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**THE POOR AS HERMENEUTICAL SUBJECT IN  
LIBERATION THEOLOGY 1**

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**Abstract**

The most suitable approach to a discussion of the hermeneutics of Liberation Theology is to view the latter as fundamentally part of the distinctive theological methodology developed by liberation theologians. To deal with the poor as hermeneutical subject in Liberation Theology, the subject is developed in four parts.

In the first part the intimate relation between methodology and hermeneutics is defended in the light of the fact that the locus theologicus constitutes the hermeneutical subject. The methodological starting point of Liberation Theology and the hermeneutical point of departure (the faith of the poor) thus coincide.

In the second part two implications of the poor as hermeneutical subject are dealt with, namely the reinterpretation of presuppositions

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in view of the inevitable ideological nature of faith, and the relative position of Scripture with regard to the status of socio-analysis as alternative "text."

The third part deals with the relation between the canonical text and the present context as basis for liberation theologians' re-reading of Scripture in view of the poor.

To conclude, a few critical questions are enumerated in the fourth part, dealing, inter alia, with the revelatory status of "the signs of the time" and the methodological position of Scripture in Liberation Theology.

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**New Testament professor:** You would not find the slightest reason in the New Testament for that which is practised as Theology of Liberation.

**Student:** Professor, do you not think that there are more important issues to discuss during the visit of the U S president than NATO?

**Professor:** But why? The unity of NATO is definitely threatened.

**Student:** And the systematic exploitation of the Third World? Now it is clear to me why nothing is said in the New Testament about the Theology of Liberation.

**Professor (astonished):** What, then, is the relation?

**Student:** Hermeneutics, professor, pure hermeneutics.<sup>2</sup>

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Since the sixties of this century, a current of so-called "Liberation Theologies" attracted a fair amount of attention

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2 Free translation and adaptation from Assmann 1969:236 note 24.

on the theological scene. I believe that the most fruitful approach to these theologies is to discern them within the oppression-liberation binomial and draw their respective characters from the nature of the oppression in question: Black Theology intends to liberate from racism, Feminist Theology liberates from sexism, and African and Asian Theologies are struggling with cultural, class and racist oppression.

For the sake of this paper, attention is focused on **Latin American Liberation Theology** for the obvious reason that a socio-economic class distinction is of fundamental importance for these theologians' comprehension of the Latin American situation. In no other liberation theology does the oppression-liberation theme emphasize the rich-poor contrast as is the case in this theology. And our concern will be to look at some of the hermeneutical consequences of such a theology.

The student of hermeneutics is immediately tempted to enlighten the hermeneutics of Liberation Theology by means of a (contrasting) comparison to major approaches in European Theology. One could, for example, refer to Rudolf Bultmann as contrasting partner.<sup>3</sup> Where he draws on the existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger to mediate hermeneutics on the way to a better self-understanding, Liberation Theology draws on the historic-materialistic philosophy of Karl Marx to mediate hermeneutics on the way to structural change. This approach does display the sound educational principle of moving from the known to the unknown and leads to exciting reading. But it would precisely be the approach so strongly rejected by liberation theologians themselves, namely to be interpreted from a Eurocentric point of view.

This comparative approach lies implicit in the apologetic parts of Liberation Theology, and "European" terms like presuppositions, surplus-meaning and merging of horizons are in fact taken over and adapted. To embark on a discussion of the hermeneutics of Liberation Theology by employing these concepts as starting points would, however, only render

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3 John Goldingay 1983:133-137, e g starts his article with the differences between traditional scholarship and the approach of L T.

"secondary" comprehension. The soundest approach to a responsible discussion of the hermeneutics of Liberation Theology is to view the latter as fundamentally part of the distinctive theological methodology of Liberation Theology.

This paper will deal with the subject in terms of the following: in the first part the intimate relation between methodology and hermeneutics is defended in the light of the fact that the locus theologicus constitutes the hermeneutical subject. In the second part, two implications of this are dealt with: the reinterpretation of presuppositions in view of the inevitable ideological nature of faith and the relative position of Scripture with regard to the status of socio-analysis. The third part deals with the relation between the canonical text and the present context, and in the last part some critical questions which could serve as basis for further discussion are enumerated.

### 1. Relation between methodology and hermeneutics

Since its formulation, Liberation Theology has emphasized that it views theology as a "critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word" (Gutierrez 1974:13).<sup>4</sup> This has led to a distinctive methodological approach which may be simplified as follows <sup>5</sup>:

Theology starts with a thorough analysis of the de facto reality and assigns an important place to the social sciences in this regard. This is the socio-analytical mediation of theology. Secondly, the analysed reality is interpreted in the light of faith using Scripture and tradition. This constitutes the hermeneutical mediation of theology. Thirdly, pastoral actions are derived from a combination of the first two

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4 See related definitions in his articles 1975:37 and 1976:67.

5 This summary is present in almost every work by liberation theologians. See as examples the whole structure of the excellent work, **Theologie und Praxis**, by Clodovis Boff (München, 1983) and the book by the Boff-brothers (Clodovis and Leonardo) (1984:27). The documents of bishop-conferences like Medillin and Puebla are structured in the same way.

procedures in order to modify reality to correspond more closely to the principles of God's Kingdom. Numerous very interesting dogmatic implications follow from this description of theology, but only those relevant to the topic are mentioned:

The locus theologicus is not represented by the desks of academic theologians, but is the socio-historical praxis of Christians. It is their faith that seeks understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). But, in view of the situation analysis whereby Latin America's position of dependence and exploitation is explicated,<sup>6</sup> the point of departure is specifically "the life of faith on the underside of history" (Gutierrez 1983:90), resulting in a theology springing up out of poverty, the oppression, the heartrending conditions under which the great majority of Latin Americans live."<sup>7</sup> The authenticity of this theology is thus closely related to the degree in which it succeeds to be a theology of the poor (and not merely for the poor). Theology is reflection of the poor upon their faith (Gutierrez 1983:90-91). And a clear commitment to the poor is nothing less than a methodological presupposition: "From the start liberation theology has maintained that active commitment to liberation comes first and theology develops from it" (Gutierrez 1978:247). To formulate the same point in slightly different terms, one could say that Liberation Theology starts with praxis, but is not an indiscriminate praxis: "It is not enough to know that praxis must precede reflection; we must realize

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6 Articles by leading Latin American social scientists on dependence are to be found in Henry Bernstein 1973.

7 R M Brown in the preface to Torres and Fabella 1978:2. See also his discussion in 1978:60-62 where he states: "Liberation theology has a different starting point. Its starting point is the poor.... The marginalized, the poor, comprise the great majority of the human family. And it is with them that theology must start; not with theories, not with views from above, but with 'the view from below!'"

that the historical **subject of that praxis is the poor**" (Gutierrez 1978:247).<sup>8</sup>

The very important question that follows is whether methodology and hermeneutics are related closely enough to justify an identification of the theological and hermeneutical **subjects**. The definition of theology as critical reflection in the light of faith and hermeneutic mediation as the relation between Liberation Theology and the traditional Christian sources, has already pointed to the methodological importance of hermeneutics. But one could even transcend this fact and state that liberation theologians come very close to an **identification** of theology and hermeneutics, as also happens in the works of the European theologians Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs (Stuhmacher 1979:192-196).

The best example of this is **The Liberation of Theology** by J L Segundo. This book is hailed for its methodological insights, but see how Segundo formulates his intention: "In this book I am going to try and show that an approach which attempts to relate past and present in dealing with the word of God has to have its own special methodology. I shall give this methodology a pretentious name and call it the hermeneutical circle" (Segundo 1977:8). Methodology as such is thus called a hermeneutical circle. This is confirmed by the conclusion of Manzanera: "Das eigentümliche dieser Theologie besteht darin, ... dass die Hermeneutik der Befreiung zur Hermeneutik **der Theologie selbst** wird" (1975:52). This is possible because of the praxis-theory-praxis-structure of Liberation Theology, that is, the dynamic, dialectical relation between praxis (starting point) and theory (Segundo 1977:8).

Segundo, however, does refer to the hermeneutical circle in theology,<sup>9</sup> and thus falls short of an **identification** between

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8 Cf also Manfred Hoffmann 1978:126, who states: "Die Praxis ist nicht irgendeine unbestimmte Praxis... Der Andere/Arme steht in der Mitte der Befreiungspraxis. Es geht um die Praxis des Armen und für den Armen."

9 Compare Segundo's definition of the hermeneutical circle (1977:8) with the first two points of the simplified methodology given on p 4 of this article.

hermeneutics and theology which would in any case make a hermeneutic mediation of theology impossible. But there is, I believe, a strong enough basis for an identification of the theological and hermeneutical subjects, namely the poor. "Solidarity with the poor, commitment to the liberation of the exploited classes ... led to a re-reading of the gospel" (Gutierrez 1975:42, my emphasis). But this re-reading in terms of the poor (hermeneutics) relies on an analysis of the socio-historical situation of the poor (methodology).

The methodological starting point of theology in general (analysis of the context in view of the poor) and hermeneutical point of departure (the life of the poor on the underside of history) thus coincide and have a profound significance for the hermeneutics of Liberation Theology.

## 2. Two implications of the poor as hermeneutical subject

2.1 The first implication of the poor as methodological (i e, theological) subject of Liberation Theology is that the generally accepted notion of inevitable presuppositions (so eloquently developed by Bultmann 1957:145 ff) is taken over but expounded with far greater politico-ideological awareness.

It is impossible, says Beatriz Couch (1976:304), to approach Scripture with an "original naivete" as if a disengagement from cultural, philosophical and ethical presuppositions could take place in a "pure" application of Scripture to reality. This is confirmed by L Boff: "We do not want to be naive from the hermeneutic standpoint. Our question (referring to the meaning of Christ in an oppressive situation) is prompted by a very clear and well defined interest" (1979:102).

The concept of ideology as used in this context is not in the pejorative sense (a set of ideas held not for the inherent truth thereof, but for the interests it legitimises), but as a reference to "the system of goals and means that serves as the necessary backdrop for any human option or line of action" (Segundo 1977:102).<sup>10</sup> And the fact that methodology

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10 See his exposition of the intricate relation between faith and ideology: 102 ff.

starts with an analysis of reality (mostly with a critical recourse to Marxist categories), entails Liberation Theology to emphasize the political character of all theologies, even those who do not think in political terms.

But if the methodological starting point is also the starting point of the hermeneutical circle, it follows that a critique of ideology becomes constitutive for a **hermeneutics of suspicion**. "A hermeneutical circle in theology always presupposes a profound human commitment, a partiality that is consciously accepted - not on the basis of theological criteria, of course, but on the basis of human criteria" (Segundo 1977:9).<sup>11</sup> In Latin America this profound commitment is the preferential option for the liberation of the poor and every theology (and resultant hermeneutic) is judged in the light of the oppression-liberation criterium. It is impossible to avoid ideologies and presuppositions, but liberation theologians believe that in the serious situation of Latin America one bias is not as appropriate as another. The question is whose interests theology serves (Wells & Baum 1984:81-87) and these interests are revealed by a hermeneutics that is suspicious of any commitment (and resultant exegesis) which does not take the poor as starting point.

The ideological suspicion which revealed the Latin American situation as one of oppression and dependence (and **not** underdevelopment) leads to a hermeneutical suspicion where Scripture is re-read in the light of the option for the poor. In other words: "From its point of departure in the anguish of the poor of this world, the whole biblical message emerges as a proclamation of liberation" (Boff 1984:26). Liberation becomes the semantic axis for a re-reading of Scripture. It is not my purpose to give an account of the exegetical work done by liberation theologians,<sup>12</sup> but it is important to discuss the **theological motives for the poor as hermeneutical subject**:

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11 See Segundo's comment in note 9 (1977:34) where he refers to W H van der Pol who emphasizes the a priori character of any point of departure.

12 The works of J S Croatto and J P Miranda are the best examples of excellent exegetical work.



**2.1.1** The first motive is directly related to God's **revelation** in Jesus Christ: the kenosis of Christ reveals a "lesser God" (Sobrino 1985:148) in a twofold sense: not only did Christ become man, He became one of the poor and lived in solidarity with the marginalized. Thus, the conception of Karl Rahner that anyone seeking God has already found Him, must be qualified: the privileged locus for an experience of God is the poor. "The question is not whether someone is seeking God or not, but whether he is seeking Him where God himself said he is" (Sobrino 1985:149). A presupposition for a liberative hermeneutic is a radical conversion to God in Christ, that is, a commitment to the oppressed: gloria Dei, homo vivens becomes gloria Dei, **pauper** vivens (Sobrino 1985:152).

**2.1.2** A second motivation is found in **ecclesiology**.<sup>13</sup> The life of faith on the underside of history is the source of Liberation Theology, and this is where the church of the poor is constituted. This church is more than a theologically democratized "people of God", it is more than a church that shows some compassion for the poor: it is a church of and from the poor.

"The Church of the poor is a Church the social and historical basis of which is to be found amongst the poor. ... It is these poor, therefore, that are said to constitute the very basis of the Church" (Sobrino 1985:135). The important point for our purpose is not merely to understand the nature of the church, but to grasp the relation between the members of this church and hermeneutics. And Sobrino cannot be clearer when he states: "The poor within this church become the **hermeneutical principle** for a primary concrete expression of important Christian concepts and realities"

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13 For the important ecclesiological contribution of Latin America in this regard, any of the major theologies may be consulted. Anthologies which give an overview are *Concilium* 11, 1975 and Torres and Eagleson (eds) 1981. I draw mainly on the insights of the recent book by Jon Sobrino (1985).

(Sobrinó 1985:137).<sup>14</sup> This leads to a total reformulation of all the important theological loci and, liberation theologians believe, to a new view on the task of the theologian (Boff 1981:108-132): the reading of books and deduction of new theological principles and mere intellectual insights are replaced by the task of listening to the poor in the light of their epistemological privileged position to inquire the message of God.

**2.1.3** A third motive for the partiality in hermeneutics relates to Liberation Theology's **view of Scripture** itself which will be discussed in greater detail below. What is important, is the point of departure that Scripture as documentation of God's historical revelation is ideological, and therefore partial, in at least two respects: it is **partial experience** of God in a specific situation by a specific individual/group and a **partial written representation**. The experiential event is interpretatively and selectively documented (Croatto 1983:150) and although the canon (as part of the hermeneutical process) has paradigmatic value, the notion of a universal God who reveals Himself to a universal man must be rejected as a residue of Greek thought (Segundo 1977:33). The profound experience of liberation which underlies the text formation and traditions of Israel asked to be creatively re-interpreted in a new situation from an inevitable partial point of view, namely the poor in the Latin American context. This partiality has always been implicit in hermeneutics and is only criticized because it challenges the powerful and reveals the oppressive nature of traditional theology. "Partiality is justified because we must find, and designate as the word of God, that part of divine revelations which today, in the light of our concrete historical situation, is most useful for the liberation to which God summons us" (Segundo 1977:33). This objective **nature** of Scripture is complemented by the **contents** of Scripture to legitimize the preferential position of the poor. "Der Arme ist der bibelhermeneutische Ort für

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14 Cf the remark of Croatto: "Its (the people's) reading of the Bible is mediated by that of specialists (the theologians, the biblicist) or else by that of powerful (church authority). And yet, whenever the people take up this oft-forbidden book, it discovers a wealth of unsuspected possibilities. This is what occurs in the process of liberation ... in which the people or community is the agent of both a history and a reading of the biblical kerygma" (1983:153).

die Botschaft der Befreiung ... Sie (die Bibel) ist am richtigen Ort - bei sich selbst - wenn sie am Ort des Armen ist und von Armen her gelesen wird" (Hoffmann 1978:152).

**2.2** Let us turn very briefly to the second implication of the poor as methodological and hermeneutical subject: the relative position of Scripture in view of a situation analysis which leads to a hermeneutics of reality or a hermeneutics of history.

Because they view theology as theo-praxis, liberation theologians understand the call of "back to the sources" not only in the light of the Scriptures and tradition, but, in line with their inductive methodology, as including the socio-analytical "text of reality" (Boff 1984:9).<sup>15</sup> Liberation Theology has matured considerably since Rual Vidales wrote (1979:48): "Though still in its initial stages, liberation theology is already breaking new ground in hermeneutics. It is obvious that we need a different hermeneutic key, one which will enable us to deal with other 'texts'...", which include history as complementary to the traditional Bible. Because both Scripture and tradition must always be historically mediated (thus without "direct" recourse), a reading of the signs of the times, as word of God to us today, is just as important as an understanding of the "word" as canon and tradition and the "Word" who became flesh (De Valle 1979:85). "God's summons to us - God's word today - arises out of communal analysis of historical data and historical happenings as praxis" (Assmann 1979:134).

Parallel to what has been said, the relative value of Scripture lies in the fact that it reveals no eternal un-historical truths which can be directly applied to a new situation. Forms of praxis in the times of Scripture are

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15 See Hugo Assmann 1969:232-233 where he emphasizes the structural analysis of reality ("Strukturanalyse der Wirklichkeit") as a source of theo-praxis. Compare also J Miguez Bonino (1975:93) who stresses the indispensable role of socio-analysis as part of hermeneutics: "We are not concerned with establishing through deduction the consequences of conceptual truths, but with analyzing a historical praxis which claims to be Christian."

relative to forms of praxis today. The latter can only be discerned in terms of a socio-analytical "reading." But this relativization of Scripture must not be rejected outright as a diminishing of the value of Scripture in hermeneutics.

Firstly, as Scripture bears a contextual message, it asks to be re-contextualized **precisely to honour the message thereof** (Croatto 1983:164). To merely repeat the culturally conditioned language of Scripture would be hermeneutically naive and would doom Scripture to silence. To say the **same**, something **different** must be said. Thus the false security of an "absolute and infallible Word of God" must be unmasked in the light of radical **historical** hermeneutics.

Secondly, Scripture reports the foundational and paradigmatic event which serves as normative basis for the interpretation of the present situation. Liberation Theology is more than a theologized sociology - its Christian character is guaranteed by the fact that reflection on praxis occurs in **the light of the Word**. Liberation theologians thus believe that the relative position of Scripture does not lead to relativism, because the normativity of the canon serves as a kind of objective control so that the text ultimately serves as conditioning factor in exegesis. How this happens, will be clarified in the section that follows, where I will deal with the text-context relation.

### 3. The relation between text and context

Some liberation theologians present the relation between Scripture and context in an almost fundamentalistic way: the Bible is taken literally and a direct correspondence between Latin America and the reported event is sought. God then only speaks in so far as an archetypal event coincides with a present reality.<sup>16</sup> This is, however, strongly criticized by the majority of Latin American scholars. Miguez Bonino describes such an effort of direct correspondence as a

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16 See L. Boff's article in Gibellini 1979:103 where he works implicitly with a correspondence model: "That world (in which Christ lived) was strikingly similar to our own Latin world; it was a world suffering from oppression both from within and without."

dangerous short cut and definitely not as the purpose of socio-analysis (1975:102). The clearest example of an alternative model is that of Clodovis Boff in **Theologie und Praxis**. A correspondence of concepts where "oppressed Hebrews" and "the exodus from Egypt" are seen as direct parallels of the "oppressed Latin Americans" and "liberation from dependence," leads to a kind of hermeneutical positivism or copying,<sup>17</sup> where the uniqueness of the original context is levelled down and the present political concern becomes the exegetical point from which the text is read.

What should happen, says C Boff, is not a correspondence of **concepts** or situations, but a correspondence of **relations** ("Korrespondenz der Relationen") (1983:241-249). The Bible must be viewed as a hermeneutical habitus where a certain **relation** exists between context and message. Not the "what" of the context/message is important, but the "how" of their reciprocal **relation**. It is this relation that is hermeneutically of vital importance for a creative reading of Scripture in a new situation.

The relation between text and context as expounded by liberation theologians may be summarized in the following three points:

**3.1** Methodologically speaking, the relation between praxis and theory is translated in hermeneutical terms and leads to a reformulation of the hermeneutical circle. As said above, the point of departure is the praxis of the poor, which is then interpreted in the light of the Word in order to lead to pastoral action and a transformation of the historical praxis. But this is precisely what is meant by the hermeneutical circle: "It is the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our interpretation of the present-day reality ... And the circular nature of this interpretation stems from the fact that each new reality obliges us to interpret the word of God afresh,

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17 Boff 1983:238: "Nach dem Modell der Korrespondenz der Begriffe werden die Begriffe, die man benutzt, dadurch miteinander verglichen, dass man sie parallel setzt. Man braucht dann nur noch den Sinn des ersten Bruchs auf den Zweiten zu übertragen - eine Art hermeneutischer Kopie."

to change reality accordingly, and then go back and reinterpret the word of God again, and so on" (Segundo 1977:8).

This has led liberation theologians to change the concept of hermeneutical **circle** to one of hermeneutical **circulation** 18: a circle conveys a "closed" and "finished" image whilst the open dialectics of praxis-theory-praxis,<sup>19</sup> is expressed by **circulation**. The implication for hermeneutics is profound: as a hermeneutics of engagement a mere re-reading of Scripture does not suffice. In the last analysis, **exegesis of the Word** takes place in the **transforming actions of real life** (Gutierrez 1975:47).<sup>20</sup> A reading of the poor compels action for and by the poor. "Das Neulesen, die 'Relectura' der Schrift aus der Perspektive des Armen, führt zu einer Re-aktualisierung des Wortes Gottes...Aus der Perspektive der Armen müssen daher **das Neulesen der Bibel und das Neuschaffen der Praxis** erfolgen" (Hoffmann 1978:144-145, my emphasis). Thus, **formally** speaking, the dialectical hermeneutical circulation guarantees the relation between text (present situation), text (re-reading of canon) and text (transformed situation).

**3.2** A second factor in the relation between text and context is Liberation Theology's view of the canonical text itself. Far from rejecting the critical methods of exegesis, the liberation theologians emphasize the fact that "...theological hermeneutics cannot forgo the effort to gain access to the text by means of critical instruments which the sciences of interpretation have created" (Miguez Bonino

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- 18 The "hermeneutical circle" stems from Martin Heidegger who developed this concept in his existentialist ontology, whereas Liberation Theology refers to the French theologian, Georges Casalis, for its use of "hermeneutical circulation" (I could find no reference to the original of the latter author.)
- 19 There is no room to explicate the terms "theory" and "praxis". Strictly speaking, "praxis" refers to the dialectical process **as a whole**, and must not be equated with "practice". See J C Scannone 1977:77-96 for a good overview.
- 20 See also Boff 1979:100-103 where the sole criterium for hermeneutics becomes its efficacy in the present situation.

1975:101-102). This is imperative in determining the "context-backward" of the text, but it is very easy to be confined to all sorts of questions related to the pre-canonical text, or to view the text as a deposit of meaning coinciding with the intentions of the author or final redactor.<sup>21</sup>

It is of the utmost importance to view the text as a **reservoir** of meaning with a "context-forward" that opens a world of meanings in virtue of the surplus-of-meaning which stems from the potentiated polysemy of every text. This is explained by Croatto in terms of the well-known transmitter-receiver and common context-analogy: as soon as the text appears in **written** form "... the meaning-closure imposed by the transmitter is converted into an openness. The narrator is now the text itself" (Croatto 1983:144). This constitutes the openness of the text and is the basis for a re-reading in a new context as is evident from Scripture itself: the exodus-event is reinterpreted in different contexts and at different stages of the history of Israel; the resurrection of Christ becomes much more than a mere historic event in the theological reinterpretation thereof. And the local or dated character of the original text is not an impediment in this regard but a **necessity** without which no reinterpretation would be possible. "Der Text der Christlichen Schrift ist voll von möglichen Bedeutungen, die durch den Kontakt mit der historischen Aktualität ans Licht kommen" (Boff 1983:235).<sup>22</sup>

This forms the basis for Liberation Theology to state unequivocally that to be true to the **text itself** a re-reading from the present context (the poor in Latin America) is not only possible, but necessary. Re-reading is thus no repetition of meaning but **creative production of meaning** in a new

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21 Croatto calls this the trap of exegetical historicism (1983:145). Of all the critical methods it is only redaction criticism that takes the final form of the text as well as the theological intent of the author into account.

22 The importance of the present situation is strongly defended by Boff: "Die gegenwart is nicht nur das, was man liest, sondern auch das **wodurch** man liest. Dies ist die **Voraussetzung** für die Möglichkeit jeder Lektüre und nicht ihre Hindernis (234, my emphasis).

context (Croatto 1983:147).<sup>23</sup> And this synthetic productive hermeneutical act where the merging of horizons takes place (Gadamer's "Horizontverschmelzung") ensures the relation between text and context.

Is any possible ingenuity now permissible? The answer is an emphatic no. The polisemy of the text is delimited by the text itself - that is precisely the value of historical exegesis. "One cannot make the text say something. It says what it permits itself to say" (Croatto 1983:165). The penetration of the original historicity is a guarantee that certain parameters are respected. The other side of the coin is equally important: a rational analysis of the present situation serves as hermeneutical control. Not every interpretation of the Latin American context is equally illuminating, and not every locus is equally suitable for hermeneutics. It is on this basis that Liberation Theology defends the hermeneutics of the poor.

3.3 Thirdly, the relation between the two texts is also seen in the light of the revelation of the triune God: God's continuous revelation in Christ and the Spirit. The canon in its final form is the codex of the paradigmatic message about God's revelation and serves in tradition as a *norma normata* normans and (more precisely) as a *norma normans ut normata* (Boff 1983:233). The epiphany of God as recorded in Scripture is the paradigmatic reading of an **unfinished salvation history** (Croatto 1983:162-163).

In accordance with post Vatican II-theology, Liberation Theology accentuates the radical historical character of God's revelation with the abolishing of any dualism between salvation history and secular history.<sup>24</sup> This implies that God's revelation in Christ and the Spirit is complemented by his revelation in the socio-economic realities of Latin America. Through faith, the theological element of the apparent secular events must be discerned: "In these realities, considered to be secular, there is a real but hidden,

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23 According to him every exegesis **must** be a form of eisegesis!

24 One could e.g. summarize Gutierrez's whole theology as anti-dualistic. See part IV of his **A theology of liberation**.



theological element. Only faith enables one to see this element present within the economic, the political and the educational. It is the task of Christian reflection to unveil and extract this hidden theological element ..." (Boff 1983:17). The struggle for liberation has revelatory power: God liberates when man acts on behalf of the poor; temporal progress is the coming of the Kingdom.

It is this revelatory relation between text and context that serves as basis for the productive hermeneutical act by the present reader. And this relation has a specific Christological (Vidales 1979:50) character: "The hermeneutical synthesis is not so much a datum as a person: Jesus Christ. More specifically, here it is Christ in the person of our lowliest human beings."

Just as Christ's incarnation is the mediation between God and man, He is, hermeneutically spoken, the axis of the relation between God's word and the human word. In communion with the nous Christou (1 Cor 2:16) a spiritual insight is gained. The Spirit of God was given precisely to reveal the truth of Christ's work and the recognition of God in the present situation is a charismatic gift, the diakrisis pneumatou (1 Cor 12:10). The spirit makes the present events comprehensible "... as obviously belonging to the same divine revelation" (Segundo 1977:120). Pneumatologically the original text and the present "text" are imbedded in the same epiphanic history. Hermeneutics, then, is nothing else than the discernment of God's revelatory presence in the liberation struggle of the poor in Latin America.

#### 4. Critical questions

Some concluding critical questions must be raised in the light of the exciting hermeneutical challenge by Liberation Theology. These are directed to evoke response and do not pretend to be a full-fledged criticism:

**4.1** Are all hermeneutical differences ultimately of political nature? If so, what reconciliatory power does Scripture have in a deeply divided situation?

**4.2** If Scripture is methodologically relegated to "second position," does hermeneutics determine praxis or does praxis determine hermeneutics? (Or both?)

**4.3** Is commitment to the poor primarily a political commitment based on rational analysis of the situation, or is it the result of Scriptural studies?

**4.4** The "signs of the time" have revelatory status. By which criteria are two conflicting "revelations" in the same society judged?

**4.5** Is there a **formal** difference between reading Scripture from the perspective of "justification by faith alone" and a reading in terms of "the liberation of the poor?"

The relevance of these questions to our present situation in South Africa is abundantly evident. Would it be an exaggeration to state that the reconciliation of Christians and a peaceful future is ultimately a question of hermeneutics?

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