

Thinking about Luther in a Submersed Reality

By Vítor Westhelle

»Eyn güttter baum darff keyner leere noch rechts /
das er gütte frucht trage / sondern seyn natur gibts
/ daß er on alles recht vnd lere tregt / wie seyn art
ist. Denn es sollt mir gar eyn nerrischer mensch
seyn / der eym apffel baum eyn buch machte voll
gesetz vnd rechts / wie er sollt epffel vnd nicht
dornen tragen / ...«¹

I The asymmetric faces of dependence

Latin America is a Roman Catholic continent. Only in Brazil there are more Roman Catholics than there are Lutherans all over the world. To say this is more than to establish a sociological datum, and it is also deceiving if one wants to draw theological conclusions out of it. Roman Catholicism stand to the cultures of Latin America as a fence stands to the grass that grows also beyond those formal limits imposed to it.

This image lends itself to further suggestions. In remembrance of the 500 years of colonization we are bound to denounce the virtual existence of fences, but simultaneously we also testify to the marvelous anomalies in and through which our cultural life unfolds itself without resistance to the sense of order that is being imposed and yet without being entirely subjected to it either. This is indeed quite paradoxical. Werner Herzog in his movie »Fitzcaraldo« suggests a parable that circumscribes this situation by telling the story of an Irish man trying to build an opera-house in the heart of the Amazon. It might even be done – and the Theater of Manaus planted, in the beginning of this century, in the midst of the Amazon forest proves it. But a symphony does not order a forest. The point is that our societies are ensembles of incompatible realities. Characteristic is the sense of otherness (»alterity«) that defies any linear causal analysis. High technological advances coexist with world visions with roots in pre-modern cultures. An official ecclesial theology is held, but faith is expressed in a kaleidoscope of symbols, believes, and practices glued together by syncretism. »Order« is raised as a national ensign, but the passionate seduction of spon-

¹ StA 3, 38, 25-29 $\triangle$ WA 11, 250, 13-17.

taneity is not subjected to control. The »official« story has its underside without linear continuity with it.

Yet, if there is no causal relation between both these levels, there is indeed the maintenance of the disparity between them in all its aspects: sociological, political, economic, cultural and religious.

The experience of otherness, the alterity, and its unharmony with the official face of Latin American societies is the characteristic mark of autochthonous theological reflection in the continent. Such reflection is being informed by enquiries into the cultural, sociological, political and economic nature of the Janus face of our societies. To describe it, the category of *dependence* has been used.

The notion of dependence points to the asymmetric relation between these two faces. Such a relation is not simply one of domination. There is no common dominion. Dependence describes rather the control exercised over the underside of life, keeping it as an underside, but does not have direct control over what takes place in the submersed reality as such. There is only a negative relation, in which the means of life are substracted from those who survive in the submersed world. Hence, dependence is a concept that defines this relation of asymmetry and perpetuates it. Dependence reproduces itself in all dimensions of existence: in economy, in society, in politics, in culture, and in religion. The reality it describes pertains both to the asymmetry created within our societies and to the asymmetry in the relation between north and south.

Liberation is then defined as the overcoming of dependence. The relation between these two concepts is at the root of all reflection about the impass we live in. Ideas about liberation as a stage to be achieved in a progessive process are rejected. The point is that the problem from which we start is determined by a structure of relations and by the juncture of factors that have caused and perpetuated the asymmetry mentioned above.

The question being raised is for the distinct contribution that a Lutheran theology can make. It is necessary to recognize the connectedness, the rootedness of the inquiry on the nature of being a human self in this reality, to uncover the hidden and submersed dimension of life in its full earthiness, as Lutherans committed to the »finitum capax infiniti«. Probing the underside of life we need to gain a language so as to speak of God in the hiddenness of God; to raise the presence of the deus absconditus sub contraria specie, knowing that the epiphany cannot be read directly in the pages of history.

II The scandal of particularity

Now, what is it that makes »dependence« and thus also »liberation« theological categories? It is well known that Friedrich Schleiermacher has raised the category of dependence to the apex of piety and has made it the ground of theological reflection.² In Schleiermacher, the concept of dependence is drawn analogically from the psychological relationship of the child to the parent, the person to the country, or from the biological relationship between the human and nature. The analogical interpretation is a hermeneutical resource that Schleiermacher adopts to raise the phenomenon of dependence from the particular and relative realm of experience to the absolute and universal realm of dogmatic truth. For him, dependence becomes a relevant theological category through analogical induction.

We have seen above that in Latin America the notion of dependence has historical references and is defined by the asymmetry and not by a genetic or causal relationship, in the sense that one factor is the presupposition for the other. Hence it does not function in Latin American theology as an analogical resource to move from society to dogmatics. It has rather served to bring theology to the concrete ground of submersed history. When Latin American theology defines itself as a second act, it also defines itself as a »second word« in relationship to the »first word«³ of the social and human sciences which are an attempt of gaining language in approaching the phenomenon of dependence. And this has the precise meaning that theology does not raise itself analogically to the realm of universal dogmatic truths, but it inserts itself in the concrete and particular ground of historical practice and reflection. Although it might sound a common place, it is a deep theological conviction that the lack of food is in itself a theological problem and not a hermeneutical occasion to raise the question of the universal and spiritual hunger and thirst for the »Word of God«.

Carolina Maria de Jesus, the woman from the slums of São Paulo that became famous with the diary she wrote, had a stroke of theological genius when she wrote under the date December 25 (Christmas): »João came in saying he had a stomachache. I know what it was for he had eaten a rotten melon. Today they

2 Friedrich SCHLEIERMACHER: *Der christliche Glaube*. 7th ed./ ed. by Martin Redeker. Vol. I. B 1960, 23-30 (§ 4).

3 Hugo ASSMANN: *Teología desde la praxis de la liberación: ensayo teológico desde la América dependiente*. Salamanca 1973, 50f.

threw a truckload of melons near the river. I don't know why it is that these senseless business-men come to throw their rotted products near the favela for the children to see and eat. In my opinion, the merchants of São Paulo are playing with the people like Caesar when he tortured the Christians. But the Caesars of today are worse than the Caesars of the past. The others were punished for their faith. And we, for our hunger! In that era, those who didn't want to die had to stop loving Christ. But we cannot stop loving eating.«⁴

Carolina's criticism of religion is sharp and perceptive when she denounces the representation of Christ as a universal dogmatic category that could be sustained or suspended without any connection with the particular problem of her son's stomachache and with the economic practice of the merchants of São Paulo. The question put forward is this: Can theology have a language able to address and relate to these particular problems that emerge in the submersed world without falling back into universal answers?

In Latin American literature, in the »marvelous realism« of an Alejo Carpentier, in the »magic realism« of Gabriel García Márquez and many others, we observe a description of a reality in which marvelous »spiritual« powers are inserted in the midst of everyday experiences, risking the particular. It is such a methodological move that theology in Latin America is accompanying when it defines itself as a reflection on the practice of Christians when they experience the »logic« of dependence being broken down. The challenge of the particular deserves a theological answer that locates God's novelty in the relative realm of history, indeed of submersed history. This is a risky endeavor, but to flee from it is to fall in the superfluous as Carolina Maria de Jesus noticed. It is necessary to maintain that God is gracious, but not superfluous. Otherwise the specter of docetism will continue to haunt us. And we will surely take as criticism the words of César Vallejo: »My God, if you had been a man, you would know how to be God.« Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel might have been quite right when he suggested, not without irony, that »when the absolute is driven away from the gardens where it walks about and falls in the water, it becomes a fish«.⁵

This relocation of theological reflection to the particular ground of history is a

4 Carolina MARIA DE JESUS: *Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada*. 10th ed. Rio de Janeiro 1983, 162.

5 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich HEGEL: *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*. Vol. 2: *Jenaer Schriften 1801-1807*. F 1970, 543.

quite radical proposal and scandalous in its claims that historical needs determined by the phenomenon of dependence are also religious needs that deserve to be addressed theologically at the level in which they are raised. This means that dependence and liberation are also theological categories without being kidnapped and taken to the paradisaical gardens of dogmatic certitudes. Liberation is not merely the scape from dependence, but also the expression of the divine presence and agency in the particularities of history.

Lest we think that this sounds like a theological redundancy let me raise the basic problems, playing a bit of the devil's advocate.

Since the Roman Catholic Bishop's Conference of Latin America Episcopacy gathered in Medellín, Colombia (1968), dependence has been understood as an expression of evil.⁶ But such an understanding of evil that focuses on the particular is the easy target of dogmatic criticism. The attack has united several theological trends and even confessions against Latin American theology. »Evangelicals« have, for long, criticed liberation theology for not giving priority to the source of all evil which lies in the human heart. More recently, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith has issued the »Instruction on certain aspects of the ›Theology of Liberation‹«, playing the same old song: »New Testament revelation teaches us that sin is the greatest evil, since it strikes man in the heart of his personality. The first liberation, to which all others must make reference, is that from sin. Unquestionably is it to stress the radical character of the deliverance brought by Christ and offered to all, be they politically free or slaves ... the new freedom procured by the grace of Christ should necessarily have effects on the social level.«⁷

Lutherans should be feeling sinfully proud in thinking that Luther's condemnation of the works for justification is finding its day in the sun once more. After all, aren't Lutherans those who have so much insisted that we are saved by faith alone and that this faith will produce effects, bring forth good fruits?

Behind this criticism there is a distinction between the dogmatic articulation of general sin and universal need of grace, and society where some consequences of sin and some fruits of faith appear. There is a causal relationship between

6 CELAM (Conselho Episcopal Latino-Americano): *A igreja na atual transformação da América Latina: conclusões de Medellín* (1968). Petrópolis 1973, 51 (1 § 11). 58 (2 § 8f). 115 (10 § 2). 146 (14 § 4).

7 THE VATICAN CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH: *Instructions on certain aspects of the ›Theology of liberation‹*. National Catholic reporter (21. September 1984), 11-15.

faith and fruits that entails different interpretations. In classical Lutheran theology, in Lutheran orthodoxy this causality cannot be normed, i.e., the fruits cannot serve as criterion to judge the tree. In pietism and puritanism, the causal result tends to become hard core evidence and measure of faith.⁸ But in both cases, the illustration of the tree and its fruits is misused when the tree becomes a universal category and the fruits the particular effects. The tree that produces a good orange is a good orange tree; the genus »tree« does not produce an orange, nor does it produce an apple.

III The language of justification

I have argued elsewhere⁹ that the Lutheran scheme of law and gospel has been used in this dogmatic sense in which the universal relationship between the law that condemns and the gospel that saves becomes the organizational and methodological principle for theological reflection. The law-gospel correlation is understood as a correlation between the theological use of the law (dogmatically drawn from the universality of sin) and the gospel.¹⁰ If the gospel is the response to the question raised by universal sin, then the word of grace is addressed to the individual in its universal sense: the sinner, defined independently from the content of particular sinful acts. This individual stands along with the entire human race, all at the same level, in face of God. Luther and those who followed him on this point (The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith included) assured the equality of grace by guaranteeing the equality of sin. So far so good: Paul's lesson was learned and even redicalized (R 3, 23).

According to this view, justification becomes an either/or. There is no gradation, no limbo. And this is the reason why good works are said to be necessary fruits of faith, but neither sufficient nor constitutive for salvation. The logic here is paradoxical, but not preposterous. Works are particular acts with particular historical significance. If they were to be constitutive for salvation, they would in their particularity be also causative of justification! In this case, the scheme of law and gospel on the basis of general sin and universal grace would

8 Max WEBER: *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. Vol. I. 4th ed. Tü 1947, 109-114.

9 Vitor WESTHELLE: *Luther and liberation*. *Dialog* 25 (MP 1986), 51-58.

10 See *Confessio Augustana*, art. 16 (BSLK, 71, 11-20).

be destroyed. But then, why are works necessary? How do good works issue from faith? The response is unequivocal. It is not to conquer grace but to praise and give glory to Good,¹¹ the One who saves us unconditionally, not from social and historical determinations but from original sin. It is an eternal salvation without causal connection with everyday life.

Instead of denouncing the helplessness of such a radical version of the doctrine of justification for ethics, it is important to notice that viewed in this way the doctrine of justification has a theoretical demarcation. It neither asks nor answers the question: What shall we do? It does not address ethics. Both the question that asks for a merciful God and the response of praise belong to doxology. My argument is that the doctrine of justification should be radically defined in this doxological sense in order to grant ethics a relative autonomy within the theological endeavor. I regard as worthless the well intended efforts to stretch the doctrine of justification into the realm of ethical theory and practice, to magnify the fruits so as to draw some ethical results from it. The rejection of the »third use of the law« in classical Lutheranism should be understood as a vindication of the strictly doxological character of the doctrine of justification.

Hence, we are left with the questions: What shall we do? What is the place of ethics in theology? Have we gained our soul and lost the world? If theological ethics cannot be framed within the doctrine of justification or regarded as an appendix to this doctrine, what is the locus of the language about dependence and liberation?

The question of ethics in Lutheran theology has been traditionally framed as a matter of the »regiment« in the left hand of God (to use Luther's metaphor); it falls under the *regnum rationis*; it belongs to civil society where the criteria for vindicating an action is to know whether it is publicly accountable (reasonable) and able to enforce equity in society, economy, politics, and in the church.¹² This is the realm in which God operates in cooperation with human beings.¹³ But why should this cooperation be important? Why should the achievement of equity and justice be of concern of the Christian qua Christian?

11 Confessio Augustana, art. 20: »Ferner wird gelehret, daß gute Werk sollen und müssen geschehen, nicht daß man darauf vertrau, Gnad damit zu verdienen, sondern um Gottes willen und Gott zu Lob« (BSLK 80, 13-17).

12 See my article quoted in note 9.

13 WA 18, 754, 1-16.

The traditional stance on this matter has defended that »peace« in the world is necessary for the proclamation of the saving grace, although in itself it accomplishes nothing: *pax mundi non speranda*. Such view has been guilty of a helpless formalism that has translated »peace« into »order« and was able, in the name of »order«, to remain silent or even to justify outrageous political regimes (as Lutherans have done in Nazi Germany and in Pinochet's Chile). Behind this theological position there is a theory of the double agency of God.¹⁴ God is both the agent of salvation and the agent of preservation of the world's order. Luther's distinction of the »two kingdoms« or »regiments« gains doctrinal weight. The *doctrine* of the two regiments is a 20th Century creation. Such a doctrinal overweight of metaphysical fat deserves to be cut off with William Ockham's razor (don't multiply metaphysical categories beyond necessity; or: don't make a dogma where it is not needed). Johannes Heckel was right when he suggested that the »two kingdoms doctrine« is a labyrinth.¹⁵ It has become indeed a dogmatic labyrinth where ethics is quite lost. Is it not cynical to justify ethics with the argument that we ought to join God in the task of preserving a helpless world while God saves our souls?

To reject the doctrinal status of the »two regiments« does not mean to reject the distinction to which they refer. I suggest that the problem of relating doxology and ethics should be framed not as a dogmatic problem, but as an anthropological problem. Instead of supposing the double agency of God, one can legitimately appeal to Luther's distinction between *coram deo* and *coram mundo* and talk about different human perspectives of God's agency.

It has been frequently suggested, since Harald Diem published »Luthers Lehre von den zwei Reichen« in 1938, that the first concern of the Reformer in formulating the distinction between the two regiments emerged out of the hermeneutical need to interpret the Scriptures without allegorizing them. Hence, the anthropological perspectives are then two classes of discourse and practice with a common reference: the experience of the will and agency of God. The suggestion to distinguish doxology from ethics finds now its support. Such distinction implies different sets of questions and answers. Each has a different grammar reflecting different practices. The doxological language, within which justification is a concept, implies a totality. It addresses the »breaking in of the

14 So Paul ALTHAUS: *Luthers Lehre von den beiden Reichen*. LuJ 24 (1957), 40-68.

15 Johannes HECKEL: *Im Irrgarten der Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*. M 1957, 3-39.

eschaton in time«. ¹⁶ Such language that aims at capturing the infinite in the finite demands metaphorical expressions and paradoxical formulations. It resorts to poetry to account for the unaccountable. Its ground is the worship practice and its goal is to praise and to glorify the holy.

Ethical language is analytical, publically accountable and reasonable (accepts established rules of argumentation). It searches for clarity in expression and efficacy. Its ground is the public arena of political, economic, and social practice, and its goal is to bring about equity and justice.

These two discourses are related to each other to the same extent that the two practices that ground them are also related. Doxology stands to ethics as motivation to public engagement, as poetry to prose, as celebration to struggle, as sacrament to example, as blessing to accomplishment.

Latin American theologians have in various ways emphasized this distinction. Juan Luis Segundo speaks about faith and ideology, about iconic and digital languages, about values and efficacy, and has recognized in them basic anthropological perspectives. Frei Betto has insisted that in ministry the distinction between celebration and political action should be preserved. Hugo Assmann and others have distinguished between »commitment« and socio-analytical mediations. And all these distinctions are maintained while the theory of two histories or of a double agency of God are radically rejected.

IV The confusion of doxology and ethics

In conclusion, I still need to explain the choice of the category of dependence as the informing model for the ethical perspective. Couldn't structuralism, functionalism, developmentalism, or the theory of imperialism work in the same way? Instruments for analysis are at the same time instruments of transformation. There are no neutral theories. The choice of a model for analysis and transformation of reality depends on its explanatory power and transformational efficacy. The development of scientific resources for the analysis of society, the sophistication of the theoretical apparatus to test hypotheses, or even the plurality in nuances within dependence theory would disavow a final word attesting to the irreplaceable character of the dependence model. Besides, it has

¹⁶ Ulrich ASENDORF: *Eschatologie bei Luther*. GÖ 1967, 127. The author distinguishes the Totalaspekt der Rechtfertigung from the Partialaspekt der Heiligung.

already been said that ethical reasoning cannot be dogmatically established. It issues from the liberating practice of those who are in, or reflect from the standpoint of, the submersed reality.

In my estimation, a compelling reason to justify the appeal to the dependence model is that in the analytical apparatus it provides for ways to understand dependence as a phenomenon that affects the totality of the human social existence, including what could be called spiritual existence. It allows for the denunciation of powers that subject soul and body, alienating them from the means of life. From Luther we have learned that the demonic is the confusion of the two perspectives mentioned above.¹⁷ In the particular case of Latin America, this confusion is a result of the factors that characterize dependence. Concepts with »religious« or plainly magical signification emerge to perpetuate dependence and to exert control over the submersed reality. This was the case when in Brazil and later in Chile there was an outcry about the economic »miracle« supposedly produced. In fact, it was induced by an optical illusion that focused on the increase of capital without showing the asymmetric relationship with the labor that made it possible. Modernization lends its support to a quasi religious devotion for property. Forced increase of productivity is used to justify extensive agricultural property relegating old and new plans of agrarian reform to the flower-pots of bureaucracy. And the army, that is frequently called upon to enforce and sustain the relationship of dependence, assumes a sacramental character: it becomes a dispensary of grace that liberates us from the »great evil«. The international capital, present through transnational corporations, creates cultural and political dependence to the point of imposing a Manichean world-view. Communism is above all a religious evil. Such a situation creates a confusion between doxology and ethics that could be well exemplified with a speech that Augusto Pinochet delivered to 32 Protestant Church leaders on the 15th of December of 1974, 15 months after the coup that put him in office: »The spiritual forces that you, bishops and presidents of different Protestant Churches in Chile represent ... have for me a great value within the national program of pacification in which we are engaged. The moral values of the sons of this country are being born again giving to Chile a new faith. Furthermore, they affirm the essential values that we defend in our struggle: the

17 See Franz LAU: *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre. Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. 3. ed. Vol. 6. Tü 1962, 1945-1949.

dignity of man, freedom and the sovereignty of our country . . . you know that the people had prayed for their salvation and that now they are delivered from evil . . . they are simple people who for years have been deceived . . . »¹⁸

Obviously, the theological clarity of the general did not reach the point of recognizing that if he thought that the people had been deceived they could not have been praying for the salvation that was imparted on them by the army. But I am willing to overlook this contradiction in order to concentrate on something more important than the general's capability for analytical reflection. Doxological language is used to cover up ethical problems and issues. The army is presented as a sacrament, as the means of grace for the salvation of a rebellious people. The army is ready to kill for our sins. When doxology invades the ethical realm, it is to diffuse the clarity demanded in the resolution of ethical issues.

The great danger that the doctrine of justification faces is not a militant ethics but the spiritualization of social and political projects that invades the ethical space. The great danger that liberation ethics faces is not doxological praise, but the dissolution of the specificity and particularity of the ethical options. Both are confusions. The first was illustrated with the quote from Pinochet; the second can be observed when every argument about liberation is reduced to the question of original sin.

Celebration and militancy go together, they should not be separated nor confused. The struggle for liberation opens up the doxological space, makes it possible to sing and dance in a foreign land. Praise and glory to whom all praise is due animates the struggle, in the confidence that from the perspective of God's eschatological deliverance no deed of love and act of justice will ever be lost. It is a simple insight: when God is in the water it is worthwhile learning how to swim.

18 POSICIÓN EVANGÉLICA: un documento que define posiciones/ ed. by Pedro Puentes Oliva. Santiago [1975], 36-38.