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My Pilgrimage in Theology

Chris Wright

With this issue I come to the end of my period as General Editor of Themelios. My successor is not yet appointed, but we look forward to his or her guidance of the journal, with the same support from the associate editors, contributors, reviewers and readers as I have enjoyed.

It happened in the Spring of 1969. Not my conversion (this isn't a testimony!), but my awakening to the excitement of biblical theology. A rather dog-eared essay in the battered file proclaims the date 'April 1969' after the title, 'The theology of Ezekiel'. I still remember the joy of discovery and the opening up of fresh insights that accompanied the preparation of that one essay. I was in the final term of my first degree at Cambridge University and was doing one year of the Theological Tripos after two years of Classics. I had already crammed in a lot of biblical studies on the one hand and even some of what I thought was 'theology' on the other (Systematics was probably the weakest part of the course in those days), but had not really connected the two. It seems quaint, looking back, that the very title of the essay was a new thought to me.

I was brought up in a Christian home (this still isn't a testimony!) in Belfast, Northern Ireland, came to personal faith in my early childhood, and grew steadily in biblical knowledge through home, church, and Crusader class. It was the kind of environment where Bible knowledge was valued for its own sake. There were quizzes and competitions and prizes and silver cups, and a few came my way in those years. So I knew my Bible at one level extremely well and am forever grateful for the saints who ingrained it in me. I knew some doctrine too. Doctrines were long words like justification, sanctification, inspiration, *etc.*, followed by catechism definitions and biblical references. But I had never thought of theology *in* the Bible. Theology was what came *after* the Bible. Theologians were people like Calvin (not that there was anyone quite like Calvin; it was a Presbyterian home). 'Ezekiel' was the name of a Bible book, not of a theologian. It was a novel thought, and an exciting discovery, to explore Ezekiel as a living human being with his own life, historical context, struggles, and theological perspectives. I suppose what I was experiencing was an awakening to the *humanity* of Scripture, never having doubted its nature as the word of God. What had always been 'true' for me was now also *alive*, and the excitement of that discovery has never worn off. Since then, it has always seemed to me that the greatest crime in Christian ministry must be the ability to make the Bible dull and boring—an ability some seem to have perfected. And conversely, that the greatest service one can do for believers is to bring it to life by the imaginative and

creative sketching of the real life characters and contexts out of which the word comes.

Once people catch that excitement (even without the discipline of an essay on the theology of Ezekiel!), then their attention to the Bible becomes a self-motivated fascination. More importantly, their ears and eyes are open to God. So it is to these roots that I trace what is probably the dominant motivation of my life and certainly what ceaselessly gives me the greatest thrill and satisfaction in preaching, teaching and writing, namely bringing the Bible to life and seeing the sparkle in people's eyes when they say something like 'I never knew there was so much in it!'

Like many young evangelical theology students, I grappled with the disturbing new world of critical scholarship. Pastorally I was sustained by the company of other evangelical theology students, such as Robert Gordon and Andy Knowles, who were my seniors at St Catherine's, by the wider encouragement of the CICCUC and TSF, and by the atmosphere and integrity of evangelical scholarship at Tyndale House where I researched my essays under the fatherly eye of the then Warden, Derek Kidner. Intellectually, I learned two things. First, as my essay on Ezekiel and others like it proved to me, I could see the immense value in the proper use of critical questions applied to the text. My conviction regarding the divine origin and purpose of Scripture was not threatened by exploring the enormous diversity of its human origins and the processes through which we have received it, any more than my faith in God as the creator of the universe was threatened by scientific discoveries about its natural processes. I had Christian friends reading Natural Sciences. The scientific method in itself did not conflict with their faith. The views of some scientists did, but that's another matter, and usually involved huge, unrecognized jumps from one category of discourse to another via many logical *non sequiturs*, comparable to arguing that once we have discovered and explained all the theory of music, harmony, instrumental qualities and acoustics, we can no longer believe in the concept of Beethovenian composition of the Fifth Symphony. On the contrary, the more you understand about musical methods and processes, the more you appreciate the genius of a Beethoven. Likewise, the more one could discover about the background, context, sources, literary forms, compositional and editorial processes, *etc.*, of the biblical texts, far from eliminating the concept of divine inspiration, the more one could appreciate the rich complexity of its results.

But secondly, I found myself unhappy and unconvinced by many of the then dominant theories that critical scholarship presented in answer to the critical questions. Inevitably, as a young student in need of the security of an identifiable 'position', some of this was bound up with the traditional battle-lines between 'liberal' and 'evangelical' views. But I remember deliberately trying to think harder than merely cheering evangelical Davids against the liberal Goliaths, and to assess the arguments on the various issues for myself. And often I felt genuine scepticism over the validity of the arguments used to support the then classical critical positions on, *e.g.*, the documentary hypothesis, the date of Deuteronomy, the conquest, Isaiah, *etc.* Too often it seemed that sophisticated guesswork was dressed up as assured fact; that reconstruction of what may have happened mysteriously metamorphosed by the end of a monograph into what unquestionably had, or must have, happened, and then other possible scenarios were built on top of that, and so on. Source criticism seemed particularly prone to dubious arguments and I found many of the standard criteria of the documentary hypothesis, for example, frankly implausible, and still do. So in some ways I remained relatively

conservative in my own critical judgements, but tried to avoid merely anti-critical prejudice. You may disagree with the theories a critical scholar purveys, but you must do so on other grounds than whether or not he or she shares your belief in divine inspiration. You may reject someone else's answer, but the critical questions are still there to be faced. At Tyndale House I was meeting and being impressed by evangelical research students and scholars who were wrestling with the critical questions, and as my own undergraduate excitement with biblical theology reached its climax in final exams, I wondered if God's will for my life might lie in that direction. 'There is a great need for first rate evangelical minds in the world of biblical scholarship,' was a message we heard at many a CICCUC and TSF event. I didn't feel like one of those just yet, but I think I wanted to become one.

After graduation in 1969 I taught Classics and RE in Grosvenor High School, Belfast. Looking back, those school teaching years were wonderful training. In my view, anyone who ventures into pulpits and lecture halls for a living should be forced to face fourth form RE classes and find ways of holding their interest, or battle to communicate the excitement of learning Latin (in a school where it was amazingly still compulsory for the first few years). Communicate or sink were the only alternatives in the classroom.

Belfast Bible College runs evening classes, and I was asked to take several courses, as a squeaky clean theology graduate. One term, the principal Victor Reid (now principal of Redcliffe College), asked me to take a course on Christian Ethics. Not having done such a course in Cambridge, I turned to all the books I could find. I thought it reasonable to start with some lectures on Old Testament ethics, but was frustrated to discover almost no help at all in the textbooks, other than very 'obvious' treatments of the ten commandments. So I did my own thing for the lecture course, and began to wonder if this might be a field for doctoral research, if Cambridge would have me back. I wrote to my undergraduate supervisor to ask if OT ethics would be a viable subject for a PhD, and he wrote back to say it probably would be, since nobody had written anything worthwhile on it for 50 years! Thus began the great love-affair of my life with the ethical study and relevance of the Old Testament. A suggestion of my doctoral supervisor, Ronald Clements, that I focus on the economic ethics of the OT (ethics of land, wealth, property, *etc.*), proved fascinating and seminal.

In the mid-1970s, evangelical concern with social ethics was reviving after a long dormant spell, stimulated by the epoch-making Lausanne Conference and Covenant of 1974. In Britain, the Shaftesbury Project (later merged into Christian Impact), co-ordinated a number of working groups on evangelical responses to a variety of social issues and I was invited along to them to give papers on the contribution of the OT to issues as varied as criminal justice, war and peace, and overseas aid. Almost unconsciously my hermeneutical tools were being shaped and sharpened in the forge of those energetic discussions. In the same years (the late 1970s), I was involved in the discussion that led to the launch of *Third Way*, and contributed some early articles on OT ethics and the relevance of the jubilee year; I participated in the National Evangelical Conference on Social Ethics; and joined the team of writers who worked together to produce the Grove Ethics Booklets series. In all these ways, I found outlets at street level for the academic research I was doing. The relevance of the OT's ethical teaching and modelling was reinforced in my mind, as was the amazing scope of the issues it could address and shed light on. The idea (which I once vaguely shared) that the OT could not

be applied today, or at least not beyond the bounds of the church as God's people, simply disintegrated as I engaged time and again with people in secular fields, lawyers, medics, economists, vets, political activists, *etc.* and witnessed *their* excited response to the supple challenge and moral nutrition that the OT brought to their Christian involvement in their fields of expertise. I also realised during those years of interaction between my research on OT economic ethics and my indirect engagement with contemporary social issues through such groups, that it was inadequate just to skim the surface of the OT for a verse or theme that seemed vaguely relevant, or even merely to apply a generalized decalogue morality. My research took me into the whole socio-economic system of biblical Israel, their theology and practice of land-tenure; their kinship patterns; their political and institutional arrangements that reflected their community ideals; their passion for justice and their judicial systems; their preventive and restorative economic welfare mechanisms in response to poverty and debt, *etc.* I began to realise that the ethical power of the OT was bound up with this whole package. Israel as a whole was intended by God to be an ethical model or paradigm and this was part of what it meant for them to be 'a light to the nations'. I tested this conviction in a number of lectures and conferences, and then, encouraged by the response, congealed it into a book published by IVP in 1983, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (in the USA, it was published under the title, *An Eye for an Eye*—not my choice!). It has survived the decade and seems to have vindicated its own subtitle. My actual dissertation was published much later in 1990 by Eerdmans/Paternoster as *God's People in God's Land*.

I had returned to Cambridge for doctoral studies having married Liz in Belfast in 1970, and we lived in Romsey Town, in the parish of St Philip's. Our involvement with the church there led on the one hand to us joining the Anglican church, and on the other, to a focusing of the next stage in our lives. During the years of working as a research student at Tyndale House, I began to realize that I was not cut out for the world of professional academic theology alone in a university context, but needed to be in the more applied context either of the pastoral ministry, or in practical training for ministry and mission. This pointed towards ordination and parish experience. So, in 1977, after two years at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, rather stressfully combining the completion of my thesis with ordination courses, I was doctored and reverended in the same year and we moved as a family with three young children to the curate's house in the parish of St Peter and St Paul, Tonbridge, in Kent.

Life on the staff of a large parish, with four worship centres and a staff of four (a vicar and three curates), was incredibly busy and varied. I enjoyed the richness of pastoral work, the fun and challenge of youth work, the joy and sometimes frustration of team work, and the nagging nostalgia for the measured pace of academic research! Liz and I enjoyed being involved together in ministry, something that has remained true since. Most of all, perhaps, I enjoyed the regular preaching experience, even with the remorseless weekly deadline. I worked at reshaping for the pulpit what I had learnt at the research desk, and bringing the OT to life again in ways that could challenge and motivate God's people today from the faith and life of God's people of old. I still find no greater thrill than doing that. I would also offer it as one of the best ways I know for preserving spiritual freshness in the midst of academic or 'professional' theology. If you can't preach it, is it worth it? This does not mean, of course, that expositions are to be

filled with critical theory or scholarly debate. But engagement with scholarship should fuel and feed one's preparation. A sprinter does not visibly carry all the special food he eats in training, or the manuals and programmes of training, or his training clothes or apparatus. For the few, seconds of the race, he is all muscle, energy and concentration. But those seconds are packed with the power of the hours of preparation and discipline—which would have no great joy or purpose as ends in themselves but draw their meaning and value from the race.

Having grown up in the missionary oriented Christian environment of Northern Ireland, and my own parents having been missionaries in Brazil, Liz and I had agreed even before we were married that we would be willing to go wherever in the world God might choose to call us. While in Tonbridge we wondered if the next step might be teaching in a theological college overseas where the need seemed far greater than in Britain. A letter arrived one day from David Wenham (my predecessor as Editor of *Themelios*), himself teaching NT in the Union Biblical Seminary in India, asking if we would consider coming and teaching OT there for some years. Supported by the Anglican mission agency Crosslinks (formerly BCMS), we agreed and headed for Pune (formerly Poona!) with three just pre-teenage children, and a baby of eight months!

Our departure, however, was delayed by 18 months because of visa difficulties, and thus began both our association with All Nations Christian College and the second of my great passions in the study and teaching of the OT. ANCC took me on as a temporary lecturer-tutor in 1982–83 while we 'waited for the visa to India. But ANCC is a college exclusively geared to training people for cross-cultural mission of all sorts, and is itself a multi-cultural community (about half its students are non-British). So I had to ask myself, in preparing lectures on OT history, Isaiah, Psalms, Wisdom Literature, *etc.*, 'What is the relevance of these texts to mission? Is there a missiological perspective or dimension in the OT?' The answers astounded me. It was the dawning of a whole new understanding of the Scriptures for me. It suddenly became clear that it was not just a matter of finding an explicit missionary mandate here or there (I knew those verses well enough from childhood), but that the very texts themselves were so often forged at the interface of faith and culture, in the clash of world-views, or in defence of the true Gospel of the living God in an idolatrous or pluralistic context. Furthermore, the theme of God's great missionary purpose to bless the nations through Abraham and his people excited me as I traced it everywhere, and in its climax in the missionary theology of Paul, apostle to the nations and the second great OT missiologist (after Jesus). Missiology was not another of those post-biblical doctrines of my teenage misunderstanding. The Bible itself was missiological from cover to core.

Our five years in India blended the two passions together. The ethical relevance of the OT came into a sharper focus in relation to the issues and needs of Indian society and church, and I realized that the great OT challenge for God's people to live in God's way and by God's standards was actually the primary meaning of mission in the OT. Genesis 18:19 has become a hermeneutical key text for me, with its purposeful integration of the election of Israel, God's ethical demand on them, and the missionary purpose of both in God fulfilling his promise to bless the nations. Discerning the integration of ethics and mission in the OT also deeply enriched my understanding of Jesus. The more you understand the OT, the closer you come to the heart of Jesus, in his understanding of his own identity and mission. This conviction led to the writing of *Knowing Jesus through*

the Old Testament (Marshall Pickering, 1992).

The experience of living and working in, and for our family, growing up in, another culture was tremendously enriching personally. But it was also invaluable theologically. The challenge of thinking through, interpreting and communicating the Bible in a non-western cultural context was stretching and demanding, but also exhilarating. Some of the enthusiasm rubbed off. C.B. Samuel of Delhi told me recently that he keeps meeting former students of mine at UBS who have given their children OT names! And some have gone on to postgraduate studies in OT fields. Now back in the rich cultural mixture of ANCC, the enthusiasm for OT ethics and mission lives on, as it leads me to explore fresh texts and themes. Some day, a book on OT theology of mission ...!

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The law of sin and death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1-3

David M. Clemens

This article not only contributes to an understanding of the theological purpose of enigmatic Ecclesiastes, but also illustrates the fruitfulness of close comparative study of the biblical text. It needs to be read with Bible in hand!

The book of Ecclesiastes (E) has frequently been viewed as a conglomerate of unresolved contradictions, in view of its contrasting affirmation and rejection of such varying topics as life, wisdom, kingship, morality, divine justice and pleasure. Some recent commentators have admitted these contradictions as integral to the intent of the text, as reflecting the ambiguity of existence confronted by the author, Qoheleth (Q). More often, interpreters have sought to bring harmony into the contradictions, particularly by identifying supposed discrepancies as redactional additions. Underlying all such harmonizations is the search for a suitable temporal and conceptual framework within which to order Q's statements: this framework ranges from the Solomonic to the Hellenistic period, from Ancient Near Eastern wisdom to Greek or existential philosophy.¹ I propose in this article that E is best understood as an arresting but thoroughly orthodox exposition of Genesis 1-3: in both texts, the painful consequences of the fall are central.

Death

The structure of 1:1-11; 11:7-12:14

The dominant motif in E is that of death. This is signalled by two corresponding structures that frame the book, identifying its author, its central conclusion, and the evidence upon which that conclusion is based:²

A Author 1:1		12:9-14 Author A'
(1:1)	words	(12:10, 11)
(1:1)	Preacher	(12:9, 10)

B Conclusion 1:2		12:8 Conclusion B'
(1:2)	vanity	(12:8)
(1:2)	says	(12:8)
(1:2)	Preacher	(12:8)
C Death 1:3-11		11:7-12:7 Death C'
(1:3, 5, 9)	sun	(11:7, 12:2)
(1:4, 6, 7)	go, etc.	(11:9, 12:5)
(1:4, 5)	come, set, etc.	(11:8, 9, 12:1)
(1:4)	earth	(12:7)
(1:4)	[for]ever, eternal	(12:5)
(1:5, 6, 7)	to, toward, into	(12:5, 6, 7)
(1:6)	turning, go about	(12:5)
(1:6, 7)	returns, again	(12:2, 7)
(1:6)	wind, spirit	(12:7)
(1:11)	remembrance, remember	(11:8, 12:1)

The obvious correspondence of A/A' and B/B' prepares the reader to find a comparable correspondence in C/C'. That this is indeed intended emerges from the repeated imagery of light and dark, coming and departure. Read in the light of C', where death is explicit, it appears evident that C deals not simply with the monotony of nature's cyclical patterns as a whole, but with death as nature's most unrelenting cycle. Man returns to the enduring earth (1:4) as surely as the sun sets (1:5), the wind/spirit comes and goes (1:6), and the wadis die out on their way to the sea (1:7). He is unfulfilled (1:8) because his existence is cut short; thus he is lost to living memory, the victim of an inflexible pattern that brooks no innovation (1:9-11). This is the unchanging *datum* that reduces human existence to vanity. Q reverts to this evidence throughout the intervening chapters of the book;³ and it is human mortality that most commonly occasions his conclusion that all is vanity.⁴

Genesis 3:4, 19

The clearest correlation between 1:3-11 and 11:7-12:7 occurs in 1:4, 6 and 12:5b, 7, marked by repeated vocabulary concerning

man's going in death and the return of the wind/spirit (see below). This thematic vocabulary runs throughout the book.⁵ The most conspicuous example occurs in 3:20, which anticipates the vocabulary of 12:5-7 and thereby serves as a central link with 1:3-11. It seems obvious that 12:7 and especially 3:20 allude to Genesis 3:19 (cf. also Gn. 2:7, 17; 3:3f., 23):⁶

- (1:4) 'A generation goes¹ and a generation comes, But the earth² remains for ever³.'
- (1:6) 'Blowing¹ toward⁴ the south, Then turning^{1a} toward⁴ the north, The wind⁵ continues¹ swirling^{1a} along^{1a}; And on its circular courses^{1a} the wind⁵ returns^{1b}.'
- (3:20) 'All go¹ to⁴ the same place. All came from the dust^{2a} and all return^{1b} to⁴ the dust^{2a}.'
- (12:5b) 'For man goes¹ to⁴ his eternal³ home while mourners go about^{1a} in the street.'
- (12:7) 'Then the dust^{2a} will return^{1b} to^{4a} the earth² as it was, and the spirit⁵ will return^{1b} to⁴ God who gave it.'
- (Gn. 3:19) '... Till you return^{1b} to⁴ the ground^{2b}, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust^{2a}, And to⁴ dust^{2a} you shall return^{1b}.'

3:18-22 is in fact a focal passage for the entire book, whose language and imagery pervade E in all the main passages concerning death (1:2-11; 2:12-26; 3:9-15; 5:13-20; 6:1-12; 8:1-15; 9:1-12; 11:7-12:7).⁷ Since the content of Genesis 3 and its immediate context form the background to Q's perception of death in E 3:18-22 and 11:7-12:8/12:11, one may reasonably assume the same background for the rest of E, constructed as it is around these passages. Death in E, then, is not merely a random, arbitrary force: its inevitability derives from the sovereign judgment of God (e.g. E 3:14-22; 11:9; 12:14; cf. Gn. 2:17; 3:3, 19); its perversity is rooted in sin, which flouts that sovereignty and thereby infects the whole creation (e.g. E 7:15-29; 8:8-14; 9:3; cf. Gn. 3:4ff., compare Rom. 8:20-22); and the frustrating brevity of life reflects the restrictions imposed by God upon that sin (e.g. E 3:11; 5:18; 6:12; 8:16-17, and 'vanity' *passim*; cf. Gn. 6:3, compare Ps. 90:7-12).

It is also reasonable to infer that the remaining themes of these chapters should be viewed within the conceptual framework of Genesis 1-3, related as they are to the dominant preoccupation with death. This assumption appears especially apposite for the prominent topics of toil, (thwarted) knowledge of good and evil, sin, and the positive recommendations to eat and embrace toil as God's assignment to humanity.⁸

Toil: Genesis 3:6, 17b-18

Genesis 3:19 describes the long-term effect of human sin. The immediate effect is the necessity to toil for food, 3:17b-18; and it is precisely the issue of human toil that Q addresses at the outset of E (1:3, 13; 2:3; 3:9-10) and with which he is most preoccupied in its early chapters.

Food

The theme of food and eating is conspicuous in Genesis 1-3, and in E: **kl*, 'eat', appears 25 times in Genesis 1-3, 14 times in E. Humanity rejects God's provision of abundant 'trees' that are 'good for food', choosing to make his own greedy choice in the matter (Gn. 2:9; 3:6). He is therefore given over by God to the consequences of his foolish independence: he shall continue to provide his own food (3:17^b, 18, 19), but it will entail lifelong pain, frustration and sweat (3:17b, 18a, 19a), and it will end only with his death. Eating in E often has the same characteristics as in Genesis 3: it may be greedy and inappropriate (5:12b; 10:16; cf. 7:2, 4), self-destructive (4:5), and frustrated (5:11; 6:2, 7); it is painful, and that pain endures to the day of his death (5:16-17); the frustration is specifically ascribed to the working of God in 6:2.⁹

Toil

**ml*, 'work, labour', etc. 'Labour' addresses our need to eat in E 6:7, as in Genesis 3:17-19. Genesis represents work by the more neutral term 'cultivate' (2:5, 15), but it acquires strong negative undertones in the light of God's judgment (3:23; 4:2, 12). The pain associated with it after the fall is expressed primarily by the noun 'foil/sorrow' (*'issabôn*, 3:17; so 3:16; 5:29).

E expresses the same concept of painful toil most distinctively by **ml*, of which nearly half the OT occurrences are in this book: it regularly denotes labour as our universal lot, rendered fruitless and painful by his finitude, in which it corresponds precisely to Genesis 3:17-19.¹⁰

**sh*, 'do, make', etc. The prominence of 'work' as a keyword gains further emphasis from its alternation with this and the following word having similar connotations in E.¹¹

Two passages involving this root show specific parallels with Genesis. E 2:4-11 contains the most explicit description of Q's investigation of work and of his verdict upon it. The language of this section evokes that of God's creative activity, especially with reference to Eden.¹² However, there is no tree of life: human labour cannot recreate Eden or reverse the curse – hence Q's frustration (2:11, 15, 21, 23) and despair (2:17-20). Another significant difference is the predominance of first person singular forms in E 2:4-11 (37 times), including nine occurrences of *li*, 'for myself/by me'; unlike Genesis 1-2, this is depicted as an entirely self-centred enterprise. Secondly, E 4:1-3 appears to be an allusion to Genesis 5:29 (cf. 3:17): both deal with man's toil in a context of pain and evil (cf. Gn. 6:5, 11, 12); both give emphasis to the need for a 'comforter', which is essentially unfulfilled – there can be no comfort until the sting of death is removed.¹³

**nh*, 'be occupied, afflicted', etc.; 'task' The noun 'task' appears in the OT only in E (eight times), as part of the first major focus of Q's scrutiny (1:13; 2:23, 26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:3, 14; 8:16) and with uniformly negative connotations. It denotes toil assigned by God to the sinner, with which he is 'afflicted' (1:13; so 3:10, NASB, 'occupy . . .'). As such, it perfectly reflects the bitter nature of toil in Genesis 3, the consequence of our rebellion.

Knowledge of good and evil: Genesis 3:5-6:22

Human disobedience secures a capacity to know good and evil that is not overtly negated in Genesis 3:17-19 (cf. 3:22); but its firstfruits are fear and shame (3:7-10), and there is no divine admission that man has become wise (cf. 3:6) – the knowledge of good and evil becomes an ambivalent, confusing acquisition after the fall. The related issues of vision, good and evil, wisdom/knowledge and folly represent the second major preoccupation of the book of E, in which their ambivalence mirrors that of Genesis 3:7.

Vision

Vision is a significant source of temptation in Genesis 3:5-7; but the opening of Adam and Eve's eyes does not produce god-like behaviour. The same disappointment attends human vision in E. Q's 'seeing' (*passim*) is largely dominated by pain and evil, frustration, and vanity. Human 'eyes' are unfulfilled, being darkened by folly and death (e.g. 1:8; 2:13-14; 11:7/8; 11:9/12:2,3); only evil fills man in a permanent way (8:8; 9:3).

Good and evil

The adjective 'good' is extremely frequent in E, with a wide range of meaning – its 52 occurrences correspond only to Genesis 1-3 in density of usage (15 times). Its antithesis ('evil, bad', etc.) occurs 31 times, comparable only to Jeremiah (121 times; cf. Gn. 2:9, 17; 3:5, 22). Apart from the phrase 'good and evil', Genesis 1-3 normally employs 'good' with the verb 'see' to denote God's evaluation of his world (e.g. 1:4ff.; contrast 3:6). The usage in E is similar, in that these terms generally refer to Q's attempt to evaluate his world from his own experience; 'see' occurs 24 times in this way with Q as first person subject. His stated goal is to determine what is 'good' for man in his work (2:3).¹⁴ He is able to define good upon a specific, comparative basis, in the repeated statement that X is better than Y (16 times; e.g. 4:3-13). However, his perception of what is inherently 'good' is stated in negative terms: 'there is nothing good . . . except to eat . . .' (8:15; similarly 2:24; 3:12, 22) – human finitude robs us of the capacity to know 'good' in absolute terms (6:12; 11:6; cf. 11:2). The book therefore concludes fittingly with the knowledge and judgment of 'good and evil' restored to God (12:14).

Knowledge

**yd*, 'know; knowledge' Humanity sins in Genesis by grasping a capacity for knowledge forbidden at that time by God (Gn. 2:9, 17; 3:5⁷, 7, 22); from that point, therefore, human knowledge is tainted by sin, and curtailed by death (Gn. 3:22-24). Q turns to the subject of knowledge (1:16-18; 2:12-23) after surveying that of toil (1:3, 13-15; 2:1-11); toil then predominates in E 3:1-6:7, and knowledge in 6:8-11:6.¹⁵ As in Genesis, human knowledge is beset with pain (1:16-18): it is corrupted by sin and folly, the correlates of wisdom and knowledge in Q's investigation (2:12/21; 7:25; 4:13; 5:1; 10:15); and it is stunted and eclipsed by death (2:14, 21; 6:5; 9:10, 11), which represents the most prominent factor in Q's widespread denial of knowledge to man (cf. 2:19; 3:21; 6:12; 8:7/8; 8:15-9:1/9:2; 9:12). Death epitomizes the finitude which excludes us from knowing our origins (11:5), our 'good' (6:12), our future (8:7; 9:1, 12; 11:2, 6), our fate beyond death (3:21), and the designs of God in whose hand are our life-breath and our ways (8:16-17; 11:5). Contrary to expectation, we have not become like God in knowing good and evil. Q vindicates the word of God and refutes the serpent's denial of death by making the reality of death his central theme; and he exposes the promise of knowledge comparable to God's as equally spurious.¹⁶ The knowledge admitted by Q comes from God (2:26; 12:9/11) and submits to reality on his terms.

**hkm*, 'wise; wisdom' This word is also dominant in E (53 times; compare Proverbs - 102 times, Job - 28 times); its connotations and distribution are parallel to those of 'know', with which it is frequently correlated.¹⁷ Q acknowledges the benefits of wisdom within this life (e.g. 9:16-18); but it operates in a world dominated by sin and death which constantly, and successfully, threaten to undermine it. It is therefore inaccessible to us in our finitude (7:23²; 8:16, 17), and must be received as the gift of God (2:26; cf. 12:9, 11).

Sin

Origins

The fall. Few, if any, other OT texts provide so succinct and precise an account of the fall as E 7:29;¹⁸ and the ramifications of the fall echo in 9:18b (cf. Rom. 5:12-19, 'one') and 10:1. The supposed misogyny expressed in 7:26, 28, which seems at variance with the commendation of 9:9, can be interpreted more harmoniously against this background of the fall. The archetypal woman envisaged in 7:26 is Eve, whose hands picked the fruit (Gn. 3:6, cf. 22) and whose snares bring deception and death to herself and Adam alike (cf. E 9:12; 2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:14).¹⁹ The repeated reference to a 'serpent' in 10:8, 11 gains significance in the light of the other Genesis allusions.²⁰

Consequences

Universal sin. The spread of sin from Adam infects his descendants and rapidly reaches universal, catastrophic proportions (e.g. Gn. 4:7-11; 6:5-13; cf. Rom. 5:12). The universality of sin is stated several times in E (7:20 (compare 1 Ki. 8:46); cf. 7:16, 22; 7:29; 8:11; 9:3); and it is implicit in the universality of death, and of toil.²¹

Sin and death. Genesis clearly associates sin with death (Gn. 2:17; 3:3, 17-19; cf. Rom. 5:12-21). A similar connection emerges in the course of E; it is stated most clearly in 9:3, where 'evil' and 'insanity' eventuate in death; similarly 7:17; 8:8; 8:11/13.

Characteristics

Pride. Genesis 3:5-8 portrays men and women in their pride as overreaching themselves, desiring to be like God yet unable to face him (cf. Is. 14:13-14; Ezk. 28:2-6, 12-17). They are therefore humbled by God through pain, toil, brevity of life and death, which force them to face their finitude (cf. Gn. 6:3; Ps. 90:10; Is. 14:15; Ezk. 28:7-11, 17-19). The same processes are central in E: humanity is humbled by God through toil (e.g. 1:13), through ignorance and weakness (e.g. 3:11), through a fleeting life and imminent death (e.g. 3:18-20). The wise man responds in the 'fear' of God (cf. Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7): he submits to God, acknowledging both his claim upon him (E 8:12; 12:13) and his own frailty and finitude in the face of that claim (3:14; 5:7/9:2; 7:16-18); and he is therefore fitted to recognize and cope with,

although not to remove, the vicissitudes of life (e.g. 2:13-16; 8:1-8). The fool is the antithesis of the wise man, and the embodiment of pride: he asserts himself in the face of God's claims, rejecting or ignoring the varied limitations to which he is subject and denying the distance which separates him from God (e.g. 4:13; 5:1-6; 7:2-17; 10:12-14); in his pride, he is not merely a victim of the fall but an active perpetuator of its ravages (e.g. 9:18-10:1).²²

Greed. Not content with 'every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food', Eve and Adam must grasp for one more, only to lose them all (Gn. 2:9; 3:6, 23-24; cf. 1 Jn. 2:16). In E as in Genesis, greed is a correlate of pride, and unfulfilment is its consequence (4:4-8; 5:10-17; 6:1-9; cf. 1:8).

Injustice. The early effects of the fall are alienation and enmity (Gn. 3:8-16), as a result of which righteous Abel dies while Cain continues to live and perpetuate his line (4:3-17; cf. 1 Jn. 3:12-13). The themes of isolation and injustice are not especially distinctive in E, although they certainly fit the Genesis context.²³ However, the inverted fate of the righteous and wicked finds an archetype in Genesis 4 (E 7:15; 8:14; cf. 3:16-17; 10:5-7); the same is true of delayed judgment (3:17; 8:9-13), and of death as the unpredictable but common fate of righteous and wicked alike (9:1-3, 11-12).

'Vanity'

hebel, 'vanity', expresses Q's final verdict upon human existence, as indicated by its concentration in the summary *inclusio* (1:2/12:8) and by its recurrence as a refrain punctuating Q's individual observations. Its concrete OT meaning of 'vapour, breath' (Prov. 21:6⁷; Is. 57:13) lends itself to the main derived ideas of transience and insubstantiality, exemplified in human mortality (e.g. Job 7:16; Ps. 39:5, 6, 11[6, 7, 12]; 62:9²[10²]; cf. Jas. 4:14); and in ineffective, futile activity (e.g. Job 9:29; 21:34), of which idolatry and sin are the epitome (e.g. Dt. 32:21). The concrete meaning is evoked in E by the repeated association with the 'wind', as in Isaiah 57:13. This association also reinforces its varied implications of transience and insubstantiality, since 'wind' is sometimes used similarly (e.g. Job 6:26; 8:2; Is. 26:18; 41:29); and it particularly emphasizes the theme of human mortality, 'wind' referring to the transience of the 'spirit' as well (e.g. E 1:6; 3:19, 21; 11:5; 12:7; Job 7:7; 12:10; 27:3; Ps. 78:39; 104:29). Death is in fact the main factor in Q's assertion that all is vanity (see n. 4). Other factors include work (e.g. 1:14) and false motives in work (e.g. 4:4, 7, 8); the vicissitudes of wisdom (2:15; 4:16); folly (5:7[6]; 6:11) and foolish pleasure (2:1; 7:6); injustice (8:10², 14²; cf. 7:15). *hebel* refers, in fact, to the same nexus of toil/sin/folly eventuating in death that is introduced in Genesis 3 and which finds its first outworking in Genesis 4:1-17. It can scarcely be coincidence, then, that the name of the first victim of this process is Abel (Hebrew *hebel*)! All is vanity because, like Abel, it is scarred by the madness of sin and swept away without warning by death. The term is so loaded with meaning that it virtually defies a unitary English translation; but perhaps 'fallen' (i.e., expressive of and/or destroyed by the fall) can capture most of its connotations within E (cf. Rom. 1:21; 8:20).²⁴

Qoheleth's conclusions

Q has concluded that there is no 'advantage, profit' in human activities under the sun: nothing is 'left over' by death; and the purchase of a spurious independence at the expense of life represents an unprofitable investment. There is, however, a small residue of 'good', to which Q reverts throughout the course of the book as he surveys the ruins of our fallen condition (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 3:22; 5:18-20; 8:15; 11:7-12:1; also 9:7-10, without specific reference to 'good'). It is a deceptively unpretentious residue: to eat and to drink; to find good and joy in life, in activity and labour, and in marriage; to receive these things as a gift and allotment of God (cf. 12:7).²⁵ These are precisely the themes that predominate in Genesis 1-2: the goodness of God's creation (14 times; note 1:31; 2:9, 18; life (14 times, especially 2:7, 9); food (7 times; note 1:29; 2:9, 16) and woman (2:18-25; cf. E 4:9-12) as God's gifts; the allocation of work (2:5, 15; 3:23; cf. 1:26, 28).

Each of these elements of creation has been soured by the fall, as is reflected in E. The proliferation of what is good has been checked by the spread of evil; good is expressed in com-

parative or negative rather than absolute terms. Food is consumed in darkness, and frustration, and folly. Joy and toil are subject to frustration (1:14; 2:1, 2; 7:4). Life is a source of despair (e.g. 2:17; 4:2). Woman is more bitter than death (7:26). God gives man toil and limitations to humble him (e.g. 1:13; 2:26b; 3:10, 11; 6:2).

Thus, it is not possible to return to Eden (cf. 2:4-11). However, it is possible to return to the commands given in Eden, and this is the intent of 2:24-26 and its parallels: God has already approved our eating and work (9:7), because they were prescribed in Eden; our only sure knowledge derives, not from independent evaluation of good and evil, but from the revealed will of God. More fundamentally, it is possible to return to the God who created Eden – to remember him after forgetfulness (12:1), and to fear him after disobedience (5:6; 7:18; 8:12²; 12:13). This, and not arbitrary cruelty, is the true intent of the restrictions he places upon humanity (3:14; cf. Gal. 3:23-24); and it is this which differentiates each activity recommended by Q from its darkened counterpart, because they are embraced as from the hand of God (cf. 2:24; 9:1). Joy is the reward and evidence of these attitudes – a reward which is never manifested in Genesis 1-3, where sin enters and snatches it away so quickly.²⁶

¹A review of the history of interpretation may be found in most recent commentaries and surveys: e.g., James L. Crenshaw, 'Qoheleth in Current Research', *Hebrew Annual Review* 7 (1983), pp. 41-56; *idem*, *Ecclesiastes. A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 34-49; M.A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), pp. 36-43, 48f; Graham S. Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), pp. 9-12; Michael V. Fox, *Qoheleth and His Contradictions* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1989), pp. 19-28, 155-163; R.N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 17-28. Extensive bibliographies are given by Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 11-22; Fox, *Qoheleth*, pp. 349-366; Diethelm Michel, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 290-322.

²Structural correlations are based upon repetition of the identical root or form. Discussion of structure is included in the preceding bibliographical references (n. 1); also, for instance, in François Rousseau, 'Structure de Qohelet I 4-11 et plan du livre', *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981), pp. 200-217, and Diethelm Michel, *Qohelet* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), pp. 9-45. Biblical quotations in this article normally derive from the New American Standard Bible (NASB), since this version together with its marginal readings is sufficiently literal to reflect the underlying Hebrew vocabulary that is often a clue to the structure and intent of a passage. I follow NASB in using 'man' in its non-gender-specific meaning of 'mankind', in which it corresponds precisely to the Hebrew term *'adam*.

³Explicitly in 2:14-16, 18, 21; 3:2-4, 19-22; 4:2-3; 5:15-16; 6:3-6, 12; 7:1-4, 15-17; 8:8, 10, 13; 9:2-6, 10-12; 10:1.

⁴2:15, 17, 19, 21; 3:19; 4:7, 8 (no heir); 6:2, 4; 6:12/9:9; 7:15/8:14; 8:10. Of the remaining 12 usages, at least six are related structurally or lexically to the same topic: 2:11, 23; 4:16; 6:9, 11; 7:6.

⁵ Going: 1:4, 6⁷; 2:14; 3:20; 5:15², 16; 6:4, 6; 9:10; 12:5
(cf. 6:8, 9; 7:2; 8:10; 11:9);
Returning: 1:6, 7; 3:20; 5:15; 12:2, 7;
Wind: 1:6⁷; 2:17; 3:19, 21⁷; 5:16; 12:7

(cf. the recurring phrase 'striving after wind').

⁶The superscript numbers refer to single Hebrew words or roots: ¹ = *hlk*, ² = *sbb*, ³ = *švb*; ⁴ = *eres*, ⁵ = *āpār*, ⁶ = *dāmāh*, ⁷ = *ōlām*; ⁸ = *el*, ⁹ = *al*; ¹⁰ = *rūh*. The keyword 'dust' is found only in these texts within E; and no other OT uses of this noun are so clearly modelled upon the language of Genesis (cf. Job 10:9; 34:14-15/Ps. 104:29; Ps. 90:3). Within this frame of reference, it is also obvious that the common origin and destiny of man and beast in E 3:18-21 as a whole reflect the Genesis account: 'breath' (E 3:19, 21; Gn. 7:22 (cf. 2:7); 6:17; 7:15); 'beast(s)' (E 3:18, 19², 21 (only here in E); Gn. 1:24-26; 2:20; cf. 2:7/19); 'die' (E 3:19²; Gn. 2:17; 3:3-4); and the term 'man' itself (E 3:18, 19², 21, 22 and a total of 46 times in E, 26 times in Gn. 1-3, 26 times in 4-9 (higher densities than in any other OT book or section)).

⁷The first theme common to all of these passages, and stated most fully and compactly in 3:18-21, 22b, is that man dies under the sovereign decree of God: unable to transcend or master his limited existence, regardless of his personal attainments and status, he is cut off from the past and the future and ultimately from life itself. The central concepts are God; fate, death, spirit; advantage, vanity; all go to one place; come from/return to dust; man's ignorance. The second theme is stated in 3:22a and its parallels: it is therefore good and wise to embrace life – with joy, because it is sweet, and with urgency, because it is fleeting. The prominent elements are the 'nothing-better' formula; eat/drink; joy; activity; lot; and God's gift.

⁸The principal exponents of such a connection have been Charles C.

Forman, 'Qoheleth's Use of Genesis', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 5 (1960), pp. 256-263, and Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* (Gütersloh: Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1963), pp. 46, 111f., 227-231. Cf. also Robert Gordis, *Qoheleth, the Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd (augmented) edn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 43 (unchanged from the 1951 edn); Hagia Witznerath, *Süss ist das Licht* (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1979), pp. 40-43; Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 46; and Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 28-30. Virtually all commentators recognize that E 3:20 and 12:7 allude to Gn. 3:19; 2:7. For a detailed critique of Forman and Hertzberg, see Michel, *Qohelet*, pp. 68-72; cf. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, pp. 25, 38. The interpretation advanced here was stimulated in part by Hertzberg's insights, but it develops the connections more systematically and comprehensively; I therefore consider it less vulnerable to Michel's often telling criticisms of the isolated connections proposed by Forman and Hertzberg.

⁹Hertzberg draws a number of parallels between Gn. 3:17-19 and E 5:15-17, *Prediger*, p. 229.

¹⁰E.g. E 1:3; 2:18-22, where it is found 10 times; 4:4-9; 5:15, 16; 6:7; 8:17; 9:9² (30 times in E, 36 times throughout the rest of the OT). Its most prominent connotations elsewhere are those of pain (e.g. Job 5:6-7; Ps. 90:10) and sin (e.g. Job 4:8; Ps. 107:12), which would explain Q's choice of this term over 'labour'. Cf. Fox, *Qoheleth*, pp. 53-77.

¹¹For instance, 3:9 (cf. 1:3); 1:9, 1:14, and 2:11, 17 (cf. 2:18-19, 2:20-21); 4:1-4, 8:9-12 (associated with sin); 1:9², 14², 2:11³, 17², 8:14³; 9:3 (with pain and frustration).

¹²Cf. 'make, etc.': 12 times in Gn. 1-3 of God, 6 times in E 2:4-11, of Q; 'plant': Gn. 2:8, E 2:4, *5; 'garden': 13 times in Gn. 1-3, E 2:5; 'tree': 20 times in Gn. 1-3, E 2:5, 6; 'fruit': 7 times in Gn. 1-3, E 2:5; 'water': 10 times in Gn. 1 (cf. 2:10-14), E 2:6; 'to water': Gn. 2:6, 10, E 2:6; 'sprout, grow': Gn. 2:5, 9 (cf. 3:18), E 2:6; 'gold': Gn. 2:11, 12, E 2:8.

¹³The term 'comfort' (E 4:1²) recurs in Gn. 5:29, 'give . . . rest', and 6:6, 7, 'sorry'. Note also the form 'rest' in the next, related section on toil (E 4:6), from the same root as 'Noah' (Gn. 5:29).

¹⁴Compare the different term 'advantage, profit' in 1:3; 3:9; 5:16; 6:8, 11.

¹⁵The root appears in 1:16, 17, 18; 2:14, 19, 21; 26 times in 6:8-11:6; elsewhere in E 9 times. On knowledge and wisdom, cf. Fox, *Qoheleth*, pp. 79-120.

¹⁶The participial form used in Gn. 3:5 ('knowing') occurs most frequently within the OT in E (14 times). Whereas it is positive in Gn. 3:5, it is usually negated in E.

¹⁷E.g. 1:13, 16-18; 2:3, 12; 7:7, 16, 25; 8:16-17; 9:13-10:1.

¹⁸The verb 'made' is regularly applied to God's creation of man in Gn. 1-3 (e.g. 1:26; 2:18). While Q applies the adjective 'good' to man and his activities, 7:29 represents the only occasion in E where man is described as 'upright' or 'straight, level'; since Adam's fall, man and his world are rendered 'crooked' by sin and decay (1:15; 7:13; so 12:3 - 'stoop').

¹⁹The 'one man' of 7:28 appears to be one who is not a 'sinner' (7:26). Within the context of Genesis, this might imply the isolated individuals of different generations who are chosen and accepted by God (4:4; 5:24; 6:8-9/9:1; 15:6; etc.). Within the context of the fall, this verse foreshadows the second Adam, who was in reality without sin (Rom. 5:14-15; 1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45).

²⁰The term is not especially common (31 times): apart from Gn. 3 (5 times) and this passage, only Num. 21 (5 times) and Is. 27:1 (2 times) show a similar density of repetition.

²¹The sinner's 'task' is previously assigned to all men (2:26; 1:13, 2:23, 3:10). The specific activity of 'gathering' and 'collecting' in 2:26 ironically alludes to that of Q in 2:8, the only other use of either of these verbs in E; and Q, like all men, is equated with the 'sinner' in that what he has accomplished is 'given' to his successors after his death (2:21, 26). In E, the clear demarcation between wise and foolish, righteous and sinner, ultimately breaks down: even the wise man concludes his life in 'darkness' (2:13, 14; cf. 6:4; 11:8; 12:2, 3); even the 'good' are flawed, die and relinquish their property to others (2:26; 7:20; 9:2).

²²The correlation of good with wisdom (cf. 2:26) and of evil with folly (cf. 7:25; 9:3; 10:13) is suggested by the statistical occurrence of these concepts (**tōb*, 52 times; **hkm*, 53 times; *ra'*, 31 times; **s/skl*, **ksl*, 31 times).

²³Particularly 4:1-3, treated above; cf. 4:8-12, 5:2, 8-9. The abuse and loss of authority evoke man's failed dominion over creation (Gn. 1:26, 28; 2:15; 3:17-19; E 4:13; 7:7; 8:8-9; 9:17; 10:4-8, 16). On justice and theodicy in E, cf. Fox, *Qoheleth*, pp. 121-150.

²⁴The equivalence of Abel/*hebel* has often been noted, but seldom as part of the Genesis pattern. On *hebel* in general, see Fox, *Qoheleth*, pp. 29-51.

²⁵The significance of the recurring theme of joy has been stressed by a number of scholars, and it is no longer usual to regard it as an invitation to hedonism; e.g. Étienne Glasser, *Le procès du bonheur par Qohelet* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970), pp. 179-190, 201-206; Rousseau, 'Structure', pp. 209-213; Ogden, *Qoheleth*, pp. 11-14.

²⁶The term 'joy; rejoice' is most widely associated with man's proper response to God, in his worship and in his activities (e.g. Dt. 12:7, 12, 18; Ps. 4:7[8]; 5:11[12]; 30:11[12]; 32:11; and *passim*); cf. Rom. 14:17; Gal. 5:22; Phil. 4:4; 1 Pet. 1:8; etc.

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Context, Bible and Ethics: A Latin American Perspective¹

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The living out of an exemplary moral life is a constant challenge to the Christian church. What is fundamental for fulfilling this task of embodying the faith is both sensitivity to contextual factors and a sound textual method. In spite of many common theological convictions and reflection upon the same Scripture, the moral life of evangelical Christians can take different forms in disparate parts of the world because of patterns of living and problems unique to the various places where the church carries out its mission.

In Latin America, the theological and exegetical work of liberation theologians has served to spur evangelicals to reconsider how they read the biblical text and mine from this study the foundations of their conception of what it means to be the church in such a needy continent. The purpose of this essay, however, is not to summarize and evaluate the various aspects and proposals of Latin American liberation theology. Others have done an admirable work of interacting on a broad scale with this theological current (Kirk; Núñez; Núñez and Taylor, pp. 233–281; McGovern).²

My goal is to try to think through important elements that should be taken into consideration when attempting to understand moral life within a particular cultural context. For the Christian church, the comprehension of its moral life will entail grasping the essence of human existence in the part of the world in which it finds itself, as well as seeking to comprehend how the Scripture might be utilized to nurture a different kind of community. This study will highlight issues within Latin America, but it is hoped that what is presented here might be of help to those in other contexts as well.

² It should be noted that Latin American liberation theology has been changing in its emphases over the last few years. Recently, for instance, there has been much work done in the areas of ecclesiology (the concept of the 'base community') and spirituality. Gutiérrez describes how his own work has changed since the first edition of *A Theology of Liberation* (1972) in the introduction to the new edition (1988), pp. xvii–xlvi. With the commemoration in 1992 of the 500 years since the arrival of the Spanish, there has also arisen a commitment to supporting the racial, socio-political and economic rights of the indigenous peoples on the continent.

I would argue that three questions should be dealt with in this enterprise: (1) How can we analyse and comprehend the nature of religion and moral life within a given context?; (2) How does the Bible function in the moral life of the Christian community?; and (3) What form of the biblical text is most appropriate for an ethic that the average Christian can understand and apply to daily life?

Religion and moral life in context

In this section we will briefly explore insights from interpretative anthropology, the sociology of knowledge, and narrative ethics. Each of these provides unique and helpful perspectives that can lead Christians into a fuller appreciation of the context within which they live out their faith.

Interpretative anthropology

In contrast to a materialist focus on culture underscoring supposed objective laws of economics and social relations, interpretative anthropology posits that humans live within ‘webs of significance’ that they themselves create and sustain (Geertz 1973, 1983). This notion of culture involves ascertaining the codes of meaning according to which people live—for example, the worldview which those in a context hold in common, how they define what is ‘natural’ and ‘correct’ and the institutions they develop to maintain this social order, the customs and mores that determine how they react in different settings and situations. It is not that material life is irrelevant or unimportant. Quite to the contrary. There can be no separating the material and the cognitive and the affective, because they are all expressions and reflections of a particular universe of interconnecting systems of signs and symbols.

This way of looking at culture argues that priority be given to the ‘native point of view’: the comprehension of a culture necessitates trying to get at what those within the culture understand about an institution, ritual or event. Only in this manner is it possible to obtain what anthropologists call a ‘thick description’ of life grounded in the meanings of the people themselves, instead of hypotheses based on the findings of the allegedly detached work of the scientist. Within social science circles, this difference between looking at a culture from the native point of view and doing so according to the categories of the observer which might be foreign to the context under study is called the emic-etic distinction. Interpretative anthropology champions the emic perspective.

According to interpretative anthropology, religion has an important role to play in the comprehension of reality and in the life of a society. Belief in the supernatural and adherence to certain religious institutions are no longer evaluated as reflecting superstition and primitive beliefs. Instead, a religion and its symbols and metaphors are recognized as helping to provide coherence to everyday existence and explanations for problems. In the realm of morality, religion can offer guidance on moral issues, as well as define and enforce ethical norms. Religious belief can also cut across racial and class boundaries; in other words, even though different segments of a culture can cherish particular rituals or aspects of a creed, still in many ways all share to some degree in a common faith and participate together in certain rites. Religion, though, is not to be isolated from the larger context, the tapestry that is the broader culture. It is one of those ‘webs of significance’ that contributes to contextual identity and works together with

other cultural institutions to preserve what people see as true and to affirm what the society would see as right and proper.

This perspective on culture is especially relevant to the task of doing theology and elaborating biblical ethics in Latin America. Liberation theology has placed much emphasis on ‘doing theology’ and developing pastoral strategies ‘from below’ (e.g., Dussel 1981; Gutiérrez 1983, pp. 169–221; Boff and Pixley). A theological evaluation of this commitment or the presentation of possible evangelical alternatives which might prove both biblically and culturally appropriate is beyond the scope of this article. From the point of view of interpretative anthropology, however, in light of the fact that most of Latin America is poor, seeing and living from the horizon of the poor would mean doing theology from the ‘native’ point of view! The evangelical church must take this cultural fact seriously, especially as some from the official Roman Catholic hierarchy, the liberationist perspective and even the evangelical camp (Costas, pp. 58–70; Padilla, pp. 94–109) have linked, though in varying degrees, the arrival of Protestantism on the continent with Western capitalist expansion and interests. Such an accusation as an historical claim is a bit simplistic (note the liberationist Miguez Bonino 1983, pp. 60–64; the evangelicals Núñez and Taylor, pp. 355–362), and today many are striving for an appropriate contextualization of evangelical faith (e.g., Kirk, pp. 143–208; Costas; Padilla; Núñez and Taylor, pp. 311–347). Nonetheless, the danger of not being sensitive to cultural realities and depending on foreign worldview frameworks for theology, pastoral work and socio-political options within Latin American evangelicalism remains (Stoll). The Christian church, within a continent so full of pressing needs, must move beyond the temptation (however well-intentioned) of utilizing the simplistic rhetoric of the political left or the right and grapple with the moral life of ordinary people, with the practical and mundane fleshing out of biblical ethics within culture. Christians need to realize that their identity is also cultural in a broad sense, not simply religious, and that their moral life will be incarnated within the world which they inhabit and take part in through their families, jobs, recreation, and their politics. This recognition is basic for the church to be able to speak to and be a model within its culture.

In addition, any talk of reading Scripture and of following biblical guidelines for discipleship will need to be prefaced by the question, ‘Where are we?’. Different cultures will give rise to and nurture distinct manners of looking at the world and at the Christian faith. Diverse contexts deal with distinctive familial, socio-economic and religious pressures and frame both the felt needs and their respective solutions in unique ways. The last few years have witnessed a growing interest in biblical ethics in North America and Europe (for a good survey, see Wright 1993). The efforts of these scholars, who often also attempt to relate their findings to contemporary Western society, provide careful studies into both testaments. All of these studies are helpful for those who live outside that world. But readings of the Bible from different parts of the globe will not always be the same. Some will offer new perspectives and angles on texts and so perhaps propose dissimilar ethical demands and models commensurate to those other situations. Christian moral life, in other words, will not be the same everywhere.

Perhaps at this juncture a personal anecdote might prove helpful. For a number of years I have taught a course on Old Testament Social Ethics at a seminary in Guatemala City. Because of three decades of conflict between the army and guerrilla movements in Guatemala, the civil war in El Salvador, and the Sandinista-Contra conflict of a few years

ago, the study of OT ethics in Central America naturally requires that careful attention be paid to the issues of violence, war and human rights in the biblical text. Two years ago I gave the same material in a two-week intensive course at another seminary in São Paulo, Brazil. After our time together had finished, I asked the students for their thoughts and evaluation. All expressed appreciation for what had been presented, but told me that their context was not exactly the same as my Guatemalan one. Though discussions on poverty and government had struck home, those on war had not; they communicated to me that a much more crucial topic in the Brazilian world was sexuality-promiscuity, AIDS and homosexuality.

The challenge then is to examine the biblical text and to exemplify a faith that is at once culturally authentic and morally true to the Christian faith. Recently many have begun to look at the issue of culture in a disparate manner. Today in Europe and North America many Christian thinkers are wrestling with a culture that is perceived as increasingly secular and pluralistic (Newbiggin 1986, 1989). For them the burning issue is how the church might maintain its distinctiveness and authenticity without being co-opted by society. Two comments are in order. To begin with, the situation in the Two-Thirds World, at least in Latin America, is very distinct from the West. Religion is still a very important part of cultural life; this has been a Catholic continent since the coming of the Spanish 500 years ago, and Protestantism (especially evangelicalism) has been growing at an astounding pace. Second, and more importantly, my focus is different. I am not dealing here with the underlying philosophical basis of secular society that is at odds with Christian faith, but rather with how we go about living our day-to-day lives in which we have so much in common with those around us, things which we share that are not inherently good or bad but which make up what it means to be British or Guatemalan or Indonesian. I am arguing that we realize that the Christian 'world' in any context is but a part of the larger culture.

The sociology of knowledge

The sociology of knowledge approach associated especially with Peter Berger (Berger and Luckmann) in many ways echoes the concerns of interpretative anthropology. Here, too, the interest lies in everyday life and how humans develop within a society which they have constructed. From this perspective, society is, on the one hand, an objective reality, in that it is external to humans in the form of institutions and roles; on the other, society is also a subjective reality, as it is absorbed into the consciousness through the process of socialization. That is, a society has a particular division of labour, typified vocations, and a set of institutions, as well as a complex set of linguistic, class, religious and ideological bonds which provide a certain cohesiveness and which make up a 'social construction of reality'. Practical competence in day-to-day living requires learning and being able to handle the various elements that make up this social world. Every society has a variety of mechanisms that legitimate its world: customs, traditions, symbols and laws. All of these communicate to each individual and group not only what social life is 'really like', but also what it 'should be like'. Society defines and enforces in informal (e.g., within the family) and institutional settings (such as schools, the media, law courts) the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and norms of propriety. Social morality, in other words, is an integral and intuitive part of this social reality.

Religion can play a part in legitimizing a social construction of reality through its

traditions and rituals that can give divine sanction to mores, roles and institutions. The religious symbolic universe provides a 'sacred canopy' to the extent that it is accepted and followed, whether by the general populace or by a smaller circle of the religion's practitioners. This 'sacred canopy' can have its formal elements, such as an official theology and rites that support the status quo, and also a popular adherence which would be less sophisticated and give its own slant to these beliefs and sacraments.

The sociology of knowledge, therefore, also stresses the world of meaning within which people live and move. This discipline, like interpretative anthropology, concentrates on meaning and on how people understand their life. Yet it would not hold that the meaning of social life does not change with time or under pressure. To begin with, the socialization process is never total. People often do not agree with everything that is taught them or with the reality in which they are immersed and that most would take for granted; some will rebel against the overriding social construction and work for a better world. Religion, too, can relativize social institutions and ideas by labelling these as transient and fallible in the eyes of God. A faith, then, can be either a defender of 'the world as it is and always has been' or an agent for change. In the latter case, the new religion (or a different version of the one already present) will offer a different vision of the social construction of reality which would be pleasing to God, along with other forms of worship and theological argument to legitimate the alternative.

The sociology of knowledge exposes the fact that all social constructions of reality are constructed and maintained by humans and are thus not absolute: it desacrilizes all societies and programmes. Accordingly, the status quo might be the best option, or, on the other hand, revolution may be considered necessary and a Utopia inspiring, but now there is no room for arrogance and naïve, unequivocal support of political options. Those Marxists who would exempt themselves from their own rhetoric usually claim immunity from relativism for a particular class (the proletariat), some sort of activity (liberating praxis), or a cognitive elite of socially aware scientists. The problem with such a partisan sociology, which does not recognize the imposition of political convictions on the study of a context, is that results can be manipulated and contrary findings excluded (and labelled 'unscientific') in the goal of achieving a particular end. Sociology, in other words, becomes redemptive, even while speaking from behind a mask of scientific rigour.

At this juncture, the use of the social sciences in liberation theology comes to the fore. Liberationists have defended the employing of certain aspects of Marxism in the analysis of Latin American reality. To begin with, Marxism has had a long intellectual and political history on the continent (Liss), so its use by Latin American theologians is not surprising. What is more, their acceptance of Marxism not only has not been uncritical, but it varies from author to author and has sometimes changed through time (*e.g.*, Míguez Bonino 1976; Segundo 1976, 1984; Dussel 1988; Gutiérrez, 1988, pp. xxiv–xxv; McGovern, pp. 105–194; Andelson and Dawsey, pp. 48–68). Some would even argue that liberationists have not gone far enough in their utilization of Marxism (Kee).

The point here is not to evaluate systematically the role of Marxism in liberation theology. My concern is methodological. The social sciences can provide significant insights into the comprehension of any context. Latin America has a complex social history, and political and economic developments over the last several decades demand that anyone interested in offering pragmatic guidance and an informed orientation for a workable future get a better handle on this context by applying social theories. What

requires scrutiny, though, is how they are to be properly pressed into service. For example, what is sometimes evident in the work of several liberationists is the lack of a clearer perception of the issue of objectivity in the task of looking at life within and proposing changes for Latin America. Segundo in an early work (1976, pp. 19–25), for instance, criticizes Weber for his apparent scientific detachment, but by so doing demonstrates that he has misunderstood that scientist's methodological distinction between facts and values. Dussel would champion the objectivity of the poor, because of their being supposedly untainted by the oppressive socio-economic system (1981, pp. 308, 313, 332), and of prophetic voices which denounce injustice (1988, pp. 72–73, 88–95, 213–214), whereas for Gutiérrez praxis becomes objective on the basis of its freeing activity and purposes (1983, pp. 36–74).

A sociology of knowledge approach would greet such pronouncements of epistemological purity with a degree of scepticism and stress the importance of distinguishing sociological data from values. On the one hand, the sort of objectivity propounded by these liberation theologians theoretically disqualifies the opinions of others who might question such a clarity of vision of the poor or wonder to what extent, or even whether, these liberationists truly reflect the voice of the poor. On the other, such certainty in the use of a particular sociological tool could be blind to the weaknesses in the theory itself or in its utilization in the Latin American context; moreover, the failure adequately to separate the theory from the source of values, which in this case would be the Christian faith, could lead to uncritically supporting (or to at least not being critical enough of) certain Marxist activity or social experiments. Recently, Segundo (1984), too, has underscored the distinction between the contribution of Marxism as an instrument of analysis and the role of Christian communities in nurturing certain values.

In sum, what is needed in the desire to grasp better what life is like in our Latin American countries (or any other context), and what it might or should be like, is a deeper appreciation of the potentially positive and constructive function of the social sciences in the elaboration of Christian identity and mission, as well as humility and balance in their application.

Narrative ethics

Both interpretative anthropology and the sociology of knowledge aid in a general way to comprehend better religion and moral life in any concrete context. Narrative ethics, on the other hand, consciously directs its attention to the ethical life of particular religious communities. This discipline can provide orientation in three regards: the relationship between Christian moral life and that of the broader context, the essence of Christian moral life as the cultivation of the virtues, and the constituent elements of the narrative of the Christian community.

Within philosophical discourse this approach has been most identified with the ethicist Alisdair MacIntyre (1984, 1988). He believes that moral confusion and disagreement reign in Western societies because a common theoretical (either religious or secular) foundation for consensus no longer exists. Because this epistemological crisis makes any substantial agreement on moral issues an unlikely possibility, MacIntyre holds that the only viable solution lies in the establishment of local communities that can serve for training in a specific type of intellectual and moral life. For MacIntyre, the tradition of *the virtues*, articulated long ago by Aristotle and developed by others over the centuries,

is the best available option for these communities at this juncture in history.

MacIntyre has also offered an insightful study of the term 'narrative' for ethics (1984, pp. 204–225). This concept can refer to the history of ethical discourse, to the self who has an individual story within a social context, and to ongoing trajectory of his local forms of communities of virtue. Hauerwas has built on MacIntyre's work and has related it to Christian ethics (1983; *cf.* Fowl and Jones): the Christian church is called to be a community of virtue. Those who confess the name of Jesus are to embody a life, both as individuals and as the corporate church, that is faithful to the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus' ministry and modelled in his life.

The Christian life, says Hauerwas, can also be appreciated *as a story*; in this case, one that is set within a canonical and communal framework. Scripture is the canonical source for the formation of the moral character of this particular community of virtue. The Bible has its own stories in the Old and New Testaments, but it is especially the story of the crucified Saviour to which Christians must attend. They are to learn how to be faithful to that narrative of grace, selflessness and hope; effectiveness in the support of worthy causes within the socio-political arena is not the ultimate goal, but instead faithfulness to this very different way of looking at and living in each context. The church is at once part of the continuing narrative of the people of God, which spans centuries; each Christian, in other words, has an identity that is tied to that larger history of the church, as well as to a local community of believers.

The Christian moral life, therefore, has a narrative quality in the twofold sense of having a socio-historical aspect (the local community within the history of the church) and a specific literary component (the Bible). According to narrative ethics, the interplay between these two foundations is what should communicate to Christians who they are and mould their character. The primary purpose is so to train the moral life of believers that they be able to be wise in their decisions and faithful to their calling. It is not enough, therefore, that Christians make the 'proper rational' choices which anyone shall make when facing moral quandaries. What is sought after instead is the development and nurture of a special people with a truthful vision of the world, who have the capacity to pursue a lifestyle which can discern courses of action that will correspond to scriptural insights and to the lives of other exemplary Christians of the past. It is a question of 'being', not just of 'doing' or 'deciding'; this is a qualified ethic, a Christian moral life.

Hauerwas is very committed to underlining the *distinctiveness* of the Christian community and its ethic in the modern Western world (1991; Hauerwas and Willimon). The church must be the church. While Hauerwas should be applauded for defending the particularity of Christian morality against those who seek some philosophical basis for a universal ethic, once more the danger of obscuring any interweaving with the broader context can raise its head. The Christian community *is* a different community with its own tradition and history, but to use the language of narrative ethics, the church is also a member of and participates in the narratives of its society and culture. The ongoing struggle for the church in any context is to try to be at once loyal to its particularity, no matter the cost, and to its cultural setting and environment. The church must incarnate a *Christian moral life in context*.

The twin appeal to *virtue* and *uniqueness* has acute relevance for the church in Latin America. Many have criticized certain forms of evangelical ecclesiology and socio-political commitments as mere imports from the West channelled through missionary

personnel and agencies. Some have gone so far as to perceive almost a conspiracy theory of capitalist expansion linked to missionary efforts and have pointed out what they perceive as a suspicious confluence of right-wing politics and evangelicalism. As the evangelical church continues to grow and occupy a more visible place within this continent's life, evangelical Christians, both as individuals and as a church, will need to continue to learn how to flesh out their faith in everyday life and worship as *believers* who are *Latin Americans*. This process of contextualization in the various spheres of national and cultural realities and in the doing of theology and pastoral practice has already begun. The overriding purpose should be the creation and sustaining of communities of virtue, which can testify to their singularity as well as contribute to social life.

Hauerwas has criticized liberation theology for its engagement in struggles for change in Latin America precisely because of the potential danger of the loss of Christian particularity (1991, pp. 50–58). He would argue that the metaphor of liberation can be defined ultimately by currents other than biblical, even though liberationists seek a Christian grounding. How, asks Hauerwas, can the concept of liberation be coordinated with the kingdom imperative of service and with a life of suffering modelled by Jesus? What is more, there is little consensus even among Christians as to the meaning of justice, and so appeals to justice are necessarily vague, although ironically considered self-evident. What can be the original Christian participation in protest and in the overthrow and establishment of a government—that is, in the vying for power—even if in the cause of liberation? The idea is not to deny or prohibit any contribution, but to stimulate honest self-criticism. One could cite, for example, how some in Nicaragua, who became intimately involved in the fight to oust Somoza and in the Sandinista project after 1979, lost their Christian faith: if Christianity could be reduced to the demand for justice and liberation, what was the uniqueness of Christian confession and practice?³

The commitment to the virtues of the kingdom can also raise questions about some liberation theology thinking. For instance, though liberationists have articulated how they understand the influence of the Christian presence in a variety of social movements in Central America (note especially Berryman), one might reflect upon how some in the past attempted to justify the use of violence. Here I do not speak of the helpful theoretical discussions concerning the different kinds of violence in Latin America, such as the distinctions between terrorism, self-defence, and the institutionalized violence of the national security state, but of Christian legitimation of and participation in revolutionary violence: violence against the oppressors is humanized if part of a project of love

³ The best sources of this tension are in Spanish. Note G. Girardi, *Sandinismo, marxismo, cristianismo. La confluencia* (Managua: Centro Ecueménico Antonio Valdivieso, 1986), pp. 354–362, and E. Cardenal's comments in 'El Evangelio en Solentiname fue obra del pueblo' in *Nicaragua, trinchera teológica. Para una Teología de la Liberación desde Nicaragua*, eds. G. Girardi, B. Forcano, J. Ma. Vigil (Managua: Centro Ecueménico Antonio Valdivieso/Madrid: Lóguez, 1987), pp. 342–343.

(Míguez Bonino 1983, pp. 106–113),⁴ revolutionary violence is an application of just war theory (Dussel 1988, pp. 170–180), some can be legitimate targets if involved in the oppressive system (Berryman, pp. 309–330). An ethic of virtues would claim that it is more important to develop and nurture a special type of people loyal to the values and peaceable ethos of the kingdom than to achieve a certain kind of society with which Christians are to identify and within which the church is to move.

Narrative ethics specifies a more circumscribed group for the earlier disciplines' native point of view, the Christian community. It is this particular group of people with a specific historical and canonical story that is called to live out its moral life in context. In its interest in the Scripture, narrative ethics also serves as a transition to the last two sections of this essay.

The function of the Bible in moral life

If the Bible is the sacred text which serves as a privileged moral authority of the Christian community, the crucial issue is to ascertain how Scripture actually functions in the church's moral life.

Different authors handle the issue of this role of the Bible in different ways. Regarding the use of the OT, mention can be made of Kaiser, who devotes several chapters to his perception and evaluation of the various hermeneutical and theological issues involved in utilizing that testament today (1983, pp. 1–78). His is a deontological approach which examines OT law in detail and that, accordingly, seeks to draw abiding ethical principles from the specific commands of that legislation (1983, pp. 41–48, 64–67; 1987, pp. 147–166). In his view, the text is a sourcebook of general moral guidance primarily for the individual Christian.

For his part, Wright offers a more nuanced theological look at OT ethics and probes the relevance of the biblical text for the broader social arena (1983, 1990). The text in this case is also a sourcebook of principles, although with a more far-reaching application through the notion that certain OT structures and laws can be paradigmatic for the contemporary world. The ethical principles, in other words, are communal and social, as well as personal.

Each of these studies is a helpful guide into the use of the Bible, and indeed there are a variety of ways the text can serve the moral life (*cf.* Goldingay 1981, pp. 38–43; Birch and Rasmussen, pp. 181–188). I would like to draw attention, however, to the particular manner emphasized by narrative ethics. A narrative approach highlights the importance of the imagination, of a different way of understanding and living in the world shaped by the stories of the biblical text (Hauerwas 1983, pp. 50–95, 116–134; Fowl and Jones; for the OT, note, *e.g.*, Brueggemann; Birch, pp. 51–65). The particular biblical stories, as

⁴ However, it is to be noted that most liberation theologians, even those just cited, now believe that violence is no longer an option and would view it as destructive. Segundo speaks of its negative impact on the 'social ecology' (1984, pp. 282–301). It is interesting to note that Gutiérrez rewrote the section entitled 'Christian Brotherhood and Class Struggle', which dealt with concrete confrontation of the oppressor in the name of Christian love, in the revised edition under the new title 'Faith and Social Conflict' (1988, pp. 156–161).

well as the more expansive canonical story of redemption, is thereby tied into the church's ongoing story, which itself is part of another specific socio-cultural story.

Scripture functions to present an alternative vision of reality; it discloses a 'truthful' perspective of the world and of the social order in accordance with divine values and demands. An imagination transformed and moulded by the text will have a different epistemological orientation, which manifests a hermeneutic of suspicion over against the way things now are, engenders hope about what life could be like, and can appreciate in a fresh way what it means to be a disciple and how the Christian faith should be embodied until the end of the age. The text, therefore, shapes the moral vision, and thus the moral life, of the church.

Within the various worlds of the OT and NT, Scripture offers depictions of a series of characters. The principal character is Yahweh, or Jesus, and in the pages of the Bible is communicated what God is like and how he involves himself in the life of his people and in human history; the life of this community, in all of its rebellious and more obedient moments, also appears in these stories so as to help shape the identity and mission of the church today; Scripture describes human governments and rulers, presents striking metaphors of nations and empires, and utilizes a variety of images to depict social malaise or desirable utopias.

The biblical text, though written so many centuries ago, speaks today and draws us to itself even as it penetrates our way of life because of the theological and moral continuities that connect Christians today with its characters. Though the philosophical and literary issues concerning the reader and the text might be complex (for a helpful survey and bibliography, see Goldingay 1993; *cf.* Thistleton, pp. 515–555), the undeniable phenomenon of the moral bond between the Bible and the Christian church is what constitutes Scripture as an ethical authority for today. From a Latin American perspective, one can see that the beasts of Daniel and Revelation are not just a theological fancy, locked into an irretrievable past: the cruelty and hubris of human institutions are a fact of our history. The oppression and injustice denounced in the textual worlds of the prophets are the warp and woof of Latin American everyday life, and their words of a new beginning beyond the destruction of judgment are a hope which can inspire. The disclosure of 'the reality about human reality' can help the church recognize that the socio-cultural construction of the Latin American context is not the final word regarding personal, family and social life.

The powerful impact that the Bible can have on the imagination cannot be limited to the narrative sections (such as the historical books of the OT, the gospels) or to the parables. For example, the prophets, the Wisdom literature, and the epistles, even though they might not in and of themselves *tell* a story, *assume* one: the story of God and his people within history, which serves as the backdrop for the 'snapshot' scenes and for the advice or denunciation that are on the textual stage. Without that underlying story, these portions would have little meaning and depth.

Narrative ethics would claim that the biblical text is a potential source for the moral imagination in at least two ways. On the one hand, because of its iconoclastic possibilities and sometimes difficult claims on the Christian life, some will simply refuse to heed the Bible's call to participate in a new discernment of reality and a different lifestyle. The source, in other words, must be appropriated. On the other hand, Scripture ultimately should stand as the source for the church as community, and not solely for the individual

Christian, as it requires the nurturing of a life commensurate with its story, a training in a life that must be learned and modelled among and for others who follow the same path. That is, the text is for looking at reality truthfully, but this itself is inseparable from faithful living, and this living should be always as part of the church. This source, then, must also be read in communion.

This communion of the faithful includes not only a particular local group or congregation, but also those from other socio-economic, racial and sexual sectors of the church, as well as the contributions from Christians from all over the globe. This sort of listening and interaction of insights into Scripture and discipleship can make it more possible to appreciate the breadth and richness of the Bible and its function for moral life. This process thus can serve to train the moral imagination, as a variety of voices can be evaluated and courses of action appropriate for particular situations discerned as they are tested for faithfulness to the biblical story.

Many in the West, as in the Two-Thirds World, have gleaned much from the various forms of liberation theology from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Literature from these latitudes has been published in North America and Europe, courses in theological schools and universities have been developed, and exchange programmes initiated. Sadly, the liberationist perspective has often monopolized the market of ideas in the West, and the work of evangelical scholars and laypeople has not received its proper due. Sugirtharajah's recent volume, which can give the impression that its contents reflect the gamut of Two-Thirds World interpretation, is an illustration of this exclusion of the vast majority of non-Western Christians from the hermeneutical discourse in North America and Europe; what is actually reproduced is a certain kind of persuasion from different geographical points. My own experience while studying at a British university a few years ago was that most who demonstrated an interest in Latin America knew only of liberation theology (both Protestant and Catholic) as a viable alternative to traditional Roman Catholicism. Yet, this theological current represents a very small minority in either church tradition. Within Roman Catholicism there is a reformist non-liberationist wing, and the charismatic movement is growing steadily. Latin American Protestantism is overwhelmingly conservative evangelical, and largely pentecostal. Recently several social scientists have drawn attention to the phenomenon of evangelical church growth and impact and have presented a more true-to-life picture of Christianity in Latin America (Stoll, Martin). The evangelical voice needs to be considered when hearing from other parts of the world.

This religious reality has implications, too, for the emphasis in literature in the West on ecclesial base communities (*comunidades eclesiales de base*). Whatever the theoretical importance and contribution of this form of being the church, the base communities are very few in number and are a peripheral perspective within the actual ecclesial activity of both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. The former continues to be more traditional and over the last couple of years the hierarchy has brought the base communities under their control and supervision; the exercise of this authority is explicit in the official documents of the last continent-wide Bishops Conference that was held in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in October 1992. The base community model is not at all common among evangelicals; instead, small congregations of all stripes are proliferating, and urban centres also witness the rise of huge megachurches. The polity profile of these churches is very different from that painted of the base community. If the

question of church polity can be problematic, what then of a reading from the poor in the base communities? Issues that need to be honestly probed here include: what particular kind of reading is being sought after (*i.e.*, what are the ‘proper’ and legitimate concerns which are to interact with the Bible and context), and who is to guide the ‘common people’ toward this goal of a ‘better’ grass-roots reading? Mesters, who is most often associated with liberationist popular readings, acknowledges that a reading of the people depends on teaching them how to look at the Bible—showing them how to read. I do not wish to label these efforts wrong-headed or misguided, but it is important for those outside Latin America to comprehend what is being referred to by the phrase ‘grass-roots reading’. Is it pentecostal, pietistic, fundamentalist, socially concerned yet not liberationist, or liberationist? Is it always of only one sort or does it vary according to certain moments in the life of an individual and society? Is it the reading of the majority of the poor or only of the vanguard of the oppressed? What is the role of outsiders? Are readings to be solely spontaneous or directed or a combination of the two? To mention all of this does not mean in any way to diminish or to deny what liberation theology or the base community thrust have to offer, but rather to strive to get a clearer picture of that worldwide community of the church in order to obtain a more complete and balanced contribution for Christian moral life. To read in communion with the rest of the world requires a vision that is open to new approaches, but which is also willing to get beyond possible idealistic postures or limited presentations.

The Bible, therefore, is a powerful authority and source for the moral life of the church, both local and universal. It can reveal ethical principles, but also work on the imagination, by disclosing a different reality than the world would admit. The final element to be discussed concerns what form of the biblical text is most appropriate for the moral life of the church.

The final form of Scripture and the moral life of the church

To recognize the importance and centrality of the biblical text does not automatically lead to agreement as to what form of that text is to be appropriated. By the ‘form’ of the text is meant whether what is to act as the source for the moral life of the church will be some hypothetical earlier stage in the production of Scripture or the final received form that is the canon.

Some liberationist exegetes utilize higher critical methods in order to get back to what they would consider original liberating messages. Not all, though, employ the same critical tools. For example, Miranda uses more traditional textual reconstruction theories to uncover an unwavering demand for justice in the OT and NT. For example, he would date any covenant theology in the prophets as late, because this would cloud the original liberating conception of Exodus and absolute justice (pp. 160–169). The final form, therefore, can sometimes cloud the foundational and clear message of the original ethical imperative of Yahweh. Pixley also appeals to traditional critical studies, but applies more recent sociological approaches, too (1987, 1992). Among the latter would be theories of social relationships and movements (such as Gottwald’s idea of a peasant revolt to explain the beginning of Israel) and a socio-literary suspicion regarding the production of the biblical texts (he focuses especially on the effect of the rise of the monarchy with its theological and literary controls). While not negating the positive aspects of much of the received form (the Bible as it is), both scholars find it necessary to retrieve parts hidden

by editorial work. The aim is to get behind the present texts, which can represent ideological and theological distortions of the original liberating good news. The same approaches to the biblical texts are also evident in NT liberationist work (for a good discussion, see Rowland and Corner, pp. 35–84). Not all liberation reflection on the Bible, of course, has been based so self-consciously on higher critical studies, although sometimes these can still be in the background (*e.g.* Gutiérrez 1987).

Many academics are now questioning the worth of critical theories that can either fragment the biblical text or depend too heavily on hypothetical social reconstructions for which there is little direct evidence. This attack has come from several quarters, with some pointing out the failure of these approaches to appreciate literary unity and coherence, the incompatibility of much of this sort of study for reading other documents from the Ancient Near East, the pragmatic and honest admission of the degree of uncertainty of much critical theory, and the claim that these theories are perpetuated in the professional interests of a scholarly elite. In addition, among many evangelicals there would be theological convictions concerning the nature of biblical inspiration that would make them wary of using critical methodologies at all, or at least certain ones considered excessive or inappropriate.

Whatever the value of these observations, my interest at this point lies in a different direction. Critical approaches, when applied to ethics designed for the church, can lack moral realism—that is, the recognition that the text that is actually used in everyday life is the final form of the canon. This is the text that functions as a moral authority for the layperson and for the church (Birch, pp. 21–22, 61; Fowl and Jones, pp. 36–44). As Fowl and Jones so aptly comment: ‘Christian communities conform their life and practice to the present form of the Scripture and not to J or E or to L or Q’ (p. 39). Academic study and critical methods are important scholarly pursuits, but their relationship to ‘the person in the pew’ is a complex and difficult issue. Whatever the resolution of the quandary, however, a realistic assessment of moral life and a pastoral commitment to the ordinary reader requires the option for the canon.⁵

In societies where illiteracy is a dominant social concern, the issue of which form of the biblical text to utilize takes an even more pragmatic turn. In the Guatemalan context, where estimates of illiteracy at a national level run at around 45% and many who do read do not do so very well, to base ethical instruction on hypothetical texts ‘behind’ the Bible that people actually hold in their hands makes little sense. The approaches of some liberation theologians, then, will not be ‘popular’ readings ‘from below’. What can easily develop in this attempt to utilize certain critical theories is another academic elite, committed to the poor perhaps, but far from the only Bible those poor will be able to read on their own. No matter what the claims concerning the freeing potential of critical methods when employed in the cause of liberation, there is born a dependency on a new class of experts who hold the key to the Bible for the people.

⁵ For some who take a feminist stance, the final form itself is a problem, because the Bible in both its production and its content is believed to be shaped by male concerns and perspectives. Ringe differentiates her own posture, which would hold this to be the case, from liberation theologians in the Two-Thirds World who see the Bible as more liberating. Tamez, speaking from Latin America, makes the same point; she cannot be as negative as ‘First World radical feminists’.

To decide for the final and canonical form of the text does not eliminate other important issues concerning the Bible and ethics, which are beyond the purview of our discussion here. Reflection upon items, such as how to evaluate and coordinate various perspectives within the canon on ethical topics (like the role and rights of women and the problems of war), or to define the relationship between the OT and NT within evangelical theological traditions and its relevance for ethics (Wright 1992), remains as a crucial further step in the elaboration of an ethical framework and in the training for Christian moral life. However, the manner in which these issues are handled will be determined in large part by the decision regarding the form of the text.

Conclusion

Moral life cannot be understood apart from its context and sources, both cultural and canonical. This essay has been an attempt to introduce those interested in Christian moral life to the many issues that can come into play. Latin America, and in particular the evangelical church on that continent, has served as my own frame of reference. The demand to incarnate the Christian faith in a manner truthful to Scripture and relevant to context is an ongoing challenge to the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. May we all learn from one another.

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Beyond liberation theology: a review article

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Humberto Belli and Ronald Nash, **Beyond Liberation Theology**, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992, 206 pp.

Gustavo Gutiérrez, **A Theology of Liberation. History Politics and Salvation** (15th anniversary edition with a new introduction by the author), Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1988, xlv + 264 pp.

Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro (eds.), **Expanding the View. Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology**, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1990, xiv + 226 pp.

Paul E. Sigmund, **Liberation Theology at the Crossroads. Democracy or Revolution?** New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 255 pp.

Christian Smith, **The Emergence of Liberation Theology. Radical Religion and Social Movement Today**, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, xii + 300 pp.

Daniel Schipani (ed.), **Freedom and Discipleship. Liberation Theology in Anabaptist Perspective**, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989, viii + 188 pp.

During the 1970s and 1980s the theological panorama in Latin America was dominated by the discourse of liberation theologians. For the sake of precision it is important to use the plural because there is not just one theological approach that could be labelled 'liberation theology'. After 20 years it is evident that some of the most radical forms of this theology, which were mainly forged within the academic world with no relation to the life of the church, are in a process of extinction. Such would be the case of authors like Hugo Assman or Sergio Arce. There is, however, a line of liberation theology that has strived to keep related to the life of the churches, with their pastoral and missiological problems. That has been the line exemplified by Gustavo Gutiérrez, which evidently is going to last even if it takes new forms. Where is this liberation theology going in this decade? This is an important question in Latin America after the

collapse of real socialism in Eastern Europe, the end of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and the shift towards a pre-Vatican II conservatism in the Catholic Church.

Humberto Belli and Ronald Nash have written their book *Beyond Liberation Theology* with the twofold aim of first describing what they consider to be dramatic changes among some proponents of liberation theology, and then evaluating positively these changes on the basis of strong criticism of earlier liberationist proposals (p. 7). Belli, a lawyer and sociologist from Nicaragua, left the Sandinista ranks in 1975, opposed their regime after 1979, and worked in the United States for the Puebla Institute, a conservative Catholic think-tank. More recently he became the Minister of Education in post-Sandinista Nicaragua. Nash presently teaches at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, and is well known as a popularizer of theological themes. In their criticism of some liberation theologians the strong point of Belli and Nash is the attack on the Marxist component of the kind of social analysis used by those theologians. Belli and Nash write from the assumption that 'Capitalism is quite simply the most moral system, the most effective system and the most equitable system of economic exchange. When capitalism, the system of free economic exchange, is described fairly, there can be no question that it comes closer than socialism or interventionism to matching the demands of the biblical ethics' (p. 110). They also believe that 'the moral objections to capitalism turn out to be a sorry collection of arguments that reflect, more than anything else, serious confusions about the true nature of a market system' (p. 109). For both defence of capitalism and attack on Marxism, Belli and Nash depend heavily on American Catholic thinkers Michael Novak and John Neuhaus.

For an evangelical reader the weaker part of this book is the actual theological argument. Little attention is paid to the theological development of themes that liberation theologians have explored widely, such as the poor, history, the nature of the church, salvation and hope. Chapter five, on 'Liberation Theology and the Bible' (pp. 115–134), is short and sketchy, and it discusses the introductory work of Philip Berryman, an

American commentator, rather than the work of liberation theologians themselves. In fact, almost all the books by liberation theologians listed in the bibliography are from the '70s. Belli and Nash do not seem to be aware of the important works on hermeneutics and biblical exposition published by liberation theologians in the '80s.

What do liberation theologians themselves think about the future of their work? Careful reading of the 15th anniversary edition of Gustavo Gutiérrez' classic book *A Theology of Liberation* is a good way to understand some of the changes and corrections required by the debates of the 1980s. Gutiérrez is a Peruvian priest who has kept his parish work in a poor section of Lima, in spite of his lecturing trips to North America and Europe. He is one of the theologians who – without actually being named – came under criticism in the two 'Instructions' about liberation theology (1984 and 1986) from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the watchdog of orthodoxy for the present Pope. Gutiérrez, however, has done whatever possible to remain in good standing in his church. This revised 15th anniversary edition of his book is preceded by a 30-page introduction entitled 'Expanding the View' (pp. xvii–xlvi), in which Gutiérrez offers evidence of the acceptance of his work by many bishops and the relationship between his thinking and the practical involvement of many persons and communities in Catholic church life. He acknowledges the criticism he has received for his use of social analysis and the need 'to refine our analytical tools and develop new ones' (p. xxiv). He goes on to describe the new world situation with the urgent demands for understanding so that 'both the scientific outlook itself and the Christian conception of the world call for a rigorous discernment of scientific data – discernment, but not fear of the contribution of the social sciences' (p. xxv). The approach to Latin American history known as 'theory of dependence' was very influential in the beginning of liberation theologies. Now in a very explicit way Gutiérrez admits: 'the theory of dependence which was so extensively used in the early years of our encounter with the Latin American world is now an inadequate tool, because it does not take sufficient account of the internal dynamics of each country or of the vast dimensions of the world of the poor' (p. xxiv).

Other changes in this revised edition are eloquent. For instance, the controversial section entitled 'Christian Fellowship and Class Struggle' in the first edition has now been replaced by a new section entitled 'Faith and Social Conflict'. Gutiérrez says that the previous text 'gave rise to misunderstandings that I want to clear up', and he explains, 'I have rewritten the text in the light of new documents of the magisterium and by taking other aspects of the subject into account' (p. 156). Also, from the viewpoint of gender the language of this edition has been corrected to make it inclusive. The Peruvian theologian tells us that he has learned much from his global exposure: 'I have found it very helpful to enter into dialogue with theologies developed in settings different from our own. . . . I have come to see with new eyes our racial and cultural world, and the discrimination against women' (p. xxiii).

For Gutiérrez, however, 'the ultimate reason for commitment to the poor and oppressed is not to be found in the social analysis we use, or in human compassion. . . . [but] in the God of our faith. It is a theocentric, prophetic option that has its roots in the unmerited love of God and is demanded by this love' (p. xxvii). This theme he has developed extensively in two books which major on interpretation of biblical texts. In *We Drink From Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Orbis, 1984) he developed the idea of the spiritual life as the source of social and political action (praxis), and does an excellent work of articulating a biblical anthropology on the basis of texts from the gospels and the Pauline writings. In his exposition of the book of Job, entitled *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Orbis, 1987), he studies the biblical text starting from a pastoral question: how can a priest or a preacher talk about God to people who suffer innocently? Innocence in this case does not mean people who are not sinners but rather people who are not responsible for the cause of their pain. Evangelicals would be surprised by the quality and thoroughness of Gutiérrez' exegetical work.

It is clear from critics such as Belli and Nash, as well as from liberation theologians themselves, that we cannot understand the course of this theology apart from reference to social and

political events in Latin America and the way they impacted the Catholic Church. The value of the book *The Emergence of Liberation Theology* by Christian Smith is that it provides excellent background about the sociological matrix of liberation theologies. Smith teaches sociology at Gordon College and has used the tools of institutional and quantitative analysis in order to map the reaction of the Catholic Church to the pressure of social change in Latin America. He considers it important 'to make a distinction between "liberation theology" and the movement for which it is named. Liberation theology is simply a set of religious ideas, about and for liberation' (p. 25). His analysis of theological discourse limits itself to Catholic theologians, and he sets it in relation to the question 'How and why did the liberation theology movement emerge and survive when and where it did?' (p. 5). Evangelicals are usually little acquainted with the way the Catholic Church functions as an institution. For them this book will be helpful not only because it provides adequate background for liberation discourse but also because it shows the depth of the pastoral and missiological problems to which the liberation movement was responding in Latin America.

Along the lines of Smith's approach we find also helpful the historical material compiled by Paul Sigmund in *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads*. This work deals with the context from which liberation theologies emerged and the impact of the debates they generated, especially within the Catholic Church. Sigmund is Professor of Politics and Director of the Program of Latin American Studies at Princeton University. He is convinced that at this time 'democracy and human rights need "all the help they can get" in Latin America. . . . [because] the possibilities for the development of genuinely participatory policies and institutions is greater in Latin America than ever before' (p. 13). Sigmund offers a good interpretative chronicle of the responses generated by liberation theology in the United States and in the Vatican (pp. 134–175). In chapter 10 he identifies six key changes in liberation theology that he welcomes, among them the change 'from an infatuation with socialist revolution to a recognition that the poor are not going to be liberated by cataclysmic political transformations' (p. 177), and 'a more nuanced attitude towards marxism' (p. 177). Sigmund reminds us that 'At no point did the [Catholic] liberation theologians reject the hierarchical structure of the Church' (p. 178), though they were critical of her position on social and political issues. An interesting example of this is that 'While they challenged the position of women in the church, there was no public questioning of the Church's position on birth control, abortion, even divorce – of the type that has been voiced frequently in Europe and the United States' (p. 178). Sigmund has tried a critical but sympathetic approach to this theology and its future, but he summarizes his own stance in this way: 'I believe that the liberation theologians are wrong in holding (a) that the primary source of oppression is capitalism and of liberation is socialism, (b) that the poor have a superior insight into religious truth, and (c) that liberalism is to be rejected by biblically oriented Christians' (p. 182).

The repercussion of liberation theologies around the world could be assessed in 1988, when Gustavo Gutiérrez approached his 60th birthday and there was an ecumenical celebration in Maryknoll, New York, attended by almost 100 scholars, theologians and activists from all parts of the world. The commemorative volume that developed from this meeting was edited by Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro with the title *The Future of Liberation Theology* (Orbis, 1989). In its 518 pages, 53 contributors are included, representing all kinds of theological disciplines. The same editors published part of that material in a more accessible, shorter version entitled *Expanding the View*. This contains 15 essays, including the one by Gutiérrez himself that gives its title to the volume, and happens to be the introductory essay to the 15th edition of his book already reviewed above.

What has been developing during the 1980s by way of evangelical evaluation of liberation theologies? Several evangelicals are included among the authors of essays collected by Daniel S. Schipani in a volume entitled *Freedom and Discipleship. Liberation Theology in Anabaptist Perspective*. Schipani is an Argentinian psychologist and theologian who teaches at the Associated Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana. This book includes eight essays by Mennonite and Baptist theologians and three responses by liberation theologians. Specially valuable in

this collection are the essays by René Padilla, John H. Yoder and Ronald J. Sider. Padilla's systematic evaluation starts by acknowledging the fourfold contribution of liberation theologies which he derives especially from the new theological method they propose. He then develops a criticism built around the same points. First, Padilla says, 'liberation theology rightly emphasizes the importance of obedience for the understanding of truth, but is in danger of pragmatism' (p. 40). Second, 'liberation theology rightly emphasizes the importance of the historical situation, but is in danger of historical reductionism' (p. 43). Third, 'liberation theology has rightly emphasized the importance of the social sciences but is in danger of sociological co-optation' (p. 44). Finally, 'liberation theology has rightly emphasized the importance of recognizing the ideological conditioning of theology but is in danger of reducing the Gospel to an ideology' (p. 46).

The first point in Padilla's approach touches on a key insight from liberation theologies that coincides with Anabaptist theology, namely the emphasis on the practice of discipleship as a precondition for true knowledge of God. How this principle may be applied with Padilla's provisos is illustrated by the way in which Yoder and Sider tackle issues of biblical interpretation in this book, focusing on two favourite themes of liberation discourse, namely Exodus and the poor. Yoder demonstrates how an understanding of the Exodus story in its own context must avoid the ideological approach that dilutes its unique message: 'the seriousness with which we should take the centrality of Exodus in the Hebrew Canon forbids our distilling from it a timeless idea of liberation that we would then use to ratify all kinds of liberation projects in all places and forms. God does not merely "act in history". God acts in history in particular ways. It would be a denial of the history to separate an abstract project label like *liberation* from the specific meaning of the liberation God has brought' (p. 84). Sider examines the biblical material about the poor and points out God's preference for the

poor: 'By contrast with the way you and I, as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, always act toward the poor, God seems to have an overwhelming bias in favour of the poor. But it is biased only in contrast with our sinful unconcern. It is only when we take our perverse preference for the successful and wealthy as natural and normative that God's concern appears biased' (p. 98). At the same time Sider stresses the fact that 'Knowing God involves much more than seeking justice for the oppressed – although it does not involve less. People enter into a right relationship with God and enter the church not by caring for the poor but by confessing their sins and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour' (p. 98).

Some proposals of liberation theologies were too closely linked with the Marxist faith that history was moving towards socialism. Recent events in Eastern Europe and China have taken away any basis for that faith which was at the core of Marxist social criticism in Latin America. However, questions of inequality, corruption, racism, and all kinds of abuses against human rights have not disappeared in Latin America. In fact they have become worse in some countries. From this context come the theological and ethical questions related to the life and testimony of the churches that continue to challenge evangelical theologians in Latin America, Asia and Africa, as well as among the poor in North America and Europe. The end of the Marxist hope has not yet been adequately assessed by liberation theologians in relation to their theology. Evangelical theologians who did not share that hope will continue to work in their own agenda of relating their hope in the Lordship of Christ and his final victory to the struggle of a growing number of poor people for survival. This task is even more urgent because there is abundant factual evidence now that while liberation theologians took a 'preferential option for the poor', in Latin America the poor have evidently preferred to join the growing evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

Trends of theology in Asia

David S. Lim

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The 1980s saw the multiplication of attempts to do 'contextualization', which was the cry of Two-Thirds World (especially Asian)¹ theologians of the 1970s. This article gives a 'bird's-eye view'² of the various trends of theological approaches and issues in the Protestant churches in Asia as they approach the dawn of the third millennium.

Historical background

Actually, even before the '70s, the 'indigenization of theology' was going on. 'Indigenization' is the method of beginning with issues and questions arising from Christian mission in particular contexts and then reflecting on those concerns from the Scriptures and with the help of church traditions and social scientific knowledge. But this time 'contextualization' is done with fuller awareness that theologizing should include contemporary settings, such as the secularism and modernism of the booming cities of the 'developing world'.³

By the 1970s, the differences between the two major branches of Protestant theology had emerged and developed from the stances of the churches to the trends developing in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and its related National Councils of Churches (NCC).

On the one hand, those who were WCC-related became labelled 'ecumenical', 'conciliar' or 'mainline' churches. The WCC's continental network is called the Christian Conference

of Asia (CCA). The national faculties of their seminaries have been developed in the theological schools in the West (mostly in the USA and Germany) through the WCC's Theological Education Fund (TEF) and have returned to their posts and slowly occupied administrative posts as their expatriate colleagues gradually decreased in number. These schools formed the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) and the North East Asia Association of Theological Schools (NEAATS), which together with the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College co-publish the *Asia Journal of Theology*.⁴

On the other hand, those who were wary of (if not against) WCC were called 'fundamentalist' or 'evangelical' churches, networked continentally as the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia (EFA) and globally with World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF). As they were developing their many Bible schools, they were also just starting to establish their denominational graduate seminaries in the 1970s. The recruitment of national faculty for academic theological careers began at about this time, too. Some inter-denominational graduate-level seminaries were established and developed in India, the Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, Hong Kong and Indonesia. Most of them are active members of the Asia Theological Association (ATA).⁵

Theological methodologies

What are the general trends in the theological approaches of these two streams? They have developed slight but significant differences in their approach to theologizing.

this collection are the essays by René Padilla, John H. Yoder and Ronald J. Sider. Padilla's systematic evaluation starts by acknowledging the fourfold contribution of liberation theologies which he derives especially from the new theological method they propose. He then develops a criticism built around the same points. First, Padilla says, 'liberation theology rightly emphasizes the importance of obedience for the understanding of truth, but is in danger of pragmatism' (p. 40). Second, 'liberation theology rightly emphasizes the importance of the historical situation, but is in danger of historical reductionism' (p. 43). Third, 'liberation theology has rightly emphasized the importance of the social sciences but is in danger of sociological co-optation' (p. 44). Finally, 'liberation theology has rightly emphasized the importance of recognizing the ideological conditioning of theology but is in danger of reducing the Gospel to an ideology' (p. 46).

The first point in Padilla's approach touches on a key insight from liberation theologies that coincides with Anabaptist theology, namely the emphasis on the practice of discipleship as a precondition for true knowledge of God. How this principle may be applied with Padilla's provisos is illustrated by the way in which Yoder and Sider tackle issues of biblical interpretation in this book, focusing on two favourite themes of liberation discourse, namely Exodus and the poor. Yoder demonstrates how an understanding of the Exodus story in its own context must avoid the ideological approach that dilutes its unique message: 'the seriousness with which we should take the centrality of Exodus in the Hebrew Canon forbids our distilling from it a timeless idea of liberation that we would then use to ratify all kinds of liberation projects in all places and forms. God does not merely "act in history". God acts in history in particular ways. It would be a denial of the history to separate an abstract project label like *liberation* from the specific meaning of the liberation God has brought' (p. 84). Sider examines the biblical material about the poor and points out God's preference for the

poor: 'By contrast with the way you and I, as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, always act toward the poor, God seems to have an overwhelming bias in favour of the poor. But it is biased only in contrast with our sinful unconcern. It is only when we take our perverse preference for the successful and wealthy as natural and normative that God's concern appears biased' (p. 98). At the same time Sider stresses the fact that 'Knowing God involves much more than seeking justice for the oppressed – although it does not involve less. People enter into a right relationship with God and enter the church not by caring for the poor but by confessing their sins and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour' (p. 98).

Some proposals of liberation theologies were too closely linked with the Marxist faith that history was moving towards socialism. Recent events in Eastern Europe and China have taken away any basis for that faith which was at the core of Marxist social criticism in Latin America. However, questions of inequality, corruption, racism, and all kinds of abuses against human rights have not disappeared in Latin America. In fact they have become worse in some countries. From this context come the theological and ethical questions related to the life and testimony of the churches that continue to challenge evangelical theologians in Latin America, Asia and Africa, as well as among the poor in North America and Europe. The end of the Marxist hope has not yet been adequately assessed by liberation theologians in relation to their theology. Evangelical theologians who did not share that hope will continue to work in their own agenda of relating their hope in the Lordship of Christ and his final victory to the struggle of a growing number of poor people for survival. This task is even more urgent because there is abundant factual evidence now that while liberation theologians took a 'preferential option for the poor', in Latin America the poor have evidently preferred to join the growing evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

Trends of theology in Asia

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The 1980s saw the multiplication of attempts to do 'contextualization', which was the cry of Two-Thirds World (especially Asian)¹ theologians of the 1970s. This article gives a 'bird's-eye view'² of the various trends of theological approaches and issues in the Protestant churches in Asia as they approach the dawn of the third millennium.

Historical background

Actually, even before the '70s, the 'indigenization of theology' was going on. 'Indigenization' is the method of beginning with issues and questions arising from Christian mission in particular contexts and then reflecting on those concerns from the Scriptures and with the help of church traditions and social scientific knowledge. But this time 'contextualization' is done with fuller awareness that theologizing should include contemporary settings, such as the secularism and modernism of the booming cities of the 'developing world'.³

By the 1970s, the differences between the two major branches of Protestant theology had emerged and developed from the stances of the churches to the trends developing in the World Council of Churches (WCC) and its related National Councils of Churches (NCC).

On the one hand, those who were WCC-related became labelled 'ecumenical', 'conciliar' or 'mainline' churches. The WCC's continental network is called the Christian Conference

of Asia (CCA). The national faculties of their seminaries have been developed in the theological schools in the West (mostly in the USA and Germany) through the WCC's Theological Education Fund (TEF) and have returned to their posts and slowly occupied administrative posts as their expatriate colleagues gradually decreased in number. These schools formed the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) and the North East Asia Association of Theological Schools (NEAATS), which together with the Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College co-publish the *Asia Journal of Theology*.⁴

On the other hand, those who were wary of (if not against) WCC were called 'fundamentalist' or 'evangelical' churches, networked continentally as the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia (EFA) and globally with World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF). As they were developing their many Bible schools, they were also just starting to establish their denominational graduate seminaries in the 1970s. The recruitment of national faculty for academic theological careers began at about this time, too. Some inter-denominational graduate-level seminaries were established and developed in India, the Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, Hong Kong and Indonesia. Most of them are active members of the Asia Theological Association (ATA).⁵

Theological methodologies

What are the general trends in the theological approaches of these two streams? They have developed slight but significant differences in their approach to theologizing.

On the one hand, ecumenical theologians have mainly used the 'new hermeneutics' popularized by various forms of 'liberation theologies'. Though their church constituencies have generally remained theologically conservative, it has been the creative, 'vocal and visible' few in the theological centres and seminaries who have given articulation to these theologies. The most popular ones are 'minjung theology' in Korea,⁶ 'theology of struggle' in the Philippines,⁷ and 'dalit theology' in India.⁸ These theologies tackled the various social issues with the use of local concepts, stories and imageries while assuming and using the biblico-theological framework (which values higher criticism highly), an approach similar to that of the 'liberation theology' which has been developed in Latin America and the WCC. The theological methodology of this 'new hermeneutic' consists of critical reflection on praxis through ideological suspicion, preferring experience and the local context to serve as the starting points of 'doing theology'.⁹

On the other hand, the evangelical churches and theological institutions have remained very conservative, with only a minority of theologians venturing into creative theologizing in their contexts. Mainstream evangelicalism has continued to accept much of the traditions of its constituent denominations almost uncritically, while being very critical of 'new theologies', whether they be Western (especially European and North American theological liberalism) or Latin American.

Their methodology uses the formulations of orthodox theology (e.g. Reformed, Wesleyan-Arminian, Pentecostal, Dispensationalist, etc.) as the non-negotiable basis for theologizing.¹⁰ It was only in the mid-'80s that there arose a greater acceptance of the fact that theological starting points can come not only from the Scriptures but also from the world.¹¹ The use of higher critical methods is slowly gaining acceptance, though still with great caution, in some circles.

Sadly, these two streams have had hardly any opportunity for face-to-face sharing and dialogue. In most contexts (except perhaps in Korea), the overworked and underpaid theologians have to work with limited financial and academic resources. Although there are signs of outgrowing this divide, the theological stereotypes of the ecumenicals as liberationists (if not communists) who only call for political action, and of the evangelicals as religious fanatics and proselytizers who are insensitive to cultures, die hard. The most visible sign of some bridging happening between the two camps is the participation and accreditation of more evangelical seminaries in ATESEA.

Main theological issues

Given these two main trends in theological approaches, what are the theological issues that have emerged from the 1980s and will dominate in the '90s in these two streams?

The ecumenical theologians will continue to 'let the world set the agenda', responding actively to the issues that each context raises. Though they are a minority 'intellectual elite', they are in some key positions, albeit ministering in increasingly evangelical-oriented constituencies.

Happily they will be joined by the growing number of evangelical and Pentecostal theologians who are being trained in seminaries today.¹² There is a growing acceptance in the evangelical churches that they must respond to the physical and social needs of their communities. However, their commitment to evangelism (conversion) and church growth will be there to keep them orthodox (or conservative), and hence slower to respond boldly to issues.

Four major concerns will continue to dominate, but with more nuanced reflection, at least in the near future:

Mission theology

The primary 'battleground' that will grow in significance is in 'mission theology' or missiology, on the issue of the relationship of evangelism and social action. Seeing the need to maintain their churches, the ecumenicals are realizing the need to put evangelism, church growth and renewal in (if not on top of) their agenda.

Although this issue was seemingly resolved in 1982 in the Consultation on the Relationship of Evangelism and Social Responsibility (CRESR), most Asian evangelicals have yet to accept that the primacy of evangelism is theological and logical, but not practical and strategic/tactical.¹³ This will determine

how deeply the evangelicals will be able to participate in dealing with social issues and how much they will cooperate with ecumenicals and non-Christians in such involvement.

Those who have already resolved the issue (from both the ecumenical and evangelical camps) would be seeking partner-theologians in sharing insights and resources on how to involve other church leaders in developing pastoral models of such missiology.

Economic prosperity

Several Asian economies have been growing rapidly in the past two decades, thus making Asia 'the continent of the 21st century'. It contains some of the world's most densely populated countries that have been characterized by great economic discrepancies. But since the '80s prosperity seems to be overshadowing the poverty issue of the recent past.

Japan has established itself as the leading nation in the continent, with a *per capita* GNP of over US \$21,000 (and Brunei has US \$15,000), though Bangladesh, Bhutan, Laos and Nepal still have less than US \$200 each. Since the '70s the 'dragon economies' of Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong have experienced record economic growth; and the '80s saw Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia going through the same kind of expansion. The economic freedom in China promises to make it the 'next superpower' before the middle of the next century.

Such economic boom has produced the need for thousands of migrant workers, mostly women (nurses, labourers, entertainers, domestics), from within and outside these countries; thus the poverty issues (including mass poverty) will remain. But the emphasis will be shifting to the concerns of those who have attained prosperity: the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, with emphasis on the lifestyle of upper- and middle-class Christians. Clearer definitions of simple lifestyle, genuine partnership and 'evangelical poverty' should become critical points for theological discourse and praxis.

Political uncertainty

The process of establishing democratic institutions has rapidly gained ground in many, though not all, Asian countries. But the looming presence of socialist/communist regions (North Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and especially China) and the rise of religious fundamentalism still raises basic questions about the political stability of the continent. The fate of Hong Kong after 1997 will undoubtedly be very significant, especially for Taiwan, whose population has recently rejected the venture of becoming independent, but does not want to join China before democratic reforms are firmly set there.

It is in the context of these uncertain political futures that the leaders and theologians of the churches in Asia have to work out their faith *vis-à-vis* their respective (often authoritarian) state governments, as significant majorities (in the Philippines, North East India and South Korea), or as significant or insignificant minorities. The problem of militarization and the role of the military will be discussed further also, particularly in Thailand, Indonesia and Myanmar.

Religious pluralism

Though Asia is fast secularizing due to economic growth, it has seen not the gradual decline of religion but (alongside the shift to material and commercial pursuits) the resurgence and expansion of the major traditional religions (Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Chinese folk religion, Shintoism). In contexts where religion has been one of the main causes of violent conflicts, Christians and churches have learned to cope with being marginalized as 'foreigners' and poor¹⁴ by their non-Christian neighbours. This calls for continued creative theologizing in context - to derive authentic traditions through fresh reflection of God's presence and of other spiritual realities in each of the varied religious communities. Christian theologians have to equip their fellow believers to handle different worldviews, belief and value systems and religious traditions, and to use dialogue as a means of relating to people of other faiths. A 'theology of hospitality'¹⁵ may be the best way forward in doing mission by seeking to respect and understand non-Christian neighbours with Christ-like love.

This emphasizes the need to distinguish the negotiables and non-negotiables of the Christian faith, not in abstract

philosophizing but (as modelled by Jesus and the early church) in concrete personal encounters. Clarifying the uniqueness of the Jesus Christ of the Holy Scriptures *in situ* is basic for proper contextualization, yet consciously knowing that the risk of falling into 'syncretism' (i.e., the fusion of Christian faith with non-Christian meanings) exists. Nevertheless this must be done, for it is the best (if not the only) way of doing biblical theology contextually.

Other theological issues

Current within and among the churches (denominations and para-church groups) are the issues of hermeneutics (actual use of the Bible in social ethics),¹⁶ the leadership role (especially the ordination) of women, and inter-confessional and ecumenical (beyond WCC and NCC) structures.

In relation to the world, the theological agenda will continue to include: the integrity of creation, peoplehood (ethnic identity, particularly of oppressed minorities), multi-cultural co-existence and cooperation, population control, use of nuclear power, equal rights for women, modernization/secularization (versus traditionalism), and viability of extended families (versus individualism).

One primary concern will be fully global (trans-national and trans-continental) in nature: the new world order amidst more rapid post-modern changes of 'information technology' – what are the ethics involved in computerization, robotics, automation, InterNet, as well as biotech agriculture, genetic engineering, etc.

Asian theologians will surely be dealing with these issues and contribute to inter-national and inter-cultural theology. Such 'cross-cultural theologizing' will seek to learn from and share in the theologies of other contexts, but refrain from universalizing one's theology or creating one universal theology.

Conclusion

Three other phenomena need to be highlighted: (1) Most of the creative evangelical theologizing has flourished recently through the continental network called Partnership in Mission-Asia (PIM-Asia).¹⁷ It includes theologians who work in both WCC/CCA and WEF/EFA circles, and is part of a global network called the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT).

(2) From and amidst explosive church growth, more younger Pentecostal church leaders are finishing their postgraduate theological degrees, and the few who have already finished have recently organized the Asian Charismatic Theological Association (ACTA). They should become a 'critical mass' soon, not only to critique their own theological heritage, but also to contribute to Asian and global theologizing.

(3) Several key theological writings have recently been written in Chinese (in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan), Korean and Japanese, and more will be coming forth in Filipino, Bahasa (Indonesian and Malaysian) and some of the major languages of India. This must be welcomed as indicators of the fuller maturity of Asian theologians to reflect and explicate the gospel in their own tongues, hence pushing contextualization forward further.

Most Asian churches have come to recognize that they must form the primary force to missionize their vast and largely non-Christian continent.¹⁸ The challenge is great, and requires clarity of vision and commitment for responding actively and boldly to the confusion and erosion of the theological convictions and moral values in the churches. How will Asian theologians contribute to the critical, prophetic and creative witness of their churches to the various issues of their respective contexts? May God find them faithful in formulating contextual biblical theologies which will equip their fellow believers in witnessing to his kingdom and its transforming power in the varied communities of Asia.

¹⁶It was a Chinese theologian, Shoki Coe, who coined the word 'contextualization' in 1970; and a Filipino, Emerito Nacpil, who defined the 'Asian critical principle' in 1974.

¹⁷It is written from the perspective of a Chinese-Filipino evangelical theological educator whose work-base has been the Philippines.

³Cf. G.H. Anderson and T.F. Stransky (eds.), *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies* (New York: Paulist/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976); D.J. Elwood (ed.), *What Asian Christians are Thinking* (Quezon City: New Day/Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); J.C. England (ed.), *Living Theology in Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982); V. Fabella (ed.), *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980); E. Nacpil and D. Elwood (eds.), *The Human and the Holy: Asian Perspectives in Christian Theology* (Quezon City: New Day, 1978/Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980); and G.C. Oosthuizen, *Theological Battleground in Asia and Africa: The Issues Facing the Churches and the Efforts to Overcome Western Divisions* (London: C. Hurst, 1972).

⁴The ATESEA offers postgraduate studies through the Southeast Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST). The key person in this network is Yeow Choo Lak.

⁵Bong Rin Ro served as Executive Secretary until recently when Ken Granakan took over. Seventeen of these ATA-related seminaries formed a consortium called the Asia Graduate School of Theology (AGST) to offer postgraduate degrees.

⁶E.g., Kim Yong Bok, Nam Dong Suh, Byung Mu Ahn, etc.

⁷E.g., Emerito Nacpil, Levi Oracion, Salvador Eduarte, etc.

⁸Mainly articulated through the Christian Institute for Study of Religion and Society (Bangalore) and Gurukul Lutheran Theological College (Madras).

⁹On method, cf. José M. de Mesa and Lode L. Wostyn, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, n.d.). For samples of their writings, see (besides those mentioned in n. 3) K.C. Abraham (ed.), *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990); Christian Conference of Asia, *The Mission of God in the Context of the Suffering and Struggling Peoples of Asia: Biblical Reflections* (Hong Kong: C.C.A., 1988); V. Fabella and S. Torres (eds.), *Doing Theology in a Divided World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985); *idem*, *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1983); C.S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984); *idem*, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986); S.P. Formilleza (ed.), *Out of the Valley of Dry Bones: Faith Reflections of Grassroots Christians* (Quezon City: E.C.D. Publication, 1980); K. Koyama, *Mount Fuji and Mount Sinai: A Pilgrimage in Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis/London: SCM, 1984); M. Takenaka, *God is Rice: Asian Culture and Christian Faith* (Geneva: WCC, 1986); K.Y. Bock (ed.), *Minjung Theology* (Singapore: C.C.A., 1981); and A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark/Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

¹⁰Each of these believe that their respective theologies are based on the authority of inerrant or infallible Scriptures. Reflection on 'how do these varied interpretations to this common source relate to one another?' is urgently needed!

¹¹Cf. B.R. Ro and R. Eshenaur (eds.), *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts* (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1988); and B.R. Ro and M.C. Albrecht, *God in Asia* (Taichung: ATA, 1987).

¹²See the first two points in this article's conclusion.

¹³Cf. Grand Rapids Report in Tom Sine (ed.), *The Church in Response to Human Need* (Monrovia: MARC, 1983), pp. 441-487. On the question of primacy, section IV.D. states, '... evangelism has a certain priority. We are not referring to an invariable temporal priority, because in some situations a social ministry will take precedence, but to a logical one. The very fact of Christian SR presupposes socially responsible Christians, and it can be by EV and discipling that they have become such. . . . The choice, we believe, is largely conceptual. In practice, as in the public ministry of Jesus, the two are inseparable, at least in open societies, and we shall seldom if ever have to choose between them.'

¹⁴In the past Christians have generally belonged to the poorer sectors of society, yet their buildings and equipments display relative wealth and 'foreignness' in the context of mass poverty. Their 'foreignness' may mainly be attributed to their access to rich foreign resources, the relatively high standard of living of (very visibly white) missionaries and some church leaders, large numbers and salaries of paid employees in established (and uncontextualized!) churches and Christian organizations, and the growing size and number of Christian educational and social institutions.

¹⁵This was mentioned in an unofficial document of the Seventh International Conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Oaxtepec, Mexico, in December 1986, in section 24: 'a theology of hospitality: make the others (persons, races, cultures, religion, sex) welcome, and celebrate them in all their socio-cultural and theological otherness while not omitting to pose an honest critique and a gospel challenge'; cited in K.C. Abraham (ed.), *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), p. 199.

¹⁶For an excellent sampling from the ecumenical camp, see R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin* (London: SPCK, 1991).

¹⁷Its publications include: V. Samuel and C. Sugden (eds.), *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); V. Samuel and A. Hauser (eds.), *Proclaiming Christ in Christ's Way* (Oxford: Regnum, 1989); V. Samuel and C. Sugden (eds.), *A.D. 2000 and Beyond: A Mission Agenda* (Oxford: Regnum, 1991); and M. Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere* (London: Collins, 1991).

¹⁸Asia contains almost 95% of the world's unevangelized (or 'unreached people groups', as popularized by various groups linked with DAWN (Discipling a Whole Nation) Movement, AD 2000 Movements, MARC Publications, etc.).