

## Faith with Deeds: The Priority of Praxis in Liberation Theology

*“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead,”*  
(James 2:26)

Liberation theology is a ‘Third World’ theology with especial reference to Latin America, and an emphasis on impacting – and improving – society. Where this social agenda differs from that of other theologies, however, is in the strongly held belief that praxis (a form of reflective action) is the starting point from which theology should begin. This essay explores the use of this praxic approach, and thereby tests the validity of what claims to be not just “a new way of doing theology” (Gibellini 1986, 4) but, according to one of its chief architects (Boff 1992, 19), “a new way of being Christian,” especially within its Latin American context.<sup>1</sup> After defining both liberation theology (Section I) and praxis (Section II), we evaluate four types of criticism levelled against praxis (Section III) before broadening our horizons and considering the use of praxis in the light of contextualised theology (Section IV).

### Section I: Liberation Theology

Liberation theology has been considered one of the most significant developments within Christian theology in the last century (Rowland 1999, xiii), and its advocates understand it not as a *branch* of theology, but something more essential: a new way of ‘doing theology.’ This method is “an attempt to look at the world in terms of involvement with the underprivileged and oppressed, and to find within the Christian gospel both the analytical tools and the energizing power to work for radical change in that world” (Anderson 1979, 4). Its immediate causes can be traced to developments within Roman Catholicism in Latin America in the 1960s, combined with glaring economic and social inequalities and widespread feelings of injustice there.<sup>2</sup> From 1968 onwards,<sup>3</sup> a conscious and deliberate movement emerged, seeking to bring about liberation from poverty and injustice (and, later, sin), built on the theology and social analysis of Gutiérrez, Boff, Segundo and Sobrino. This movement was characterised by belief in a divine preference for the poor and their liberation; the need to analyse social problems contextually; the need to work within a historical and systemic framework; and a conviction that theology must be practical – by being based on experience, and having an ultimate impact on society.

### Section II: The Priority of Praxis

Liberation theologians argue that there must be an explicit relationship between theory and practice. Moreover, this relationship must *start* with action, a concept that is termed “the primacy [or priority] of praxis.” This is not to be understood, as some have argued, as an argument that action is necessarily the most important thing; on the contrary, Boff and Boff (1987, 32) are clear that “the sovereign word of God... retain[s] primacy of value.” Instead, the primacy of praxis refers to the belief that genuine theological thought and analysis must begin not with abstract ideas and concepts, but with experience and social engagement.

As Bevans points out (1992, 64), praxis is a technical term “that has its roots in Marxism, in the Frankfurt school, and in the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire.” It is best understood, says Tracy (in Anderson 1979, 29) as “the critical relationship between theory and practice where

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<sup>1</sup> This essay focuses on the traditional (i.e. Latin American) strand of liberation theology, whilst acknowledging that other forms have evolved. Sobrino, for example, has come to an understanding of liberation theology as opposing socioeconomic oppression, as well as cultural, ethnic and religious oppression, and oppression of women, children and nature (in Sobrino 1996, ix).

<sup>2</sup> In an excellent discussion of why liberation theology arose in Latin America – as opposed to Africa or Asia where poverty and injustice are arguably just as prolific – Dyrness (1990, 75) interestingly concludes that the answer lies in Latin Americans’ *perception* of their history and experiences.

<sup>3</sup> Although Gibellini (1986, 1) has traced the roots of liberation theology back to the style of theology practised by missionaries when Latin America was conquered in the sixteenth century, it is more usual to depict liberation theology as having its origins in ecclesial, social and economic developments of the 1950s and 1960s. Chief among these developments were the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) and the general conferences of Latin American bishops of 1966 (Mar del Plata, Argentina) and 1968 (Medellín, Colombia). Also in 1968, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez outlined his “theology of liberation” at a lecture in Chimbote, Peru in what appears to be the first use of the term he was to later popularise in his seminal *A Theology of Liberation* (1971).

each is dialectically influenced and transformed by the other.” It is action with reflection, and as such cannot be simply equated with ‘practice’.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, praxis of liberation (sometimes called ‘liberative praxis’) “seeks to overcome, with lucidity, all forms... of slavery, exploitation, institutionalised violence, and socioeconomic marginalization.” An example given by Cadorette (1992, 298) is instructive:

“[when] base communities decide to build a school or clinic for their neighbourhood, they are involved in praxis. Their action on behalf of the community is informed by their Christian values. Their combined ideas and energies produce what is called liberative praxis.”

This approach is markedly and deliberately different from the classical Western theological tradition, and has faced strong criticism from European and American theologians – but motivated as much by ideological objections as theological or methodological ones. These criticisms, and their validity, are discussed in Section III below.

### **Section III: Criticisms of the Praxis Model**

Criticisms of what can be understood as the Praxis Model, and its primacy in liberation theology, can be categorised into four areas: (i) philosophical; (ii) methodological; (iii) theological; and (iv) practical, although there will inevitably be some overlap. We only have space to consider each form briefly, together with an assessment of whether such criticism is justified. Below, then, are criticisms that could be made (and many have been elsewhere) of the use of praxis as the starting point of liberation theology.

#### **(i) Philosophical Criticisms**

These relate to the political and philosophical nature of the praxis model. Foremost amongst such criticism is that ‘praxis’ is essentially a Marxist concept, and there has been concern at the entrance into theology of an analytical tool borrowed from a widely discredited political philosophy.<sup>5</sup> It seems no coincidence that interest in liberation theology (at least from a Western perspective) declined in the early 1990s with the political liberalisation of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe and the attendant rejection of Marxism and Communism.<sup>6</sup> This area of objection seems to rest on three points: that Marxism is discredited; that theology as a discipline (and the church as an institution) should not be politicised by use of such an overtly political concept; and that it is invalid to apply a fundamentally European concept in Latin America.

In response to such criticisms, it could be argued that the validity of using praxis is not dependent upon the overall validity of Marxism, on the grounds that a part that is separable from its whole can be analysed, and utilised, separately. Secondly, liberation theologians strongly assert that there is no alternative to using political terminology, since there is no neutral, non-political ground to argue from (and therefore, doing or saying nothing is effectively an endorsement of the status quo).<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, liberation theologians are mostly unconcerned that praxis is of European origin: in the words of Anderson (1979, 11), the important question is not “is this Marxist analysis” but “is it true?” The fact that European languages are, for historical (and not necessarily agreeable) reasons, spoken in Latin America, illustrates that images and concepts that have been adopted by a new cultural setting can, in principle, become ‘acclimatised’ there.

#### **(ii) Methodological Criticisms**

It is possible to identify three key methodological criticisms of the use, and primacy, of praxis by liberation theologians. Firstly, is it acceptable to use a politico-sociological concept piecemeal

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<sup>4</sup> Although most commentators seem well aware of this distinction, Rowland (1999, xvii) conflates the two terms, and erroneously equates them merely with action: “praxis’ or ‘practice’ [is defined as]... action, a term often used in liberation theology to describe the actions and commitments which provide the context for theological reflection.”

<sup>5</sup> Richard McCormick (in Anderson 1979, 43), for example, complains of liberation theologians’ “uncritical” use of Marxist categories and terminology. In contrast, Bevans (1992, 65) enthusiastically claims that theologians are actually indebted to Marx, whose “breakthrough was his discovery that rationality or intellectual knowledge was not enough to constitute genuine knowledge... We know best, Marx insisted, when our reason is coupled with and challenged by our action.” Elsewhere, Dyrness (1990, 117) detects the influence of Michael Polanyi and J.S. Mill in this concept of praxis.

<sup>6</sup> As Linden (1998, 42) memorably put it, “liberation theology looked like two grand stories caught in bed together – socialism and Christianity,” both of which were rejected by the postmodernism of the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>7</sup> In a characteristically Marxist verdict, Gutiérrez claimed that “class struggle is a fact and neutrality in this matter is impossible,” (quoted in Sherry 1985, 9).

and out of context; secondly, is it acceptable to start a methodology with action rather than contemplation or axioms; and thirdly, is there, as Linden argued (1998, 14), an “imprecise and inadequate social analysis” in operation?

In agreement with those concerned by the selective way in which praxis has been removed from a structured philosophical system, I concur that there are dangers in isolating and applying only one part of Marxist critical analysis. However, although this may lead to incomplete analysis, it does not of itself invalidate any conclusions that have been made – no methodological constructs are sufficiently broad to encompass all social, political, cultural or religious phenomena, and the exclusion of one on these grounds would necessitate the exclusion of all on the same grounds.

Secondly, is praxis an acceptable starting point for theological analysis, or do we agree with Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) that praxis neither replaces truth nor produces it?<sup>8</sup> There is a clear methodological schism between those in the West whose methodology begins with abstract reasoning – which has been derogatively labelled the product of “armchair intellectuals” by the Boff brothers (1987, 19) – and liberation theology which starts with praxis.

Yet the differences between these two approaches can be downplayed for the following reasons: firstly, liberation theologians can be seen to be making explicit the process of how their ideas are formed, namely on the basis of social experience;<sup>9</sup> the same process occurs, to an extent, in all theologizing, although it is not normally made explicit – the ideas of Western theologians do not occur in a social vacuum and are thereby influenced by their experiences. Muskus (2002, 14) even argues that all theologians “have a praxis based on their own ideologies.” Further, liberation theologians *do* actually have an abstract, pre-action starting position of sorts, acknowledged by Clodovis Boff (in Sobrino 1996, 2) as that of “faith.” With this in mind, the seemingly sharp division between the two approaches becomes less distinct.<sup>10</sup>

The third criticism, whether the use of praxis is “imprecise and inadequate social analysis,” carries some truth, but touches on a larger issue than is first apparent. Such criticisms are an attempt to hold the debate between Western, classical theology and liberation theology on ground that is itself Western and academic. Whilst proponents of liberation theology have sought to develop and articulate their approach, this is just one aspect of what they are trying to do, which they believe must have an ultimate, positive impact on society. This current at times expresses itself with impatience, such as Berryman’s rhetorical question:

“who is more likely to understand the situation of the Brazilian peasant, in human terms, in social analysis, theologically and pastorally – an individual who supervises a doctrinal watchdog agency in the Vatican, or a theologian who teaches half the year in a Brazilian university and spends the other half year trekking into roadless sections of the Amazon basin, as does Clodovis Boff?” (Berryman 1987, 195).

It is possible, therefore, that praxis *may* be imprecise and even inadequate, but it is part of a wider and more meaningful process that has end results. In other words, “the criticisms made of liberation theology by those who judge it on a purely conceptual level... must be seen as *radically irrelevant*” (Boff and Boff 1987, 9, emphasis added).

### **(iii) Theological Criticisms**

Given that this debate is ultimately concerned with theological validity and Christian practice, it is not surprising that there has been significant discussion as to whether liberation theology’s commencement with praxis is Biblical and Christian. Specific attacks have been made on liberation theologians’ claim that their methodology is that of the Bible (and, especially, of Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> In Muskus (2002, 114). Ratzinger was for many years in charge of the Vatican’s doctrinal oversight body, the CDF (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), and produced an ‘Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation’ in August 1984. Intriguingly, Ratzinger had supervised Leonardo Boff’s early theological studies in Munich (Linden 1998, 17).

<sup>9</sup> Parratt (2004, 182) believes liberation theology’s most novel and therefore significant contribution to global theology is its tenet that “context is made quite explicit as a ground for theologising.”

<sup>10</sup> It is worth considering whether these two theological approaches are in fact addressing different questions – as Berryman (1987, 26) notes, theologians in Latin America are answering “not so much whether one can believe what Christianity affirms [which is typically the case in North America and Europe], but rather what relevance Christianity has in the struggle for a more just world.” This different understanding of the *purpose* of theology goes a long way towards explaining differences of opinion over its *nature*.

and His Apostles, as well as Old Testament prophets); other concerns are that it lacks spirituality, and that its ultimate purpose seems this-worldly.

Sobrino's argument (1996, 132) that "the Christian scriptures testify that existential faith has priority over formulations of faith, and that the former is expressed more radically as praxis of faith..." is typical of liberation theologians, who find Biblical justification for their theological beliefs.<sup>11</sup> This argument is plausible on two grounds: as Dyrness argues, meaning in scripture is derived not from philosophers and abstract ideas, but from prophets and past actions of God;<sup>12</sup> this seems to endorse the use of praxis. Secondly, Christ Himself was historically active in a social (and some would argue political<sup>13</sup>) way, which was informed by his understanding of his role in the world, and reflective actions taken to transform it: in short, praxis action.<sup>14</sup>

Of the next theological criticism, we may agree that praxis as a concept lacks spirituality, but as an action, it can be as flexible and spiritual as the practitioner allows. It may indeed be the case that the praxis model has been characterised by shallow spirituality,<sup>15</sup> but this is arguably due to the urgency of the felt need for social transformation, and perhaps due to failures of liberation theologians, rather than praxis *per se*. As to whether praxis seems worldly, human and too earth-bound, perhaps critics would do well to remember that Christ in His incarnation, ministry and suffering was worldly, human and earth-bound. However, the point still stands that, in imitation of Christ, liberation theologians should make renewed effort to stress the heavenly and divine nature of their beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

#### **(iv) Practical Criticisms**

As well as philosophical, methodological and theological criticisms, there have been practical criticisms of praxis. Particularly, it has been criticised as being ineffective, and for not sufficiently involving the poor, given its self-description as being a 'theology of the poor'.

In his damning study of liberation theology, Muskus (2002, 268) concludes, "Latin American liberation theology has hitherto failed," although he neglects to adequately justify this conclusion, or to outline his criteria for reaching this decision. As a theology focusing attention on the poor and oppressed, and as an alternative perspective to Western theology, liberation theology cannot be said to have totally failed, since it has materially and spiritually improved the lives of many people, even if the societal transformation it seeks has not yet been realised. Even if the total failure of liberation were demonstrated, however, this could not be automatically equated with failure of praxis as a concept: the results of liberation theology may be disappointing, but it could be argued that they would be even more disappointing were it not for the methodological contribution of praxis.

As to the second criticism, there is some truth in the assertion that praxis, as a model which includes meaningful reflection, has failed to incorporate the experiences and reflections of the poor and the oppressed themselves, especially as a starting point for that reflection.<sup>17</sup> This is unfortunate, although it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise; those steering the liberation theology movement are, despite their involvement, removed from ground-level dynamics to some

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<sup>11</sup> Surveying the literature on liberation theology revealed the following texts to be the most frequently cited by liberation theologians: Matthew 25:31-46, James 2:20-21, 1 John 3:17-18, John 3:21, Luke 4:18-21 and Galatians 5:6, as well as the Exodus narrative and the minor prophets, especially Amos, Micah and Hosea.

<sup>12</sup> Dyrness (1990, 89) acknowledges that he is following Düssel's line of reasoning here.

<sup>13</sup> Sherry, for example, concludes that "since the Gospel is concerned with social relationships, the Church's work inevitably has a political dimension" (1985, 6).

<sup>14</sup> It is self-evident that this issue of Jesus' application (or not) of praxis deserves much more comprehensive attention than this short essay can provide. Suffice to say that, for now, we must at least agree with Sobrino (in Cadorette 1992, 114) that the case for Jesus having "a determinate praxis objectively calculated to change the situation of the poor" must at least be taken seriously.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Sherry (1985, 10) complained, with some justification, that hitherto liberation theology had said relatively little about prayer, worship and the nature of God.

<sup>16</sup> Gutiérrez (1974, 74) himself acknowledged that "there is a great need for a spirituality of liberation," something he believed would emerge as liberation theology developed: "in many areas of their life [those influenced by liberation theology] are without a theological and spiritual tradition. They are creating their own."

<sup>17</sup> This has been the case despite Boff and Boff's (1987, 5) desire that "in liberation, the oppressed come together, come to understand their situation through the process of conscientization, discover the causes of their oppression, organize themselves into movements, and act in a coordinated fashion," a wish that reveals that their Marxist sympathies extend well beyond the use of praxis.

extent. Whilst professors such as Boff visit Latin America's slums and *comunidades eclesiales de base* (base communities), it is genuinely difficult for ideas and experiences to move in the opposite direction, apart from via interpretative experiences. However, such 'praxis by proxy' is preferable to no praxis involvement at all.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Section IV: Praxis in the Light of Contextualised Theology**

From its inception, the theology of liberation was based on the concept of praxis, which was generally held to be the starting point of such theology and, by many, to be its central and defining feature. This was a radical departure from traditional, Western theological approaches, and as such (though for other reasons too) has been controversial.<sup>19</sup> Amongst the criticisms have been whether this theology actually *is* contextualised, since it seems to reflect not the theological tradition or background of Latin America, but the philosophical traditions of Europe. In Jürgen Moltmann's penetrating words, "Gutiérrez has written an invaluable contribution to European theology. But where is Latin America in it all?" (quoted in Anderson 1979, 59).

This criticism has been made repeatedly, and at first seems persuasive, but is ultimately wide of the mark, since it is entirely possible for a concept to develop in one part of the world, yet find rootedness and applicability in another. It would be nonsensical to argue that there is no genuine American or Australian culture, for example, simply because they use adapted forms of the externally-developed English language! Cultural expressions, including ideologies, philosophies and theologies are both flexible and transportable, and are reshaped and re-formed by the new contexts they find themselves in. To suggest otherwise is to imply falsely that there are 'pure' and distinct ideologies that do not interact at all. They *do* interact, and thereby influence one another; but this does not deny their legitimacy. So, if liberation theology *is* partly based on a European philosophical concept of praxis, this in no way invalidates the new meaning that concept has acquired in Latin American usage.

The ultimate irony here is that it is *European* theologians and academics who are trying to dictate what theology is appropriate for *Latin America*, even as they protest that Latin America's liberation theology has been dictated by European philosophy! The accusers are thereby guilty of committing the very same offence they consider liberation theologians to have succumbed to. For contextualised theology to be meaningful, the relevance of geographically and intellectually distinct theologies should be ultimately decided by those whom such theologies are related to. As such, the suitability of praxis as a defining – and starting point – of liberation theology, should not be pronounced unacceptable by those who are external to both liberation theology and, especially, Latin America. This implies a plurality of global theologies, but this should be seen as a sign of strength for the Church, rather than weakness or compromise.<sup>20</sup> As Rowland succinctly argues, "We in the 'North' need to learn to be part of a *community* of interpretation" (1999, 10, emphasis added).

#### **Conclusion**

Despite the fact that liberation theology's "epistemological foundations [began]... in a somewhat intuitive and fragmentary way" (Gibellini 1986, 8), we find its methodological starting point of praxis to be a sound principle, given that it is based on both empirical, practical experience, and theological and philosophical reasoning and contemplation. The iteration between the two results in continuous development, and avoids some of the pitfalls of traditional theology.<sup>21</sup> Whatever

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<sup>18</sup> The rather mechanical language of praxis obscures the fact that praxis' motivation and, according to Gutiérrez, its deepest meaning is "love and justice" (1991, 152).

<sup>19</sup> The controversy has been bi-directional, with Sobrino claiming that many Western theologians were busy writing about theology, rather than about God (Berryman 1987, 152), and a frustrated Clodovis Boff claiming that First World theologians had responded to liberation theology "with ostrich-like politics... [and by playing] games by criticizing details" (in a personal interview with Rosino Gibellini, 1986, 95). In more restrained language, Boff's brother Leonardo argues that "the weakness in the classical christology of the manuals resides precisely in that wherein it considers itself to be strong: its theological-philosophical systemization" (in Cadorette 1992, 90).

<sup>20</sup> This point concurs with Kraft's assertion (1979, 298) that "we need... a broader and balanced etc, ethnotheological understanding of God's truth. For this truth transcends the capacity of any single individual, or group, or discipline, or culture to grasp..."

<sup>21</sup> This implication that praxis "is never completed" is well explored by Brown (1990, 68-69) who strongly argues that it provides the tools for an ongoing correction of one's understanding, and that this should be seen as an empowering process.

failings liberation theology has (and one may pause to question the enthusiasm with which these have been pointed out), they are not due to its beginning with praxis. Whether or not one agrees with liberation theology, one must acknowledge that it has helped shift the focus of theology towards greater involvement in the world, and greater concern for the poor and the oppressed.<sup>22</sup> For this change, the Church is more Christlike.

For this reason – and because no-one has yet developed a better theology of the poor and the oppressed – we conclude with Sobrino (1996, ix), that liberation theology has “not become irrelevant” and that its “most fruitful thing... continues to be its manner of conceiving the theological task as reflection on a praxis.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In the words of Boff and Boff (1987, 88), the concept of praxis “forces theologians to think in terms of specific actions, of the real problems of life...”

<sup>23</sup> However, we stop short of Bevans’ assertion (1992, 70) that “a theology that is not in some way rooted in praxis cannot be considered an adequate theology today” since this claim denies the legitimacy of alternative theological approaches which may well be more appropriate to their own differing contexts.

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