in their local communities (where they serve in a variety of roles, from pastors to fellow pilgrims), in all other gatherings of the people of God (from retreats to discussion groups, as advisors), in interdisciplinary contexts and discussion groups (as advocates), and at their own desks (in their role as lecturers, writers, researchers). Their multifaceted role as organic and militant intellectuals serves to reinforce the collective nature of the theological enterprise.

c. A third and final dimension of socioeconomic criticism has to do with the theologians' approach to the scriptures, as they search for the message of God to the poor, profoundly rooted in both the life of the poor and the life of the church (32–35). This approach puts into practice the model of the hermeneutic circle set forth above and calls for a reading strategy with a variety of constitutive components.

First and foremost, the scriptures are to be read from the perspective of the materially poor. Such a reading must focus on those themes in the Bible that are most relevant to the poor—for example, God as the father of life and advocate of the oppressed, the liberation of Israel from bondage, the predictions and visions of a new world, Jesus' giving of the kingdom to the poor, and the church as a community of total sharing. Then, since the poor also seek life to the full, this reading strategy must take into account the transcendental themes of the Bible—such as conversion, grace, and resurrection—and proceed to reread them in the light of poverty so that these themes are rendered directly relevant to the life and cause of the poor. The Boffs add that, quite in keeping with the hermeneutic circle, such a reading remains subject to the Word of God. The Bible always retains the lead in this (dialectical) process of reading, although experience has shown that its message will be one of radical consolation and liberation for the poor.

Second, the reading strategy issuing from the hermeneutic circle strongly privileges application over explanation. This strategy is not as concerned with meaning as with the ramifications of meaning. It reads the Bible not as a book of strange stories but as a book of life, seeking to interpret life according to the text; it is intent on discovering and activating the energy of the Bible, both in terms of individual conversion and historical revolution; and it emphasizes the social content of the message, situating the text within its historical context in order to construct (through the correspondence-of-relationships model delineated above) an appropriate translation into the contemporary context.

Third, such a reading strategy favors certain biblical texts over others. Thus special emphasis is placed on Exodus as the epic of liberation, with its narrative of the transformation of a mass of slaves into the people of God;

on the prophets, for their denunciation of injustice, their defense of the poor, and their proclamation of the messianic world; on the Gospels, for their focus on the divine person of Jesus; on Acts, for its portrayal of the ideal Christian community, free and liberating; and on Revelation, for its description of the struggles of God's people. Even among such favored texts there is a further hierarchy: Writings of the New Testament rank above writings of the Old Testament, and within the New Testament itself the gospels have pride of place.

Finally, such a reading strategy must always be conducted in a christological key, with every book of the Bible read from the perspective of the high point of revelation in the Gospels. Through the figure of Jesus in the Gospels, the perspective of the poor is placed within the wider perspective of the Lord of history, from whom "the Word of God derives its consistency and strength" (35).

5. These references to the centrality of the Gospels and to the need for a christological reading of the Bible serve to introduce a final principle of socioeconomic criticism—the foundational role ascribed to the figure of the historical Jesus. As the Boffs note (49–63), liberation has given rise to a large number of distinctive claims: (1) a living and true faith includes the practice of liberation; (2) the living God sides with the oppressed against the pharaohs of this world; (3) the kingdom of God is God's project in history and eternity; (4) Jesus, the Son of God, took on oppression in order to set us free; (5) the Holy Spirit is the "Father of the poor" and is present in the struggles of the oppressed; (6) Mary is the prophetic and liberating woman of the people; (7) the church is a sign and instrument of liberation; (8) the rights of the poor are God's rights; and (9) liberated human potential becomes liberative. Among these, none is as important for socioeconomic criticism as the belief that the historical Jesus is the great liberator, a belief that is both the result of and foundation for critical inquiry.

In addressing the principle of massive poverty, I pointed out that liberation sees in the faces of the poor, the crucified of today, the face of its own crucified, Jesus Christ. Thus it commits itself to the poor not only by way of service in solidarity but also as an act of love for the suffering Christ. This christological focus is evident throughout the Boffs' volume, yielding a twofold image of the historical Jesus (53–55). On the one hand, this christological image is quite high: Jesus as the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, and the revealer of the kingdom of God—the divine plan for the full and total liberation of all creation. On the other hand, this image is quite low: Jesus as taking on human misery and oppression; making an option for the poor, assuming their hopes and announcing their fulfillment both in the present and in the future; preaching the liberation of the kingdom outside all boundaries and thus calling for radical conversion; paying

for this option and message with his own death. For liberation theology, the kingdom and the poor are indissolubly joined together in and through Jesus. As a result, the poor become for liberation much more than the social category of those oppressed and marginalized by material poverty; they take on the image of the Son of God made suffering servant and rejected, and serve as a memorial of the poor and persecuted Jesus (31).

Thus for the socioeconomic interpretation of the Scriptures, the figure of the historical Jesus plays a foundational role: first, because it is in Jesus' life and message that liberation finds the grounding and exemplar for its own option for the poor; second, because it is through Jesus that liberation theology proceeds to read the whole of the Bible from the thematic of poverty. In what follows I shall amplify this reading of the historical Jesus on the part of socioeconomic criticism.

Socioeconomic Criticism: The Historical Jesus

In 1972, quite early on in the development of the liberation movement, Leonardo Boff published a major work entitled *Jesus Cristo Libertador*. This was six years before the appearance of Clodovis Boff's *Teologia e prática* and fourteen years before the publication of their joint manual on doing liberation theology.[13] Although this discussion of the figure of Jesus appeared prior to the other two volumes under consideration, I include it at this point for two reasons. First, its portrayal of the historical Jesus serves as a clear illustration of the critical practice of socioeconomic criticism. Second, this portrayal provides an expanded account of the foundational role assigned to the historical Jesus in the hermeneutics of liberation.

Jesus as Preacher of the Kingdom

Boff begins his portrayal of the historical Jesus with the matter of Jesus' intention (L. Boff, 49–62), summarized as follows: "Jesus Christ wants to be in his own person God's answer to the human condition" (50). Across all cultures and civilizations human beings experience profound alienation as well as radical hope. This alienation affects all of reality—individual, social, and cosmic; this hope is correspondingly utopian in character. Within this universal human context, Jesus of Nazareth reveals himself as God in human condition and discloses God's own plan for such alienation and hope—the kingdom of God. As God made human, Jesus is the savior of the world, the one awaited by all nations. As God's own plan, the kingdom of God is a message of absolute meaning for the world.

The kingdom preached by Jesus signifies "the manifestation of the sovereignty and lordship of God over this world" (52)—a world ruled by demonic forces and locked in combat with the forces of good—through which all alienation and all evil, physical or moral, is overcome and all the consequences of sin are destroyed. This kingdom transcends any particular agenda of liberation to encompass the transformation of the old world into a new world. This transformation, moreover, is ongoing, with a present as well as a future dimension. The kingdom has already been inaugurated by Jesus himself, as his miracles clearly demonstrate, and will be brought to fulfillment at the end of history. As the one who preaches the kingdom, Jesus presents himself as the liberator of all reality.

For Boff, therefore, one finds in Jesus of Nazareth not just the presence of God in the human condition but a God-made-human who participated fully in it, taking on its deepest aspirations and announcing its total liberation. Jesus preached not himself but the kingdom. It was only after the resurrection that his disciples raised the question of his identity, making explicit by way of the christological titles bestowed upon him what had been implicit in Jesus' own words and works—Jesus was Son of God, Messiah, God.

Jesus as Liberator

As he preached the kingdom of God in full awareness of his role as liberator of all reality, Jesus made two fundamental demands for participation in this new order—personal conversion and social reconstruction. First, the kingdom called for a revolution within, a radical change in human ways of thinking and living in accordance with God's plan of liberation. In addition, the kingdom called for a societal revolution, a similarly radical transformation in purpose and structure, again in keeping with God's plan of liberation. Through these demands Jesus pointedly showed that the established order could not serve as a basis for the kingdom and set out to create the conditions necessary for the kingdom's new order.

These demands entailed a total transfiguration of human and social existence. The internal revolution demanded a sharp rejection of the established order among human beings: All were called upon to sell their property, to abandon their families, to risk their lives. In doing these things, human beings would open themselves to God and become God's children. A new way of life and thought—unconditional love—would be the result. This love calls for giving oneself to the service of others and is far superior to any concept of justice, for the latter always presupposes giving to each their due within a given social system and hence a sanctioning of the status quo. This love is also universal, embracing all brothers and sisters. The external revolution demanded just as sharp a rejection of the established order in human societies: away from all forms of legalism, conventionalism, and authoritarianism, and toward liberty and equality.

Such demands coincide with Jesus' own option for the poor. Within the present order it is the poor who stand nearest to the kingdom and who will enter the kingdom first. Since they have nothing and are nothing, they stand to lose nothing and are thus much more likely to listen to and follow the message of the kingdom. For their sake, therefore, Jesus transgresses all social conventions of the established order, breaking all class distinctions and approaching those who are despised and shunned. In so doing, he shows that he is free of all preconceptions and is willing to give himself in unconditional love to others, especially the oppressed and the marginalized.

Jesus, Boff concludes, calls a new type of human being into existence, one who belongs to the family of the world; labors in the world and assists in its construction and direction; is not content with the world as it is; and works, as a "stranger en route" (78), toward the creation of a more human and happier world. Such human beings of the new order are the ones who ultimately overcome the sense of alienation afflicting humankind and find true fulfillment for the hope of liberation. Such human beings, of course, constitute the Christians of all generations, of all cultures and civilizations, insofar as the historical Jesus is the risen Christ and the demands of the former continue to be the demands of the latter.

Jesus as Extraordinary Person

As he preached this message of total liberation, with its radical demands for personal and social transformation, Jesus presented himself as the image of God's new order, new human being, and new creation. He revealed himself to be a person of good sense, creative imagination, and authentic originality. Indeed, in all three respects Jesus ranks far above any other human being, past or future, and remains unparalleled in the history of religion, for now or to come. The preacher of liberation was himself totally liberated.

Having good sense means possessing a concrete knowledge of reality, knowing how to distinguish what is essential from what is secondary and being able to see things in their proper perspective. Jesus showed extraordinary good sense: He drew his teaching from common experience and appealed to sound reason; he formulated anew the moral wisdom of old; he looked at the world precisely as it was, without preconceptions of any sort; he was a person of profound human sentiment. Having creative imagination implies being free to think and speak otherwise. Jesus revealed extraordinary imagination: He stood up and spoke differently; he called for liberty and love rather than order and obedience; he respected all human beings in their originality and asked for openness to others and to God. Having originality means speaking of things with absolute immediacy and superiority. Jesus displayed extraordinary originality: He went to the core of human nature; he broke down all barriers, sacred and profane; he allowed access to God for all, regarding all as children of the same Father.

For Boff, therefore, all those who belong to the kingdom must follow the example of the historical Jesus, the image of God's new order. They too must be liberated persons in the service of love, remaining completely open to God and others, exercising indiscriminate love, critically confronting the current social, cultural, and religious orders, giving primacy to persons over things.

Concluding Comments

It should be clear from this portrayal of the historical Jesus that for Boff there is an unbroken continuity between Jesus of Nazareth and the Jesus of the Gospels. Although Jesus did not preach himself as Son of God, Messiah, or God, he *was* Son of God, Messiah, and God before as well as after the resurrection. For Boff there is no rupture between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, only a transition from the implicit to the explicit, and this by way of the disciples' subsequent understanding and formulation of Jesus' intention, Jesus' message, and Jesus' personality. Consequently, the portrayal of Jesus Christ in the Gospels functions as the foundation (that is, both grounding and exemplar) for the protest and commitment of liberation theology in the face of massive poverty, as well as for its reading and interpretation of the scriptures from the perspective of poverty. In its protest, commitment, and reading (and here one can see the correspondence-of-relationships model at work), liberation seeks to comply with the preaching, demands, and image of God's new order introduced by Jesus.

Socioeconomic Criticism: Critical Comments

Socioeconomic criticism is as important for the development of biblical criticism at the end of the twentieth century as literary criticism and cultural criticism; what the latter movements do from inside the discipline, the former accomplishes from outside. Thus there can be no proper understanding of biblical criticism—its recent history, its present configuration, or its future development—without a proper understanding of the hermeneutics of liberation. By way of conclusion, a few critical comments are in order.

First, in my opinion no critical movement has been as uniformly forthcoming regarding its context and perspective as socioeconomic criticism. From the outset it has pointed to material poverty as its driving force and its reading lens, all the while emphasizing the need for the critic to share in the life of the poor. In the 1960s and 1970s, socioeconomic criticism beheld the

pervasive, inescapable, and overwhelming presence of human misery, socioeconomic oppression and discrimination in Latin America and the Third World, and turned such poverty into a fundamental lens for reading and interpreting the scriptures. Not only did it pursue the thematic of poverty in the Bible in a sustained and systematic way, it also proceeded to re-read and reinterpret the whole of the Bible in light of this thematic.

In retrospect, such constancy of focus has proven both a blessing and a burden. While a new reading of the scriptures emerged in the process—the first true reading from the periphery—this reading has remained unduly monolithic. Initially, the complexity and diversity of the Bible in matters social, political, and economic remained unaddressed. The Bible as a whole emerged as an undisputed and undivided manifesto of liberation for the masses experiencing material oppression. It was a text not to be challenged but to be followed. The ideological edge of the movement came to a halt at the Bible; in the struggle, the text was seen as standing fully and without question on the side of liberation.

Second, such constancy of focus has proven problematic in another respect as well. While acknowledging other forms of oppression and discrimination, socioeconomic criticism persisted in regarding material poverty as the primary expression of oppression. Such a perspective remained both limited and limiting. This failure meant that the relationship between socioeconomic oppression and other forms of oppression would remain unproblematized and untheorized in socioeconomic criticism. Analysis of this relationship would in time be undertaken elsewhere in the name of liberation—in other parts of the Third World as well as within the West, among women and among ethnic and racial minorities. However, in this regard socioeconomic criticism proved singularly unable to lead and to develop in new directions.

Third, although quite radical in social matters, early socioeconomic criticism proved quite conservative in theological matters, as the following examples make abundantly clear:

It posited no difference between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith—the Christ of the Gospels was the Jesus of Nazareth. The critic was to have complete trust in the rhetoric and ideology of the biblical texts.

It regarded the Bible as the fundamental criterion for all theological activity. The results yielded by the critical analysis of society were to be brought to the Bible for evaluation and validation (theological pertinency). The critic was to be a constructive theologian in dialogue with the scriptures, in search of the Word of God for the present.

It regarded the Bible as the fundamental basis for all practical activity, the praxis of faith in human society being determined in the light of the evaluation and validation provided by the Bible (correspondence-of-relationships). The critic was to be a practical theologian in search of a concrete political way of life in the world, sanctioned by the Bible and in the light of the Word of God for the present.

It called for a reading of the whole Bible, Hebrew and Christian writings, in a christological key. The summit of God's revelation was to be found in the New Testament, in the Gospels, and in the figure of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the Gospels. The critic was to be a Christian believer.

It regarded interpretation as a thoroughly ecclesiastical exercise. The scriptures were to be read and interpreted within the context of the church and in solidarity with other levels of theological activity in the church. The critic was to be a member of the church, in close contact with the popular church and in close harmony with the pastoral church.

Thus the call for a socioeconomic approach to the scriptures, despite its daring dependence on neo-Marxist criticism, ultimately presupposed a very traditional view of the authority of the scriptures, of the theological dimensions of interpretation, and of the ecclesiastical character of criticism.

Finally, the picture of Jesus that emerged from within socioeconomic criticism proved quite triumphalist as well. It is in Jesus that human beings come to know God's plan of liberation for all humankind; it is in Jesus that all human beings and all religions find their apex; it is in Jesus that the alienation of all humankind is resolved and the hope of all human beings is fulfilled. Thus early socioeconomic criticism proved completely blind to the histories and realities, the sensibilities and concerns, the beliefs and practices of non-Christians. Indeed, in keeping with its unquestioned commitment to the rhetoric and the ideology of the Bible, liberation could easily and quite unabashedly paraphrase the declaration of Jesus in John 4:22, "for salvation is from the Christians." The result could hardly be liberative for those outside the Christian fold.

Many of these questions and problems were eventually pursued by hosts of critics who expanded and decentered socioeconomic criticism. In so doing, critics looked back to the initial outburst of liberationist criticism in Latin America for inspiration and guidance and proudly situated themselves within its legacy. In large part because of socioeconomic criticism, biblical studies will never be the same. In this regard, liberationist criticism of the socioeconomic type has proven thoroughly liberating for the discipline as well.

Notes

1. For other introductions in English to liberationist hermeneutics see Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, "The Foundation and Form of Liberation Exegesis," chap. 2 in *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Louisville,

Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1989); Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Toward an Assessment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990), 62–82; and David Tombs, "The Hermeneutics of Liberation," in *Approaches to New Testament Study*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and David Tombs, JSNT Supplement Series 120 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 310–55.

2. See Fernando F. Segovia, "'And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues': Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism," in *Reading from This Place*, vol. 1: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 1–32; "Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as Mode of Discourse," in *Reading from This Place*, vol. 2: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 1–17.

3. C. Boff, *Teologia e prática: Teologia do político e suas mediações* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1978). English translation by Robert Barr, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987). All references are to the English edition.

4. See the book's preface, xxi-xxx.

5. The volume actually seeks to provide a theoretical foundation for a "theology of the political" in general, encompassing not only the theology of liberation as such but also all possible political theologies, including the theology of captivity, the theology of revolution, and the theology of violence. The result is a highly theoretical work, a critical reflection on method from the point of view of a theology of the political in conversation with a full array of dialogue partners, including European social and hermeneutical theory, European Roman Catholic theological epistemology, and Latin American liberation theology.

6. Praxis, Boff explains, constitutes the starting point, the venue, and the goal of liberation theology. In the ongoing dialectic posited between theory and praxis, praxis emerges as the fundamental locus of theology and has primacy over theory. It is precisely this emphasis on the praxis of faith that calls for contextual social analysis as a first mediation against any type of speculative and abstract thought, for contextual biblical interpretation as a second mediation against any sort of spiritual hermeneutics, and for an engaged theology of the political as a third mediation.

7. Here one can readily see the concept of the *sensus fidelium* at work. Scripture is bound to the church in another way as well (136, 146–48). Just as the meaning of scripture is to be had only within the context of the church, so scripture itself emerges from within this context.

8. Boff adds that one can only search for the original meaning of scripture by way of Christian tradition, insofar as a hermeneutic practice always stands within a tradition and takes a position within such a tradition (139). Thus, while hermeneutic technique establishes boundaries within the text, it is clear that tradition also establishes boundaries.

9. C. Boff and L. Boff, *Como fazer Teologia da Libertação* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1986). English translation by Paul Burns, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates/Search Press; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987). All references are to the English edition.

10. As the preface puts it (xi), its aim is to give "an overall, non-technical, and objective account of this new way of 'doing theology.'"

11. The materially poor constitute "all those who lack or are deprived of the necessary means of subsistence—food, clothing, shelter, basic health care, elementary education, and work" (46–47). The Boffs opt for a dialectical explanation of poverty: Poverty is the result of neither vice nor backwardness but of oppression (25–27). To be sure, there is a type of poverty ("innocent" poverty) that is due to natural conditions or disasters and is thus not connected to any system as such (47). For the most part, however, poverty is the direct result of the economic organization of society itself, with the capitalist system directly responsible for its existence and continuation (47–48). Such poverty is brought about both by exclusion and by exploitation.

12. Segovia, "'And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues,'" 7.

13. L. Boff, *Jesus Cristo Libertador: Ensaio de cristologia crítica para o nosso tempo* (Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 1972). English translation by Patrick Hughes, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978). All references are to the English edition. A year earlier Clodovis Boff published an article on the historical Jesus, "Foi Jésus um Revolucionário?" *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 31 (1971): 97–118. The preface to the English edition explains that the volume had been put together at a time of severe political repression in Brazil, a time when even the word "liberation" itself had been banned from all the communications media, thus preventing the author from saying all that he had wanted to say with respect to Jesus. In the English edition an epilogue is added ("A Christological View from the Periphery") in which the author pursues, at a time of much greater political tolerance, the liberative dimension of Jesus in quite explicit fashion.

For Further Reading

Liberation Theology

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