

Trying to help an oppressed person is like trying to put your arm around somebody with a sunburn.

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Towards a Critical Theory of Methodism?

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The basic orientation of the paper was suggested by Theodore Runyon's September 8, 1981, letter:

Are there any resources and norms within Wesleyan theology - and especially in the doctrine of perfection - which, if lifted up and thematized, could provide the 'critical theory' that could counteract western, cultural Methodism?

The question is directed to the concrete situation at hand: Oxford Institute Concerns for Methodist theology. What we basically need to discover, however, is a "critical theory" that could counteract western, cultural Christianity as a whole. The Methodist occasion offers us a learning model of how we might approach the overall challenge.

I am proposing to make my first stop at the introduction to the 1977 Oxford papers (with an occasional glance at one or two of the papers themselves). The Runyon piece offers an excellent overview of the issues. But a number of difficulties also appear. Because of the brevity called for in these small papers, I will immediately concentrate on select difficulties. (a) The function of the Scriptures, (b) the significance of Karl Marx, and (c) the sequence of theory and praxis.

Where Do We Go From Here With the Scriptures?

We might agree in one denomination that here a problem exists as regards "critical theory". But since sister denominations might have a different angle or agenda at the same time, people begin to wonder whether worrying about acculturation is "for real" and quickly turn to other concerns. In the North American setting it is impossible successfully to tackle the drawbacks that turn a church into the non-church of Civil Religion. Without interdenominational praxis even the best aspirations remain utopistic.

The old Protestant principle, ecclesia semper reformanda, is hardly applicable in our "modern" churches. Reformation seemed possible in a fairly uniform church covering a wide range of culture like medieval Catholicism. When one thing began to give other things had to give too. Revivalism has long taken the place of Reformation in U.S. Protestant churches. There is also the factor that Reformation was possible mainly where there was continuity

in discontinuity as Christendom provided a uniform cultural umbrella. But socially structured continuity in modern society can no longer be assumed.

In a remarkably clear way, Runyon shows us how in all the discussion of the ten Oxford papers about Wesley's stance (whether he was a reformer or a "revolutionary", and in comparison with the Reformers) anthropology is a key orientation point: "Essential humanity becomes a project, to be realized not only in heaven but in this world."¹ One wonders soon, however, whether the Wesley anthropology is rooted deeply enough in the originative events of Christianity as common basis of all denominations.

It is a drawback that some caveats otherwise inserted in the volume by contributors are not taken into account by Runyon in any explicit way. Yet an immediate move to Marx would be "jumping the gun". Runyon, for example, claims that Wesley appears compatible with Marx: "We note in Wesley's anthropology...some strong formal parallels with Marx. Human life is seen fundamentally as activity."² All this might be correct. Yet one also has to keep in mind that Marx was not just identifying the human being in activity, but was describing it in terms of economic activity. That angle may make the parallel between Wesley and Marx less attractive. José Níguez Bonino injects the useful reservation: "Wesley's articulation...lacked a deeper understanding of...this human subject."³

From which vantage point may one arrive at a deeper understanding of the human subject? Any church, including the Methodist church, needs to underscore its commitment to the Christian Scriptures for discovering who "this human subject" is. In the era of primitive Christianity there was as yet no "economic man" around in the modern sense. But there was a clear grasp that human beings exploit one another, and that covetousness is rampant in us all (cf. R.1: 26-29).

The Christian Scriptures need no apology in the Oxford/Methodist context. The UNC Book of Discipline acknowledges the primacy of these writings in matters of Christian thought.⁴ The originative events of Christianity declare decisively who the human being is that God addresses in the divine struggle for justice in the world. "This human subject" (Níguez Bonino) is seen as caught by powers and principalities that do not allow for free maneuverability economically and otherwise in the social structures.

Any talk about "critical theory" within the Christian fold has to have the critical leverage of the Scriptures in mind as the

basic dimension of any critique. The Scriptures stress the need for the human subject, captive in sin, to labor for a renewal of all human structures. The Kingdom of God evokes labor for the renewal of all human order or its bouleversement. But the Scriptures do not mean all that much unless they are experienced in that regard in an interdenominational praxis that tackles the new structural challenges.

In basic terms, Wesley, I believe, cannot help us at all in the issue of critical theory. "For Wesley, the ancien régime adequately contained, or was contained in, the divine order, and as long as men were politically free to become sanctified, further change hardly mattered.... Sanctification, in Wesley's sense or in any other, was not a cure for sanctification, but only evidence of an alienated state."⁵

Wesley did important things in defense of the poor. The issue of "critical theory" runs deeper. Because of sin no order is containable. The Constantinian church made peace with the political order and the economic order. Most white middle-class denominations in North America did the same 1500 years later. H. Richard Niebuhr makes a point still valid today: "The primary question to be asked for the understanding of a Fox, a Luther, a Wesley... is this: what did they mean by sin or evil? From what did they want to save men? Now it is evident in Wesley's case that he envisaged sin as individual vice and laxity, not as greed, oppression, or social maladjustment. Sin meant sensuality rather than selfishness."⁶ Whenever it comes to elaborating "critical theory", Wesley's actual captivity to his time makes for difficulties in the issue of restructuring society. John Kent sums it up: "Here, liberation, understood as the kind of self-awareness that is central to both black theology and feminist theology, seems to be a more hopeful guide than are scholastic revivals of sixteenth-to-eighteenth century doctrines of sanctification."⁷

Christian "critical theory" radically has to begin again in the Scriptures and face the contemporary situation in a common praxis much beyond what the eighteenth century could ever be interested in. This does not say anything against Wesley. But it does say that we need to plant our feet firmly on our own ground today where the old notion of sanctification takes a turn toward setting together in corporate selfhood. Any setting apart to personal sainthood is outside the new experience of common praxis.

What Role Karl Marx?

a. Ideology Critique. As soon as we realize that no denomination has in its tradition a way of answering the modern problem of poverty, we are ready to appropriate the significance of Karl Marx. Denominationalism is also an expression of capitalism. Ideologically it is one way for capitalism to use Christianity as a "kept religion". What Freud did for psychology, Marx did for political economy. But Marx did more. He unmasked the dream-world religionists usually live in by offering an ideology critique. The human being is the only animal that feels the need to justify its existence. God can easily be used as a codeword for self-justification. God can be ideologized. Any ideology is a system or superstructure of ideas used to justify some cause, status quo, revolution, race, or class.

A few years ago in a cartoon two executives caught my eye, the one saying to the other: "Before God made profits, he made production, and before production, he made capital. So be it." (Time, August 16, 1976) God is here coopted as justification of the success of the socio-economic system we all indwell. Ideology turns into idolatry.

It goes as far back (at least) as the Bible of our modern economic system, the Wealth of Nations by Adam Smith (1776). Our local paper recently reviewed the book once more and supported in an editorial Adam Smith's cooption of God. Its basic Gospel came through as "man's self-interest is God's providence."

In the Bible God usually underscores, "My thoughts are not your thoughts". But much of 18th century philosophy and theology ventured to think that human thought is divine. Marx unmasked the deception on the socio-economic level: God is an idea that helps the ruling class to keep the farmhands and millhands in line. The ruling ideas are always those of the ruling class. But we in North America apparently have not as yet gotten the message. We still think that we're living in harmony with ourselves and the world around us.

In a collection of essays entitled Seeing With the Native Eye: Essays on Native American Religion W. Richard Comstock contrasts two pictures of North American fame. The first one is The Peaceable Kingdom by the American primitivist Edward Hicks, a Quaker preacher strongly influenced by the famous treaties William Penn made with the native Americans (1683-1750) which he honored and which lasted fifty years. The picture shows a peaceful scene near the Delaware River. Penn on the one side stands with his associates peacefully

next to a group of Native Americans with some treaty being held up to them. On the other side (the right side of the picture) one sees lion and lamb, leopard and kid, and other animals peacefully lying or standing next to each other in terms of Isa.11:6.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

This is harmonious nature and history, in the mind of the artist realized in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The other picture in the article is The Death of Jane McCrea by John Vanderlyn. Here are two Indians scalping a white woman in kneeling posture. Comments on this picture are summarized in the remark that "though the native figures have a rude grandeur to their bodies, their faces reveal an unrelenting savagery and brutality." In comparison of the two pictures we are told:

It is not too fanciful to imagine that both images of Indians are also projections by the immigrant Europeans of their own spiritual reality they are all too conscious of. Under the Puritan morality that came to dominate in the new Republic, the white Americans were on the one hand concerned to keep in check their own savagery, while on the other they yearned toward an imagined prelapsarian paradise, where equity and perfect justice governed all relationships. The Indian, a little too conveniently, came to represent both these opposing forces within the white American out to capture a continent while dreaming of perfect peace.⁸

The two pictures reflect the continuing tug-of-war in us North Americans between keeping in check our own savagery and our dreams of perfect peace. We are constantly pulling the wool over our eyes still and think that we live in a world of harmony.

The underclass in the United States, the working class, is not part of our vision of the contemporary scene in most churches. We still transfer our savagery to others and think of ourselves as members of a peaceable kingdom. The fact that in some Black communities there is up to 50% unemployment, not to speak of Native American communities, is perhaps sometimes felt as blemish. But it does not shake the basic notion of harmony most of our churches still live with. I see few churches concerned about the high rate of unemployed youth among Blacks, or, for that matter, about unemployment as such.

José Níguez Bonino makes the crucial point: "The fact that Methodism was unable to disclose for them the reality of their condition as a class, but rather led them to accept their role in society and to improve their lot without challenging the rules of the game, was one element in the domestication of the working

class in Britain."⁹ Much of this is still true today of the United States. There is no denomination I know that seriously can challenge the rules of the game which in some cities leaves up to half of the adult population out of work. What Marx does is unmask the religious halo we provide for the bloody scene. There is no ideology critique of this genre before Marx.

b. Social analysis. In an AAR discussion last year I indicated that with the emphasis on liberation the church had arrived at a new turning. A colleague who wanted to straighten me out stated categorically that the turning had already taken place in 1799. He was of course referring to the publication of Friedrich Schleiermacher's On Religion: Speeches To Its Cultured Despisers. My reply to this type of claim is: If it is a matter of seeing the turning as already having happened in the past we might as well say, it took place in 1848.

With the publication of the Communist Manifesto the revolutionary tendencies of the West came to a head. Poverty was no longer to be seen as a natural event, but as a political factor. At about the same time the denomination consolidated itself in the United States - largely as a counter-revolutionary force. Meanwhile the denomination has lost all strength to rejuvenate itself. There is nothing in the Methodist denomination that could counteract cultural Methodism. What can counteract cultural Methodism lies outside the institutional confines of religionism.

The function of the church has changed because the structures of the world are changing. God was never confined to the walls of the denominational sanctuary. But now we realize that God is going ahead of us in history. "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light." (Ex.13:21)

The ancient régime notion can no longer last in a history that constantly renews its structures and replaces them if need be - the struggle of God for justice among all peoples. The new world of 1848 did not emerge as peaceable kingdom, but as vast current of opposing forces. Marx thought that the human being had changed in the process: "The bourgeoisie, wherever it got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations...and has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest....callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor...in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into ex-

change value, and in place of the numberless indefensible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom - Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation."¹⁰

Christian thought can no longer proceed without social analysis along these lines. What shapes us into human beings today are the political and economic forces against which God is the counterforce. Naked self-interest is the modern form of sin St. Paul is so well aware of. And it shapes us as class stands against class.

Denominational allegiance makes little difference here, since we can find ourselves as Christians only in a new kind of praxis. In taking sin more seriously in its full dimensions, our attention is rivetted on what religious people are doing to the First and the Third World. More concern for the biblical grasp of sin makes us take the wide range of national sins more seriously.¹¹

How Do We Sequence Theory and Praxis?

One of the real drawbacks is that we still tend to begin our Christian thought reflection at the desk and hope that things will work out in reality. I myself admire very much what Theodore Runyon has done for us in editing the 1977 Oxford papers and clarifying their "Sitz in Leben" in the Introduction. Yet for a moment we need to stand back from all our denominationalism if we want to take liberation into account lest we continue theology as it has been done for the last two hundred and more years.¹²

Roy I. Sano, commenting on some issues I had raised on this very subject in another context, observes: "Rather than a sequence from action to reflection, or even a circle which moves round and round, it may be better to speak of a spiral."¹³ One thing is for sure, unless we are involved in the liberation struggle one way or other, no amount of God-talk will set the issue straight. We need to understand that the Christian Scriptures themselves root us deeply in praxis in terms of the *Πραξις Αποστολων*. The Bible is not a book I take from the shelf for exegesis "later on". It is the eucharistic book of the church that is with us in the struggle. Without participation in the Realpresence of Messiah Jesus in concert with the Bible (as eucharistic book) in social location we miss the theological reality altogether: "What is at stake is a new Christology that acknowledges the continuity of divine activity in Messiah Jesus in history."¹⁴

What happens in the praxis of the church in social location with the poor is the interaction-spiral of action and reflection. Yet reflection grows spirally out of the praxis of Christ itself and not the other way around. Social analysis does not "grow out of" theological reflection, but out of discipleship. The dogmatic task and the social analysis task go hand in hand "spirally". But social analysis does not bring a new pre-understanding. It is in terms of the spiral that we need to proceed with Marxist analysis: "The social analysis of Karl Marx is the pioneer tool in the West for unmasking the ideology that undergirds the unjust sociopolitical and socioeconomic structures."¹⁵ We have to stand back and look one more time real hard at the place of liberation in the church. Runyon claims: "Like Marx, Wesley reminds us that a theory must lead to a new praxis."¹⁶ Maybe Wesley does remind us so. But try to change just two words: "Like Christ, Wesley reminds us that theory must lead to a new praxis." Does it work? I don't think so. It is from this angle that we need to look one more time at liberation in a denomination. We are one more time compelled to start from scratch. Where do we ourselves really stand in the liberation struggle? It's all not that easy. We need to clarify where we are actually involved. "Trying to help an oppressed person is like trying to put your arm around somebody with a sunburn." (Florynce Kennedy) Are we trying to help the oppressed? Or are we fighting our own battle?

NOTES

- ¹Theodore Runyon (ed.), Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition (Nashville, 1981), p.28.
- ²Ibid., p.29.
- ³Ibid., p.63
- ⁴The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (Nashville, 1980), pp.78f.
- ⁵Runyon, p. 97.
- ⁶H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York, 1957), p.67.
- ⁷Runyon, p.101.
- ⁸Walter Holden Capps (ed.), Seeing With a Native Eye: Essays On Native American Religion (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London), p.65.
- ⁹Runyon, p.59.
- ¹⁰Karl Marx, Capital, The Communist Manifesto, and Other Writings (New York, 1932), pp.323f.
- ¹¹We need to study carefully a book such as Penny Lernoux, Cry of the People (New York, 1982), pp.137 ff.
- ¹²We need to spend some time carefully reflecting on what "critical theory" might be in the first place. For this brief paper I left out such reflections. See Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination (Boston and Toronto, 1973), pp.41-85.
- ¹³Unpublished manuscript.
- ¹⁴Frederick Herzog, Justice Church: The New Function of the Church in North American Christianity (Maryknoll, 1980), p.97.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p.98.
- ¹⁶Runyon, p.47.