

CONVERSATION OR COLLABORATION? BASE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AND THE DIALOGUE OF FAITH

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Abstract

The dialogue of Christians about their faith, expressed in literature, confessions, creeds, liturgical rituals, symbolic acts and proclamations of dogma, is a public record. As with all public records, one may ask to what extent this one is in the first place the reflection of the perspectives and practices of a dominant group, class or elite? Equally, to what extent may it legitimately be understood as the public record of the marginalized, silenced and poor sectors of its host societies throughout its history? The weight of the available evidence, I believe, favours the view that the products of the dialogue of faith strongly reflect the interests or perspectives of the dominant, and weakly reflect the interests or perspectives of the dominated. The relative perspective implied by the terms 'strongly' and 'weakly' is important, though: I do not accept that the voices of dominated groups are entirely or almost entirely absent. Their voices may well be present only in the traces of their absence (hidden), or in encoded form. Just what this means is one focal point of this essay. Discerning these two kinds of 'presence' is a complex task, as historians of popular life well know.¹ More so, when one takes into account the question of representation: whose voices, in the end, do we hear? The voices of the oppressed themselves, or their voices as represented by others? If the latter, what changes in the act of representing the other in dialogue, as opposed to engaging with the other in dialogue? This is a second focal point. The third focal point is a reflexive move backwards from these first two points, to ask what the nature and goal of dialogue is, a question pursued by attempting to define a link between discourse and praxis.

1. Road Signs on the Way

The blind man would not stop shouting, even though the people tried to stop him. Today people are helpless, unemployed, looking for money, fetching water. People ask 'who, who?' is going to help, and others tell them to keep quiet.²

The social context of this interpretation of the biblical, Lukan story of the blind man who was healed by Jesus at the side of the road is that of a base Christian community whose study of the bible has, over time, increasingly overtly linked

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- 1 Perhaps the *Annales* School is the most extensive modern attempt to overcome the problems associated with recovering popular history.
 - 2 Luke 18: 35-43: transcript from comments made at a Bible study in the 'squatter' community of Amawoti, Natal, dated 2/6/89.

religious discourse to the practical realities of daily life. In their interpretation are three pointers to the themes of this essay.

First, in the Lukan narrative a situation of need ('blindness') is made visible by a communicative action, which in turn provokes a healing or therapeutic action - an emancipation. Therapy as the effect of communicative action, and emancipation, introduce the issue of the vexed relationship between *discourse* and *praxis*.

The above comment on the biblical narrative transposes the personal need of the blind person into contemporary, social categories of need. The soteriological import of the story is thereby generalized, that it may once more be situated contextually in the new, contemporary context of the interpreter. There is an implied anticipation, a hope for the future, of acts of solidarity, or collaboration, in addressing these concrete needs. The interpretation thereby goes beyond the hermeneutic metaphor of conversation (with the text), towards the rhetorical metaphor of collaboration. Here, if we are addressed by the call to conversation and collaboration, yet another question arises: who is this 'Other' with whom we converse or collaborate?

Finally, in the narrative and its interpretation one hears that the person in need is told to keep quiet. This suggests a discursive complexity that goes beyond the surface conversation between the particular actors of the implied narrative. The opposition of those who 'tell them to keep quiet' signals a breach of socially accepted or desired patterns of discourse by the blind person insisting on making public his demand. There is a provocative suggestion that we are dealing with at least two levels of discourse, one public, the other normally hidden. I shall ask how we might understand those sites of discourse among subordinate groups out of which material struggles of resistance grow, and within which knowledge is constructed and deposited to be potentially available for restructuring society.

All three focal points have a single concern: to find an understanding of language, knowledge, and power which makes sense for historically particular communities (thus respecting particular differences against essentialism or universalism), and simultaneously allows for projects of emancipation (thus affirming particular commitments against relativism). More precisely, is there a defensible hermeneutic of conversation about the Christian faith which issues in collaborative activity aimed at emancipation in a context of acute needs?

These theoretical concerns arises from, and contain within them, a larger practical concern related to the specificity of the base Christian community whose presence lies behind this discussion, and whose voice appears only in the opening quotation. This is the question of the possibility of such a community accessing and significantly shaping the dominant discourses of the Church in which their voice is normally silent or, if present, then only by virtue of representation by others than themselves.

This is also a personal question, applicable perhaps to many others in a similar situation. What role does a trained theologian have to play in altering this reality, given that he or she stands, willy-nilly, firmly and squarely within the traditions of the dominant discourses of the Church which, by commission or omission, silence the discourse of the dominated within the Church? Can one ever be

anything more than a reporter of that which is not one's own, a representative of the voice of others who still, therefore, do not speak?

This approach to these practical questions is by way of an analysis of the discursive context required by, or imposed by, an interaction with base community Christians. Because it is concerned about a discourse on Christian faith which in some way is a transformative practice, one is forced, first, to clarify how discourse may meet this concern.

2. In What Sense is Discourse Praxis?

Discourse, understood simply as 'language as it functions' (Eagleton), would be too narrow a definition to carry the weight of this inquiry, because it is concerned not just with speech but with the full range of communicative actions which are possible between human beings. In particular, discourse limited to 'language as it functions' would provide an inadequate account of ritual, symbolic constructions, liturgical theatre, gesture and the like, all of which are vital to any adequate grasp of religious experience. Jennings,³ following Gadamer, has proposed the use of the cumbersome term 'linguisticity' (*Sprachlichkeit*) to incorporate both language and all acts analogous to language as an alternative term. I shall retain the term 'discourse', meaning the full range of linguistic and analogous acts.

Discourse, I have argued elsewhere, is the fundamental nature of the practice of the Church, that which identifies it in a modern, secular state, or indeed, in any state in which the Church has no ecclesial authority over political and economic life (Christendom).⁴ Given this understanding, the problem one faces is how the discourse practice of the Church may be linked to emancipatory praxis, understood as practices which have a material effect in transforming the conditions of domination towards greater freedom, justice and autonomy.⁵ It does not seem sufficient simply to claim that discourse, *per se*, is a form of praxis, because it is hard to avoid the view that discourse may be only indirectly related to emancipatory political or economic struggles, or may indeed, be a way of subverting such struggles (Marx's view on philosophical idealism, for example). All that has changed, in the eyes of many critics, is the focus on contemporary philosophies of language instead of metaphysics; otherwise Marx's criticism remains valid.

The discerning reader will immediately see in this understanding of discourse as the wide range of communicative acts in which human beings engage a nuance which depends upon the theory of communicative action developed by Jürgen Habermas. There are important aspects of his theory which I believe help one

3 TW Jennings, *Beyond Theism: A Grammar of God-Language*, New York: OUP, 1985.

4 JR Cochrane & GO West, 'War, Remembrance and Reconstruction', in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, vol. 84, Sep. 1993, p.25-40. 'Discourse' in this context includes practices that we call liturgical, proclamatory, homiletic, catechetical, formational, communal, counselling, and legal (church discipline, canon law, etc.). They are the things the Church does to establish and express its identity, as opposed to those things it does to manage itself or its welfare practices.

5 By 'autonomy' in this context I mean *Mündigkeit*, the term used by Jürgen Habermas to describe the adult 'coming of age' of a mature subject possessing an awareness of historical agency and a capacity to use her agency.

forward at this point, though I am more skeptical of the extent to which a theoretical system can answer our problems than Habermas.

Communicative action, Habermas suggests at many points in his writings, is akin to therapy. Our present given condition is marked by multiple, sometimes severe distortions of communication and of the communicative context, whose effect on people and on societies is negative. The therapeutic goal posited by Habermas is the emancipatory transformation of the given. Emancipation he defines as fully open communicative action, presupposing the transformation of those material conditions which prevent it (earlier on, Habermas spoke of the 'ideal speech situation', by which he meant much the same thing). This is the task of the human being come of age, of the person marked by *Mündigkeit*: autonomous, responsible and free. This is his revised version of the grand ideal of the Enlightenment.

It implies a confidence in the project of the Enlightenment despite its many critics (of whom Habermas would consider himself one), because of its emancipatory intent and its search for a better informed praxis on the basis of a reasoned - and therefore better warranted - position. It also implies an attack on those postmodernist trends which subsume the emancipatory task under a differentiated network of pluralities in which no specific goal or position is privileged above any other. Such postmodernist trends suspect all emancipatory goals which are defined in structural or systemic terms because, imbued with what are seen as the incipiently imperialistic ambitions of all modernist projects, they are felt to partake in an unwarranted confidence in reason and practice.⁶ These debates aside, what does Habermas offer in moving us along the way to an understanding of the relationship between discourse and practice?

Let us remind ourselves of Habermas's basic epistemology, first announced in *Knowledge and Human Interests [KHI]* and still key to his total enterprise.⁷ For Habermas, every human action may be described by a transitive verb (think, know, speak, perceive, understand, interpret, posit, and so on), implying always the presence of a subject (the actor) as well as an object (that which is acted upon). The relationship between action and knowledge may be expressed thus: 'In thought and action we simultaneously *both* create *and* discover the world; ... knowledge crystallizes in this generative relation of the subject to the world.'⁸

There is no such thing, therefore, in science or in any other form of human knowledge, as a purely objective reality unconstituted by subjectivity (or more accurately, given Habermas' conviction about the social construction of the subject, *intersubjectivity*). Ideas and concepts, then, are not 'weak sense impressions' (Hume) or derivations of experience, but *constituents* of experience.

6 One person who believes that much of this debate is about different issues is Stephen Toulmin. He suggests that Habermas defends an understanding of modernity which is not that of the French postmodernists in particular. See *Cosmopolis: the Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, NY: The Free Press, 1990.

7 Because it is accessible, reliable and thorough, I will refer in my comments on Habermas's theory to the overview by M. Pusey, *Jürgen Habermas*, London: Tavistock, 1987. Those who do not wish to grapple with Habermas's large and complex body of writings, but who would like to understand the key features of his programme, are well advised to turn to Pusey's admirably concise overview.

8 *Ibid.*, p.24.

Pressing ahead somewhat, one may analogously claim that discourse is not a capturing of prior experience, but a constituent of it. Similarly, ritual, symbolic imagination, liturgical theatre, is not *about* something; it is part of something, contributing to its substance. This is even true of the so-called hard sciences, something that current pioneers in astrophysics and nuclear physics are now acknowledging in their own theories.⁹

This attack on positivism or scientism leads Habermas to the proposition that knowledge is constituted, as much as anything else, by interests. In *KHI* he speaks of his well-known three 'knowledge-constitutive' or 'cognitive' interests: an interest in technical or instrumental control over nature; a practical interest in social existence; and an emancipatory interest in autonomy. For my purposes, the practical interest, whose forms of knowledge are typically historical and hermeneutical (*Geisteswissenschaften*), is of greatest importance in understanding the nature of discourse.

The practical interest of historical and hermeneutic work, whose social medium for Habermas is language (we could substitute the term 'discourse' here), is in 'mutual understanding in the everyday conduct of life.'¹⁰ This is not far from Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's conviction, to be discussed later, that 'conversation' is the metaphor of hermeneutics. It is important to recognize here that Habermas's formulation links discourse to *practical life* by definition, but it is equally important to realize that this does not yet mean that discourse and *praxis* are two sides of the same coin, because for Habermas (reinterpreting Aristotle), *praxis* carries the specific meaning of social action aimed at the transformation of the material conditions of domination. In other words, *praxis* is a particular kind of (political) practice, whereas practice in the sense of 'carrying out any action' is not specific, and is equally pertinent whatever knowledge-constitutive interest is at work.

If truth is at all to be defined as that which is in some sense objectively valid, as many biblical scholars working with historical-critical sciences tend to assume (keeping in mind that Habermas would not be inclined to an objective view of truth), then Habermas's understanding of historical and hermeneutic knowledge offers a particularly acute observation of considerable methodological significance. Given Habermas's anthropology, which denies the possibility of an individual, atomised or essential subject and affirms only a socially constructed subject, there is no objective experience available to the historical and hermeneutic sciences which is not based precisely on the fact that it is intersubjectively shared. A reconstruction of historical or hermeneutic meaning would then have to go by way of a grasp of the intersubjective constitution of meaning, which includes the reconstructions of the contemporary practioner of the historical or hermeneutic sciences.

The implication is that judgements reached in discourse have truth value only insofar as they arrive at a 'mutual understanding in the everyday conduct of life.'

9 The most fascinating recent report to amply demonstrate this is the story of the discovery of the first empirical evidence of the Big-Bang theory of the origins of the universe: cf. G Smoot with Keay Anderson, *Wrinkles in Time: The Imprint of Creation*, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1993.

10 Pusey, op. cit., p.25.

Does this mean that we have (a) ended up with a norm-free relativism, because 'truth' is now reduced to the general products of a variety of possible 'mutual understandings'? Or does it mean that we have (b) failed to link discourse to praxis, because 'everyday conduct' can hardly be construed as necessarily or even normally emancipatory? At first glance, yes, to both points. But at second glance, the picture changes. This is because of the dynamic of Habermas's third knowledge-constitutive interest, that of emancipation towards adult autonomy, towards 'truth, freedom and justice'.

What drives the third knowledge-constitutive interest is Reason itself (here we have the neo-Kantian side of Habermas), insofar as Reason aims at uncovering 'illusions that veil arbitrary power in society', thus emancipating us from 'ideologically frozen representations of all politically constituted order.' Reason understood in this way enters directly into the other two types of knowledge-constitutive interests in order to turn them critically (which also implies self-critically) to the service of human rationality.

Science, understood in relation to Habermas's first knowledge-constitutive interest of technical rationality, is a human disease when it is removed from this demand to serve human rationality (not the idea of rationality, but the socially constituted forms of rationality by which we conduct our lives), for then it ends up as instrumentalism. When that happens, as in daily descriptions of the effects of bombing people in Cambodia and Vietnam during the US war there, we hear not of the deaths of persons, but of 'body counts'.

Similarly with Habermas's second knowledge-constitutive interest, the practical interest of historical and hermeneutic knowledge in reaching 'mutual understanding in the everyday conduct of life': when abstracted from the emancipatory interest, it ossifies relations, traditions and cultures, leaving us victims or passive recipients of the past and its effects on the present. It leaves us locked in an historical cage from which we cannot escape of our own, but which is likely sooner or later to be smashed anyway by those people who embody the emancipatory interest in their historical struggles for truth, freedom and justice.

Habermas has been criticized quite widely for his understanding of emancipatory interest, resting as it does upon the type of knowledge represented in the critical sciences, because in reality it contains two tendencies, not always in harmony with one another. The first is critique as reason reflecting upon its own principles and categories (the Kantian sense), and the second is 'reflection as a form of self-formation.'¹¹ This latter sense is for my purposes the most important, as it suggests that discourse (the medium of the second, historical-hermeneutic interest) finds its link to praxis when the 'mutual understanding reached in the conduct of everyday life' is infused with the emancipatory intention of self-formation. This formulation has important implications, among other things, for the relationship between a local base Christian community and an *avant-garde*, trained intellectual (the 'theologian' or the 'biblical scholar') in their dialogue about faith.

11 Ibid., p.26.

Habermas's reformulation of the Marxian tradition emphasises the importance of social reproduction, an understated and finally undeveloped aspect of Marx's theory (which got stuck at the point of the material forces and forms of production). On this reading, culture (and thereby, religion) cannot be reduced in positivist fashion to economic processes, though these remain a vital part of the equation. Culture (religion) contains its own historical dynamic. In Habermas's framework, it is one sphere in which 'the claim to reason [is] announced in the teleological and inter-subjective structures of social reproduction themselves.'¹² From here it is a short step to an emancipatory theory of cultural activity. One may say that activities which enable social entities (such as religious institutions) to reproduce themselves, wherever these activities--intersubjectively expressed in discourse--are goal-directed towards truth, justice and freedom, contain within themselves a form of reason, namely, emancipatory or critical reason.

Culture for Habermas, then, following one strand of Weber, is a form of 'meaningful social action, ... because it is always something that subjects *do*, whether in thought or deed.'¹³ But, Weber ultimately believed that no amount of meaningful social action would prevent us inexorably heading into an iron cage of history defined by the intensive penetration of rationalized social structures into all spheres of life. Social systems will run us, so this view goes, as they become increasingly extensive and sophisticated, while our capacity to transcend them decreases accordingly. Weber's basis for this pessimistic judgement, in Habermas's view, was his assumption that only one type of rational action produced long-term historical 'consequences', and this was purposive, or instrumental, rationality (*Zweckrationalität*). A second type of rational action, value-rationality (*Wertrationalität*), had no such consequences in history for Weber. Culture or religion or anything similar would, on these terms, have no link to praxis.

Habermas, in contrast, spends enormous intellectual energy in arguing precisely that value-rational action has *structure-forming effects*.¹⁴ Here Habermas joins Weber's concept of 'meaningful social action' with rationality in what I call discourse (what Habermas calls communicative action, or speech acts). Social inter-action, in other words, has material effects insofar as its consequence is the formation of social structures which express the practical intent which underlies all non-trivial discourse (even habitual discourse, on this reading, would have structure-forming effects, at least negatively, insofar as it serves to ossify or conserve familiar patterns of life). This is as true at the level of the family as it is at the level of nation-building. It is Habermas's way of working out what Marx called the 'social relations of production', but which he never defined in the way he defined 'forces of production', though it was clear that Marx conceived the two as intimately bound up with each other.

Communicative rationality, Habermas's own term for the underlying normative standard of all 'meaningful social action', posits a historical process which expands the possibilities for collective learning and allows for the gradual

12 *Ibid.*, p.28.

13 *Ibid.*, p.29.

14 *Ibid.*, p.31.

institutionalization of reason in society.¹⁵ In essence, Habermas wants to defend a positive view of the human interest in emancipation, to ground it in an anthropological reconstruction of the subject as an intersubjective participant in communicative action, and to undergird its historical significance in multiple projects of social self-formation.

His approach to the question of discourse (or communicative action) and its relationship to praxis through the notion of emancipatory self-formation helps to clarify my starting question: What is the link between discourse and praxis which will help us understand the relationship between a trained interpreter of the Christian tradition and untrained, 'ordinary' members of a base Christian community. We can now say that the link is found primarily in *discursive processes of self-formation which have structure-forming effects of an emancipatory nature*.

The bible studies undertaken over four years by the Amawoti base ecclesial community, whose voice is represented in the interpretation of the Lukan narrative of the blind man, have indeed given evidence of precisely this kind of emancipatory communicative rationality.¹⁶ Whereas bible studies are the forum through which a process of communal self-formation is strengthened, the community of Amawoti has been the practical context within which institutions have been built on the basis of, and in relation to, this discourse.¹⁷ The one aspect has been organically expressed in the other aspect, less as a conscious activism than as an inexorable drive dependent upon the intentionality implicit in the communicative interaction which the bible studies represent.

One should not claim too much for discourse: the idealist mistake is easy to make. In a very important sense, the bible studies themselves have served only to allow an articulation of that which had already been experienced, once space was provided for such readings to occur. But once articulated, the group could develop these experiences practically in transformative actions beyond the *originating* (not original) context of discourse. Conversely, after a few months when the bible studies were not run, the base community came to the conclusion that the 'structure-forming effects' of the process they had been involved in were being lost and even undermined. In order once again to energise their practical programmes of development (emancipation) they decided that a return to the bible study process was vital.

This community has had several unusual factors in its favour, and it has now reached the point of possessing considerable self-awareness, with the result that a recognition of power relations in the discourse situation is sufficiently strong to prevent undesired outside control over most of their key decisions. This is not

15 Ibid., p.31.

16 In making this claim, I rely on a selective assessment of the links between the discursive work done in the Bible studies to practical efforts at transforming local conditions. One could just as easily point to numerous difficulties and problems the same group has had to cope with, including internal tensions within the group, but these are neither the focus of my interest, nor do they undermine the essential point--that discursive practices of self-formation have had emancipatory, structure-forming effects.

17 Among these institutions are numbered a civic association, a subsistence farming operation, a secondary level educational programme, an action committee, and others.

common in a pervasive context of powerlessness (relative to the dominant social groups and institutions; some forms of power are always present).

What remains unclear is just how discourse practice in such a context, when it takes the form of dialogue or conversation with the Other, may occur in the face of powerful distortions of the sphere of communicative action. The danger of pseudo-emancipation is great where this is just another occasion for a new form of domination, this time by the power-laden figure in the communicative context, for example, the trained theologian. I pursue this problem in dialogue, first, with Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in respect of the a contrast between 'conversation' and 'collaboration', and second, with Gayatri Spivak in respect of 'speech with the Other'.

3. Conversation or Collaboration?

Whose interests, and which interests, are served by particular kinds and strategies of discourse? Specifically, what is the situation in respect of intellectuals who wish to collaborate critically in the interest of 'non-persons' (Gutierrez)? They face an existence and practice that is contradictory, claims Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. But, she believes this contradictory position, if consciously taken, provides a rich source of inspiration, energy and creativity in the theological task of deconstructing oppressive religious and theological practices, and of reconstructing the religious heritage as a voice for the oppressed.

For this to happen, Schüssler Fiorenza contends that 'the inclusion of the previously excluded as theological subjects ... calls for a paradigm shift from ... a hermeneutical model of conversation to a practical model of collaboration.'¹⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza argues, against a hermeneutic model of conversation (which does help us to respect the plurality of experiences and thus the experience of the marginalized Other as well), that critical collaboration is vital because we do not 'all enter the conversation on equal terms.'¹⁹ Interpretation, therefore, must be linked to communicative praxis, or what Schüssler Fiorenza calls a 'rhetorical genre'. Rhetorical practices, understood as that which links knowledge with action and passion, have three characteristics: a *referential moment* about something; a *moment of self-implicature* by a speaker or actor, in which the intent of the proclamation is linked to the interests of the proclaimer; and, a *persuasive moment* of directedness to involve the other, eliciting responses, emotions, interests, judgements, and commitments directed toward a common vision.

Critical collaboration, the metaphor of praxis, thus drives us away from relativism into making choices which can be defended against other choices. Our grounds for critical collaboration are established by Schüssler Fiorenza through a summary of the major correctives of the original Enlightenment ideal of pure reason which have changed our understanding of critique. They are the aesthetic-romantic corrective ('intuitive imagination over selective abstraction'), the religious-cultural corrective (tradition as 'wisdom and heritage'), and the political-practical corrective (the connection of knowledge to power).

18 Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Commitment and Critical Inquiry', *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 82 no. 1, 1989, page 1.

19 *Ibid.*, page 8.

To this she adds a fourth corrective of 'minority discourses' which asserts the importance of the situated, particular self against the Enlightenment notion of the universal, transcendent subject 'whose disembodied voice is reason.' An embodied voice is what she seeks, specifically those voices which represent the colonized Other, who must engage in a political and theoretical process of becoming the subject of knowledge and history. In this respect, Schüssler Fiorenza distances herself from the postmodernist perspective which she believes tends 'to abandon the notion of the subject and the possibility of defining the world.'²⁰

Yet the 'critical collaboration' which Schüssler Fiorenza propogates also remains, she notes, a 'problematic potentiality' as long as those who have been silenced have to adopt the languages of those who have silenced them and defined them as 'other'. Nevertheless, she clearly assumes here that the oppressed person can 'speak', and that the intellectual has a role to play by constituting her discipline 'as a heterogeneous, polyphonic public, [thereby being able] to develop critical collaboration and discursive practices in the interest of a democratic public....' The 'critical', activist aspect of the task is clear for Schüssler Fiorenza: not only are we to understand religious communities, but also to change them. This strong confidence on the part of Schüssler Fiorenza about the *avant garde* role of the intellectual, albeit clearly stated as in 'collaborative' relationship with the oppressed, seems too much to sustain the actual conditions of power and powerlessness in the discourse situation.²¹

While, therefore, accepting her distinction between the hermeneutics of conversation and the rhetorics of collaboration as instructive in defining the route to patterns of discourse which link intrinsically to praxis, questions must also be raised about the ease with which it is assumed, at least in this text, that the oppressed Other can indeed speak to us, the intellectuals, in a relatively unproblematic manner once we decide to collaborate with her. This may be true for educated women who live in a middle class society, but we cannot assume that this is so for others. Here we may with profit turn to the work of Gayatri Spivak.

4. Can We Speak With the Other?

Spivak, in an influential article on the representation of the Other,²² asks whether the intellectual can 'speak to' the subaltern, the one of 'inferior quality or status'. 'Speaking to', in her language, means the communicative interaction of two *strongly present subjects*. Her question probes the capacity of the subaltern to be present as subject, and her own answer to this question is largely in the negative. Two elements of her response to her own question are of interest here.

First, her response illuminates the dynamics of dialogue between the master and the subaltern, as they are played out everywhere and throughout history, in

20 Ibid., page 6.

21 That fact that Schüssler Fiorenza is speaking to an academic audience at the convocation address of the Harvard School goes some way to explaining this, but nevertheless, her position as expressed there promotes the idea of the intellectual which Spivak questions.

22 Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', in C Nelson & L Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London: MacMillan, 1988, pp.271-313.

terms of domination and resistance. Second, she argues forcefully for a linguistically and ideologically constituted subject, and against any essential notions of the subject. Thirdly, her corollary is that the subject, especially the subject constituted in part by the *epistémé* of the dominant powers (the oppressed, the marginalised), is not always -perhaps seldom - represented knowingly even to herself, let alone to others, and cannot therefore be taken to be sovereign, and cannot therefore *knowingly* speak. A fairly strong view on the hegemonic impact of the discourse of the dominant is evident here.

The first element takes us into the realm of discourse, especially in respect of the patterns of interaction that define 'conversations' between intellectuals and the subaltern. One may ask about the relevance of these patterns for the Church, in which context one may posit parallels with Spivak's categories as follows:

- theologians and policy-makers in the *ekkleisia* as roughly equivalent to Spivak's *intellectuals*, and
- the ordinary, theologically and ecclesially untrained Christian as equivalent to the '*common person*', to which I add a specific category, namely
- the *subaltern*, understood in terms of the evangelical claim of a 'preferential option for the poor' as 'the poor'.²³

The latter category is the locus of the base ecclesial community existence which interests me throughout this discussion.

The second element identified by Spivak, of the linguistically and ideologically constituted subject, pushes us to consider the nature of the subject in communicative practice, and leads to an understanding of the dialogue between the theologians/church-leaders and the ordinary person of faith as an historically conditioned construction of subjects of faith (by which I mean *both* or *all* parties to the dialogue).

The third element, the lack of subjective sovereignty in the subaltern existence, forces us to consider the question of power relations in the construction of discourse. This final step gives to the title of this paper its particular poignancy. Conversation *or* collaboration implies a claim about two distinct modes of communicative interaction.

Let us turn, first, to the dynamics of discourse between the master and the subaltern, and by way of pursuing this issue, draw in the second and third points concerning the nature and sovereignty of the subaltern subject.

Normally, the master ('the expert', 'the researcher', 'the interpreter', 'the authority figure') speaks either *for* the subaltern, or *at* the subaltern. The

23 'The poor' is a contentious category, seen by Black Theologians in South Africa as another theoretical fulcrum whereby 'white liberal theology' may avoid facing racism or the term 'black' as the definition of oppression. 'The poor' is a sociologically imprecise category, but so is the term 'black', I believe. Both terms are polemical in our context. Though I prefer other terms, I remain with the term 'the poor' as a commonly recognized heuristic device and a more general indicator to subordinate groups within structures of domination, including such groups as women, the materially poor, and blacks. Sexism, classism, racism—one might add groups such as the aged, gays and lesbians, the 'physically challenged', and so on, as often subject to significant structures and practices of domination—are key issues in this context.

subaltern, in these dominant ways of conducting discourse, has no voice of her own. The latter mode ('speaking at') is not my concern here, for it implies no interest in the Other except that of subjugation. Speaking *for*, on the other hand, implies some concern for the voice of the subaltern. But such speaking 'on behalf of' the Other already sublimates the Other, who is seen as in need of 'conscientization' and of public representation by those who speak for them and who purport thereby to 'understand' them. These others are often the activists, the *avant garde*, the intellectuals, who believe they have understood the suffering and the perspective of the subaltern better than the subaltern herself. It is their task, they remain convinced, to bring the subaltern to self-awareness, and having done so, to represent that self-awareness on the stage of politics or theory.

The assumption lying behind such efforts, Spivak argues (against Foucault in the first place), is that the subjectivity of the subaltern is sovereign, that is, epistemologically present in public discourse, as represented in the first place by their own discourse (*Darstellung*, a performative act), and in the second place, as represented by those who have brought them to consciousness (*Vertretung*, a substitutive act). These two meanings of representation together constitute the subject as Other, who is re-presented as 'self-knowing, politically canny.' In simpler terms, the subaltern *speaks*, clearly, about her situation; the intellectual *listens*, and then speaks to others on the subaltern's behalf. The role of the intellectual in actually constructing the subjectivity of the Other disappears from view in the process, and with it the 'interest' of the intellectual, while the subaltern supposedly stands revealed:

The critique of ideological subject-constitution within the state formations and systems of political economy can now be effaced, as can the active theoretical practice of the 'transformation of consciousness.' The banality of leftists intellectuals' lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed: representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent [invisible].²⁴

The point is that the intellectual, cannot simply 'listen to' the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised persons, assuming therefore to have grasped their reality. This is because, first, whatever re-presents in reporting on what the intellectual has heard is in fact already an act which linguistically and ideologically constitutes the subjectivity of those to whom she or he have listened, by virtue of the fact that one cannot escape *one's own interpretive activity*, nor *the ideological character of one's interpretive activity* as it is shaped by political and economic realities. Second, there is no guarantee that what one has heard from the oppressed person is in fact an adequate representation (*Darstellung*) of their subjectivity, because their subjectivity is also constituted discursively and ideologically. Indeed, the 'subaltern' may not know how to speak of her subjectivity, or more profoundly in Spivak's view, not be *able* to do so because of the thick layers of oppression. Third, by assuming that what the intellectual re-presents is the genuine voice of the oppressed, and by conveying that same conviction to those whom she or he addresses one hides one's own (complex) interests as an intellectual in the discourse that has taken place.

24 Spivak, op. cit., p.275.

Spivak, following Foucault, calls this kind of intellectual activity 'epistemic violence'. It is the violence of actions taken on the basis of a knowledge of the subaltern which is presumed to be better than that of the subaltern herself, for the presumed ideal of 'saving' the subaltern from herself. It is not hard to recognise in this description a common understanding among a number of clergy and church activists, by bible study group leaders and Sunday School teachers, by evangelists and catechists, that it is their solemn duty to tell their 'flock' (the image itself is revealing) what they must believe about themselves, and how they should act in relation to their needs.

The other side of this equation (external intellectuals vis-a-vis subordinate groups) is captured in Spivak's title, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Her answer, spelled out in relation to legal and ritual practices in colonial India, makes clear her conviction that the subaltern cannot speak, because silence has become virtually ontological in its force. For this reason, the intellectual *must* take the risk of representation, but now as a carefully circumscribed task. The initial step required is an act of deconstruction: first, by way of a recognition and admission of his linguistically and ideologically shaped subjectivity (and interests), in order to clear space for what otherwise cannot be heard; second, by deconstructing the context of the speech of the subaltern in relation to her linguistically and ideologically shaped subjectivity (and interests).

The force of Spivak's argument notwithstanding, I believe she has not made an entirely convincing case, for two reasons. First, she holds too strong a view of the hegemonic power of the discourse of the dominant, as implied in her belief that silence in the face of domination has become virtually ontological in its force. Second, her notion of speaking appears limited, emphasising it seems a kind of self-conscious capacity of articulation through language. Her final example in support of her claim, ironically, refers to a young woman who committed suicide under conditions that made it clear that she was protesting not about some personal wrong but about a political wrong. Her suicide is the communicative act, though this is not understood unless it is analysed in its 'semantic' and ideological context. In this sense, once understood, the woman has spoken. A broader understanding of discourse or of communicative acts is necessary at this point. Consequently, a different set of strategies for entering into and understanding the discursive relationship is necessary.

Before taking up this point, let us take a side route out of, and back into the main discussion to consider briefly the evangelical claim in theology of a 'preferential option for the poor', because this is not unrelated to the kind of commitment Schüssler Fiorenza supports, while it is a common presupposition of many Christians. Spivak attacks speech that is *for* (on behalf of) the subaltern, and speech that is *at* (reification, objectifying the other) the subaltern. In both cases, the subaltern is not allowed to enter into the dialogue as a full subject in her own right. By contrast, to 'speak *to*' implies that both partners in the dialogue are strong subjects, each secure in the face of the other, each able to listen to the other while speaking for one's self.

Perhaps, therefore, we are wrong to speak of taking a 'preferential option *for* the poor'. The semantic force of the preposition *for* implies a strong subject who

stands over against the 'poor' rather than where the poor are. This strong subject can only be the 'non-poor'. The practical force of such a position must be to represent in theology, church polity and ecclesial practice a perspective that, to be sure, takes the poor seriously, but simultaneously tends to undermine their right to speak for themselves. By further implication, undermining the right of the poor to speak for themselves as strong subjects also undermines their right to participate influentially in shaping theology, polity and practice. As one observer put it after attending a major ecumenical conference in Brazil on the question of the poor, 'the only problem is that there were no poor there to speak for themselves'.

We need, perhaps, to refer instead to our faith as taking a preferential option *with* the poor. The minute one says this, it becomes obvious that there is a different intentionality here, one corresponding to Spivak's 'speaking to' mode of discourse. Only then can we begin to talk of dialogue, if we mean by dialogue something akin to a conversation among equals comparably strong as subjects. Notice, however, the underlying assumption of unbroken intersubjectivity in this way of putting it. Speaking 'to' or 'with' implies the mode of 'conversation', which we may see as a hermeneutic metaphor and as the intention of language. But here this is a conversation between equals. Were it not so, we would no longer have dialogue but rather one of two other modes: either 'representation', a replacement of the lesser Other by the subjectivity of the greater (*speaking for*); or, 'subjugation', a full reification of the lesser Other who is thereby brought under control or excised from the context of discourse completely (*speaking at*).

This gives rise to the second point: Let us assume that we believe in the practical goal of genuine conversation, whether for the sake of personal, familial, communal or social cohesion, stability and well-being. What happens to dialogue when the purported conversation is not between equals, especially when this is manifestly the case? One will have to allow for the distortion of conversation by this unequal relationship. Then conversation becomes opaque, increasingly inaccessible to the interpretive act the more the imbalance of equality between those in relationship. Spivak has already addressed this point, but she has not made clear how one may escape the impasse which she seems to lead us into (that the subaltern finally cannot speak), other than to say that the task of representation remains vital provided it includes the deconstruction of the subjectivity of both the re-presentative and the subaltern.

Can one escape the impasse? Are there ways into the discourse practices of the subaltern, of the oppressed person, which allow us 'into the space' occupied by what at first appearance is a reproduction of the existing pattern of public powers? At this point, James C Scott's notion of 'hidden transcripts' in the context of 'arts of resistance' against domination offers some further insight. It will also enable us to return to the question of hegemonic discourses, and to the concern for a broader understanding of discourse than Spivak allows.

5. Behind the Stage of Public Discourse: 'Hidden Transcripts' and 'Infrapolitics'

Scott has proposed the innovative and fruitful metaphor of 'hidden transcripts' to describe the kind of discursive or practical activity of dominated groups of people

which, carried out behind the backs of those who dominate them, is almost never apparent to those who dominate them, or if so, then in coded form.²⁵ Dominant groups also have their hidden transcripts. These hidden transcripts have as their necessary counterpart the 'public transcripts' which contain the performances known both to the dominant and the dominated, and which regulate their normal discursive (thus practical) relationship with each other.

Scott's work as an anthropologist, drawn from years of detailed empirical research of his own, is seminal to the issues with which I am confronted in dialoguing with the faith, beliefs and experience of base Christian communities. While some of his critics are not sure that the kinds of activities he associates with hidden transcripts among subordinate groups have in fact anything to do with resistance (as the title of his book claims), he persuasively offers two important correctives to sociological analyses which assume or utilize concepts of hegemony and false consciousness in one or other form.

First, he shows how discourse patterns and practices among subordinate groups may negate or neutralize dominant discourses, and thus provide discursive sites (hidden or disguised) of struggle out of which practical struggles may germinate and within which they are developed. Second, he implicitly accords to subordinate groups, even in the most extreme circumstances, a capacity for agency and wisdom which hegemonic theories fail to allow or explain. If one is to respect what happens in base Christian communities, and what emerges out of such contexts in the way of faith and its reflexive knowledge (what I call 'incipient theology'), then these correctives provide vital inputs to what Spivak requires in 'speaking to' a sovereignly constituted subjectivity in the Other.

Of course, Scott's analyses are not aimed at what Habermas would call 'system' imperatives (economic and material realities). They thus fall within the category of what used to be called 'superstructural' realities. Besides the fact that the model of substructure/superstructure has been undermined or so altered as to make it no longer persuasive even within many forms of contemporary Marxism, Scott is not unaware of the importance of material realities, systems and structures, nor does he propose a theory of discourse practices which operates outside of such things. Rather, Scott's work self-consciously

privileges the social experience of indignities, control, submission, humiliation, forced deference, and punishment. The choice of emphasis is not to gainsay the importance of material appropriation in class relations. Appropriation is, after all, largely the purpose of domination. The very process of appropriation, however, unavoidably entails systematic social relations of subordination that impose indignities of one kind or another on the weak. These indignities are the seedbed of the anger, indignation, frustration, and swallowed bile that nurture the hidden transcript.²⁶

His focus on social relations leads Scott to suggest that at least four forms of political discourse may be discerned in the interface between dominant and

25 James C Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 111.

subordinate groups. Each has its own set of rules and codes, and all contain expressions of resistance against domination though at different levels and with differing considerations of the balance of power and the likelihood of threats against those who disturb the prevailing patterns of power relations. The four forms of political discourse, which are central to Scott's understanding of discursive 'arts of resistance', are:²⁷

- ...that which takes as its basis the flattering self-image of the elites. Owing to the rhetorical concessions that his self-image contains, it offers a surprisingly large arena for political conflict that appeals to these concessions and makes use of the room for interpretation within any ideology.
- ...[the] hidden transcript itself, offstage, where subordinates may gather outside the intimidating gaze of power, [where] a sharply dissonant political culture is possible.
- ...[the] politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identify of the actors' (this lies between the public transcripts and the hidden transcript).
- Finally, the most explosive realm of politics is the rupture of the political cordon sanitaire between the hidden and the public transcripts.

Scott's view may be diagrammatically represented as follows:



Scott suggests a way of understanding the patterns of discourse among dominant groups which changes both the way one understands what is going on there, and the way one enters into discourse with subordinate groups as a trained intellectual. Moreover, his approach takes the question of unequal power relations as fundamental to any understanding of the social location of discourse practices while according to subordinate groups a much greater degree of (inter)subjectivity than Spivak allows. Subordinate groups, in his view, no matter how pervasive and extreme their experience of domination, are never without forms of discourse which both neutralize and negate the hegemonic force of dominant patterns of discourse.

If Scott is right,²⁸ and the range of evidence he brings to bear in support of his argument is certainly impressive, then it is not sufficient in attempting to 'listen

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.

²⁸ It is worth noting here that Scott himself is clearly strongly influenced by postmodern views on knowledge and truth; he would not say that he is essentially 'right', but rather that he can point to family resemblances (Wittgenstein reapplied), in a very wide range of contexts, in discursive patterns

to' or 'speak with' subordinate groups to take at face value what one hears or says. Between the trained theologian and a base Christian community, for example, lies the public transcript which, Scott suggests, is most often the basis for drawing conclusions about what is said and heard, and for extrapolating such conclusions into theological or sociological claims. But if this is only half the story, and a distorted story at that, then representations of the perspectives of subordinate groups (whether by themselves, or by third parties) which take the public transcript as their datum are necessarily misleading, at the least, or fundamentally unreliable at worst.

Drawing on language studies concerned with gender struggles, Scott makes the point clear: 'In face-to-face encounter the tone, grammar, and dialect of the dominant male is likely to prevail, not to mention that, as in other asymmetrical power relations, the dominant is typically the one who initiates the conversation, controls its direction, and terminates it.'²⁹ Conversely, the subordinate Other is likely to engage in patterns of discourse which reduce risk, an aim best met in the face of domination by adopting the language games of the dominant, by venturing as little as possible, by using stock formulas whenever possible. When one views Christian theology, confessions, creeds and the like in this light, recognizing to what extent a breach of established patterns of language and other forms of discourse (liturgical, for example) brings upon one sanctions of one kind or another, then a dialogue with base Christian communities on matters of faith and theology within a context of unequal power relations must be particularly suspect.

Is it possible to find a way around the impasse that this discursive reality produces, if one does indeed want to enter into a dialogue 'with the poor' from the position of power (even if this power is expressed primarily in the form of knowledge)? We have already seen that Spivak is pessimistic about the possibilities of genuine dialogue, though she believes the attempt must nevertheless be made. Similarly, Schüssler Fiorenza feels the attempt must be made, though she is more optimistic about the ability of the intellectual to represent the subjectivity of the Other than either Spivak or Scott would accept. Habermas, too, on the grounds of the universal pragmatics of the emancipatory interest, goes in the same direction.

I too believe the attempt must be made, for a wide variety of reasons I cannot discuss here. But Scott's work, and its congruence with my own experience, convinces me that the task one undertakes in making such an attempt is both complex and difficult. A different set of hermeneutic skills and tools than those normally applied to the public transcript are necessary, and they are neither easy to acquire, nor will they lead to results that are painlessly transferred from one context to another. To paraphrase Scott's title, what we need are not systems of interpretation but 'arts' of interpretation (in itself a desire for systematization and universalization, an occupational hazard for theologians, may well be evidence of an inclination to enter into patterns of discourse which dominate others on the side

shaped by power relations between dominant and subordinate groups. This caution does not, however, reduce the value and importance of his insights.

29 Ibid., p. 30.

of domination, that is, with the aim of defining and controlling the norms and the limits of discourse).

Why is the task likely to be so difficult? Using Scott's terms, when we enter into an attempt to interpret the dialogue of a base Christian community, we do so in the first instance at the level of the public transcript:³⁰

What is often available ... is what they have been able to introduce in muted or veiled form into the public transcript. What we confront, then, in the public transcript, is a strange kind of ideological debate about justice and dignity in which one party has a severe speech impediment induced by power relations. If we wish to hear this side of the dialogue we shall have to learn its dialect and codes. Above all, recovering this discourse requires a grasp of the arts of political disguise.

The polyvalent symbolism and metaphorical openness of cultural expression is no less relevant to the discourse of subordinate groups than anywhere else, while the predominance of oral traditions among such groups implies a further flexibility in the construction and interpretation of meaning occasioned by the fact that oral culture, in its impermanence and its uniqueness 'as to time, place, and audience' and in respect of 'every other enactment', offers control over the means and the ends of its transmission.

In other words, there is no orthodoxy or center to folk culture since there is no primary text to serve as the measure of heresy. The practical result is that folk culture achieves the anonymity of collective property, constantly being adjusted, revised, abbreviated, or, for that matter, ignored.

Once again, we must recognize here a difficulty for the Christian tradition wherever its guardians exhibit the tendency to control the definition of faith by fixing it in writing, and then demanding of others that they conform to fixed, standardised interpretations of these writings. Indeed, the difficulty arises in the very institution of the faith by the mere fact of locating its primeval origins in relation to a canon of fixed writings. This is not to say that such strategies are incorrect or wrong, but it is to say that those who inherit these strategies and adopt them anew, particularly when this is done in service of the life and identity of the ecclesial institutions, will find it especially difficult to connect to the faith of base Christian communities, or to understand what this faith means as an act of reflection (*their* incipient theologies).

Of course, this observation does no more than say differently what is already widely acknowledged, namely, that the dominant discourses of the Church are the discourses controlled by the dominant elites in the Church. But my interest in Scott's way of approaching the matter lies in the range of alternative practices of interpretation that may be possible for those who do engage in dialogue with base Christian communities, and who do so with a desire to respect their constructions of faith and knowledge. Where this is the case, the boundary conditions between

30 Ibid., p. 138. Here Scott also discusses the 'basic or elementary techniques of disguise: anonymity, euphemisms, and what I call grumbling', as well as the 'more complex and culturally elaborate forms of disguise found in oral culture, folktales, symbolic inversion, and finally, in rituals of reversal such as carnival.'

the public transcript and the hidden transcript have to be taken into account and rigorously explored. What is the nature of this boundary, then, and what is it that one should be looking for?

The boundary between the hidden and the public transcript shifts as the constellation of power relations between the dominant and subordinate groups shifts. This boundary, moreover, is always a site of struggle: as Scott puts it, 'Real ground is lost and gained.'³¹ Where the hidden transcript enters into public discourse, it often does so in *disguise*, a key notion for Scott.³² This disguise is likely to be as deeply rooted as the context of power requires: 'The more menacing the power, the thicker the mask.'³³ Because disguise is so important, so too is surveillance. Both the dominant and the subordinate groups aim to discern what is going on behind the scenes.

As noted, another term Scott therefore introduces is 'infrapolitics', by which he means 'a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name.'³⁴ In contrast to formal political organization, written records (such as resolutions, declarations, lawsuits) and public action, infrapolitics is 'the realm of informal leadership and non-elites, of conversation and oral discourse, and of surreptitious resistance.' Infrapolitics is discourse (and its related practices) in the face of threatening powers which leaves as few traces as possible in minimizing risk, yet which remains serious politics in 'always pressing, testing, probing the boundaries of the permissible.'³⁵

From this vantage point infrapolitics may be thought of as the elementary--in the sense of foundational--form of politics. It is the building block for the more elaborate institutionalized political action that could not exist without it. Under the conditions of tyranny and persecution in which most historical subjects live, it is political life

From the perspective of infrapolitics, and the more general category of hidden transcripts, discourse practices among marginalized, oppressed or poor communities are seen to be connected to enterprises of transformative praxis, even when such enterprises are not fully articulated, not overtly and consciously aimed at resistance, and not systematically connected to specific struggles of resistance. Scott's view fills out the original intuitions contained in Habermas' understanding of communicative competence; it does so in a way that allows one to begin to see what collaboration as espoused by Schüssler Fiorenza might mean; it accepts implicitly the challenge posed by Spivak in seeking a political practice aimed at a

31 Ibid., p. 200.

32 An example: Recently I was told the story of a farm labourer who, like his fellows, was required to address the farmer as 'Ou Baas' ('Superior Boss'). He, however, took to calling the farmer 'Ou Haas' ('Old Rabbit'), feigning a lisp and 'acting stupid'. His fellow farm labourers knew well what he was doing, and the disguise protected him. The point was made. Most, if not all of us, can probably think of many such examples in our own experience.

33 Ibid., p. 3. Of course, one implication of this axiom is that the 'hidden transcript' is likely to be much more accessible in contexts where domination is relatively lightly exercised, as are the forms of infrapolitics more likely to be less disguised. Then the boundary conditions are less clear, and discourse practices more open.

34 Ibid., p. 19.

35 Ibid., p. 200.

discursive mode of 'speaking with' the subaltern and adds to it a much thicker description of the subjectivity of the Other.

In all these ways, the route taken through this essay, while stopping along the way to consider key difficulties in the relationship between intellectuals and base communities, comes to fruition at the point of defining the nature of discursive activity among subordinate groups in the face of domination through the ideas of infrapolitics and hidden transcripts. Even when taken as heuristic concepts rather than scientific assertions (which Scott does not claim),³⁶ these ideas and the capacity they possess for alerting us to 'family resemblances' of discursive 'arts of resistance' among subordinate groups are very fruitful in a number of directions.

They alert us to the contextual nature of such discourse (there is no generalized, universal or essential subject here), for 'the hidden transcript is specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors.' Moreover, they allow us to specify these discursive practices as broader than the functions of language: the hidden transcript 'does not contain only speech acts but a whole range of practices.' They are discerned not in abstract dialogue but on the boundary between the public transcript and the hidden transcript which may be described as 'a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate - not a solid wall.' Finally, they emphasize the link between knowledge and power, and show us how it is that dominant groups are able to naturalize their power over subordinate groups inasmuch they 'prevail - though never totally - in defining and constituting what counts as the public transcript and what as offstage.'³⁷

But these notions raise problems as well, specifically in the attempt to dialogue as an intellectual with base Christian community groups. Just how these problems should be addressed is not the focus of this essay. Yet they must be brought to the fore at this point, precisely once one has begun to understand the issue of discursive practices in contexts of domination.

The first is the question of getting at the hidden transcript of a subordinate group if it is indeed hidden vis-a-vis the public transcript. How does one know when one has established the kind of trust which will allow access to the hidden transcript? The second, related question concerns the means by which one may reliably decode the discursive practices defined as infrapolitics. If disguise and surveillance are indeed the right metaphors for what goes on in infrapolitical activity, then how does one get behind the mask, especially where the mask is thick ('the more menacing the power the thicker the mask')? In these ways, notes Scott, 'The *official transcript* as a social fact presents enormous difficulties for the conduct of historical and contemporary research on subordinate groups.'³⁸ One may ask, do the non-discursive practices of resistance material struggles offer a point of contact whereby discursive arts of resistance may be deciphered?

36 I follow here Ricoeur's sense of 'heuristic'. Noting that models in scientific discourse are like fictions in certain forms of poetic discourse, Ricoeur sees in both a common trait, namely, 'their *heuristic* force, that is to say, their capacity to open and unfold new dimensions of reality by means of our suspension of belief in an earlier description.' See 'Imagination in Discourse and Action', chapter 8, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991, p. 175.

37 James C Scott, op. cit., p. 14, passim.

38 Ibid., p. 132.

The third major question is ethical in nature, and goes to the purpose of engaging in a dialogue with base Christian communities in the first place. Assuming that the dialogue, from the point of view of the outsider or intellectual rather than the subordinate group, serves a purpose beyond the immediate aim of understanding each other, then it must - at least in the context of this essay - be that of transformative action aimed at processes of self-formation which have structure-forming effects of an emancipatory nature (the formulation I arrived at in my discussion of discourse and praxis). But why should *I*, in particular, or any other theologian or non-organic intellectual,³⁹ take on this task? Does one not run the profound risk of bringing into the public realm, by virtue of one's representation of what one has discovered in the process of dialogue in whatever quarters I may choose, those things that are hidden because of the dangers accompanying them? Who gives one the right to do this? Clearly, this is not an easy question to answer, and it takes us deep into the ethics of human scientific research.

Of course, there are stock answers to such a question; in theology, one may simply say that the dialogue of the ecumenical community of Christians breaches all class, race, gender and other barriers, and that this is both required by our faith and a mark of our faith. Or one may claim on evangelical grounds a mission of liberation or redemption which takes the whole of the created world, and all its inhabitants, as the theatre of mission. Indeed, in this latter view, one may also locate the belief by many (especially intellectuals and politicised elites!) that they *need* to act, as an *avant garde*, on behalf of those who are not in a sufficiently strong position to act for themselves. Scott himself, though he writes largely as if he were standing back from all he surveys as an uncommitted anthropologist, provides room for such an approach by noting that the social sites in which dissenting hidden transcripts may be created are not automatically the result of domination:⁴⁰

It would be more accurate to claim that a form of domination creates certain possibilities for the production of a hidden transcript. Whether these possibilities are realized or not, and how they find expression, depends on the constant agency of subordinates in seizing, defending, and enlarging a normative power field.

What Scott says here implies clearly that it is the *agency of subordinates* which is critical, but it does not take much to imagine that their agency may be connected to what is going on in the wider society around them, particularly within institutions that are directly or indirectly important to them. This is where the role of the outsider, and the intellectual fits, if it fits at all. The ethical question remains, however.

39 I use Gramsci's term here in a quite specific and limited sense: the 'organic intellectual' is both a member of the subordinate group in question, and rooted materially within that group. An intellectual who has come out of that group but now lives in a materially different social location (by virtue of advanced training and the material benefits attached to jobs which highly trained people are likely to enjoy, for example) is no longer 'organic', though she may more readily grasp and more reliably interpret the discourse of her originating group than complete outsiders.

40 Ibid.

The reverse side of this ethical question may be seen in the impulses expressed in the discursive arts of resistance described so powerfully by Scott. These are by definition impulses aimed at negating and neutralising the discourses of domination, and if possible, developing sites of resistance to domination which have practical outcomes in overcoming domination. Those moments when the public transcript is ruptured and when resistance moves beyond the secluded sites of hidden transcripts into the public realm depend upon what has gone before. Such moments are not automatic; they are usually triggered by some person or group who, in effect, decides no longer to play the game behind the scenes. Thus Scott notes: 'It is only when this hidden transcript is openly declared that subordinates can fully recognize the full extent to which their claims, their dreams, their anger is shared by other subordinates with whom they have not been in direct touch.'⁴¹ The question which arises here is that of the role of the intellectual, or theologian in assisting local communities to develop their own sense and capacity for power such that they are able publicly at last to express what has been hidden. Once again, the ethical issues at stake are profound and remain to be considered.

6. An Unconclusion

This essay began by looking for an understanding of the relationship between discourse and praxis in the boundary between the dominated and the dominant. The reason for such a search lies in an interest in the way in which theologies are produced which are held to be normative or at least directive in interpreting faith.

The question at the back of it all is this: What may the faith of base Christian communities, arising in concrete experiences of domination and discerned in the products of *their* reflection on faith (their 'incipient theology'), contribute to the wider dialogue of faith in the Church and its authoritative theologies, confessions, creeds, catechisms, proclamations and worship. The concern is a more effective praxis in the relationship between the trained theologian and Christians at base community level in mutually overcoming the relative 'silence' of base communities at the level of theology.

The route taken illuminates, for me at least, many difficult issues arising from research and practice guided by these interests. Perhaps there are no final answers here, yet there are insights of considerable significance to be developed. If my discussions with others are anything to go by, the journey seems to have relevance to a wide range of people. For that reason, this accounting is offered, in the hope that it may stimulate a broader base for the cooperative, committed research which seems to offer much in our pluralist, religious context towards a fuller understanding of religiously oriented practices in their relation to emancipatory concerns, and thereby to the enhancement of an indigenous, contextual theological discourse and appropriate ecclesial practices.

41 Ibid., p. 223.