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Editorial: The Gospels and History

The story told by the gospels is an exciting one and, according to Christians, a supremely important one. They describe one who changed the course of the world through his amazing teaching, his powerful acts, his purity and compassion, his death and resurrection; one who lived a perfect human life and who revealed God; one who claimed to be and showed himself to be the Son of God and Saviour of the world.

But the story's excitement and certainly its importance are drastically diminished if Jesus of Nazareth was not as the gospels describe. The critics who question the reliability of the gospels may try to assure us that we can retain Christian faith without retaining the 'old-fashioned' view of the gospels as trustworthy records of Jesus' life and ministry. But the instinct of the ordinary man or woman in the street who sees scholarly doubts as undermining the Christian gospel is sounder: the Christian gospel is not a set of abstract ideas or ideals, but is good news about a historical person and historical events, and if the historicity of that person and those events is questioned, then the gospel ceases to be good news.

How then are we to react to the questionings of the gospel critics? One option is simply to dismiss the whole business as a devilish distraction. It can be argued that negative gospel criticism has no solid basis and that it is the product of western rationalism and anti-supernaturalism; it may therefore be safely ignored. Such an attitude is understandable, and may in some situations be quite sensible: when the church is faced with urgent questions about Christian living and witness in the world, we cannot and must not spend all our time arguing directly or indirectly with those who are prejudiced against the gospels and who seem determined to doubt everything they can. Instead we must take the gospels at face value and get on with the task of preaching and applying what they say. If we do so, the message of the gospels will be seen to be relevant and powerful, and this in itself will be a strong argument for their reliability and inspiration.

However, it would be very unwise to ignore the questions and ideas of the critics altogether. Their ideas about the gospels are not all obviously the product of prejudice; often the critics are wrestling with features of the gospels that need explaining—such as the divergences between the different gospels—and it has to be admitted that their explanations have considerable plausibility. Given this situation, the person who believes and wishes to proclaim the gospels to be true and trustworthy must wrestle with the same problems as the critics and provide alternative and better explanations, demonstrating—and not just denouncing—the prejudices of those who question the truth of the gospels. To put the matter biblically: we must 'be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Pet. 3:15).

There are many straightforward points that can be made in defence of the reliability of the gospels. For example, (1) the gospels were written within the lifetime of Jesus' contemporaries and are not folk traditions that evolved over many centuries. (2) Tradition has it that the gospels were written by followers of Jesus (*i.e.* Matthew and John) or by people closely in touch with the apostles (*i.e.* Mark and Luke). (3) Certainly many of the gospel traditions were known and were being preached at a very early date; witness the apostle Paul writing in the 50s AD (*e.g.* 1 Cor. 7:10–11; 11:23–26; 15:1–7). (4) Despite the claims of many critics, the gospels do not seem strongly to reflect the interests and the situation of the early church (as might be expected if they were the creation of the early church), but they appear to reflect an earlier period; thus, for example, there is not a strong emphasis on the Gentile mission in the gospels. (5) The evangelists are evidently intelligent writers, and they say explicitly that their intention is to give us fact not fiction in their gospels (Lk. 1:1–4; Jn. 19:35). (6) Where Luke's accuracy as a historian can be checked in parts of the book of Acts, archaeological evidence repeatedly confirms his account. (7) It is true that there are some perplexing differences between the gospels. But the differences are far outweighed by the similarities, and many of the differences are only such as might be expected from different accounts of the same event.

There is weight in all these points, and other arguments could be added. But anyone familiar with gospel criticism will know that the matter is very much more complex than such an over-simplified list of points might suggest. The evidence does not all point conveniently and obviously in one direction, and even those who agree on the essential historicity of the gospel tradition may disagree about particular problems of interpretation. An interesting case in point is R. H. Gundry's commentary on Matthew's Gospel (reviewed later in this issue of *Themelios*): Gundry believes that the gospels are trustworthy, but he considers that Matthew (though not Mark or Luke) has quite deliberately written a 'midrashic' semi-historical gospel. This is, to say the least, a controversial opinion, and many readers will consider that his arguments for his view and for its acceptability are unconvincing. But Gundry's book certainly makes clear the continuing need for study and thinking about the gospels, as does H. H. Stoldt's book on the synoptic problem (also reviewed below), which is one more in a stream of books challenging the common opinion that Mark's gospel was the first to be written.

One recent concerted attempt to come to grips with the question of the gospels and history is the Gospels Research Project of Tyndale House, a biblical research centre in Cambridge. This project was set up some years ago under the leadership of a former editor of *Themelios*, Dr R. T. France (who was later succeeded as co-ordinator of the project by the present editor). The project has so far produced two volumes of essays under the title *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*.[1] The essays, written by an international team of contributors, look at a wide variety of questions: there is discussion of broad topics such as history in John's Gospel,

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[1] *Gospel Perspectives I* (1980) and *II* (1981), eds R. T. France and D. Wenham, are published by JSOT Press, Dept. of Biblical Studies, The University, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK, and are available to IFES/TSF members direct from the publishers at £4.95 and £5.95 (UK) or £5.50 and £6.50 (elsewhere) or through other booksellers.

the ‘criteria of authenticity’, and the nature of the gospel tradition; and there are also studies of particular questions and passages, *e.g.* of the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives, the interpretation of the parable of the sower, Mark 10:45, the empty tomb tradition, the nature of the resurrection body according to Paul, *etc.* The Research Project is continuing its work, and a third volume should be published in 1983 looking particularly at the question of ‘midrash and historiography’ in the gospels—the question raised by Gundry and other scholars.

It should not be thought that a project like this will simply ‘solve’ all the historical questions surrounding the gospels. As has been observed, many of the questions are complex (as are some of the essays in the volumes!). But the hope of those involved in the project is that it will clarify many problems and help to show ‘that serious historical and literary scholarship allows us to approach the gospels with the belief that they present an essentially historical account of the words and deeds of Jesus.… We are convinced that a recovery of that belief will prove liberating both in the scholarly enterprise, which has so often seemed locked in a straightjacket of rationalistic assumptions and arbitrary historical scepticism, and also within the church, which needs to hear, to see and to follow the Jesus of the gospels’ (from the preface to vol. II, p. 7).

Most readers of *Themelios* will not be able to do in-depth research into gospel historicity (though hopefully some may take up that challenge). But it is important for all theological students to be familiar at least with some of the arguments and evidence, so that we can use the gospels confidently as the Word of God, knowing that their historicity has not been discredited and that the Jesus we follow really was as important and exciting as the gospels suggest.

Editorial notes

We welcome the publication of the first issue of a new quarterly journal EVANGEL. The journal is an evangelical publication, edited by Dr Nigel Cameron of Rutherford House in Scotland. Its level is between the academic and the popular and it is intended for ‘thoughtful Christians, and particularly those with preaching and teaching responsibilities’. It places particular emphasis on biblical exposition. The first issue includes J. Alec Motyer on ‘Covenant and Promise’, John Webster on ‘The Legacy of Barth and Bultmann’, James Philip on ‘Preaching in Scripture’, *etc.* The rates are £4.25 per year (£3.75 for students) or $12, and the address is EVANGEL subscriptions, Rutherford House, 17 Claremont Park, Edinburgh EH6 7PJ, Scotland, UK.

The Pentateuch today

J. G. McConville

Dr Gordon McConville, who lectures at Trinity College, Bristol, did his research at the Queen's University, Belfast, in Northern Ireland, on cultic laws in Deuteronomy.

Preliminaries

There is no more urgent question today in serious study of the Old Testament than that of the composition of the Pentateuch. A century after J. Wellhausen's epoch-making analysis of Israel's history, and his accompanying division of the Pentateuch into four documents, J, E, D and P, ranging in date from the early monarchy to the post-exilic period, most scholars do not even consider it necessary to give a passing thought to the traditional view that Moses was himself responsible for large parts of the books in which he is the prominent figure. R. E. Clements, for example, considers that '... the complexity of the problems rules out of court conservative attempts to overthrow the basic insights of literary criticism and tradition-history in the interests of a return to a very uncritical position'.[1] Our question is whether, in fact, the 'complexity of the problems' is indeed such that basic Mosaic responsibility for much of the Pentateuchal material is beyond recall. Or is the complexity born of the particular methodology adopted by the critics?

It is important to recognize that, despite Clements' remarks (cited above), there is important modern writing on the Pentateuch which does *not* rule Mosaic authorship out of court.[2] Such writing is not merely conservative reaction; indeed in a number of works we are beginning to see a movement within more conservative writing away from defensiveness and towards imaginative building upon traditional premises.

The fact that scholars can disagree so radically over Pentateuchal studies shows that the question of starting-points and presuppositions is just as decisive as it ever was. It makes a great difference whether a scholar takes seriously the possibility that the Pentateuch is God-given and reliable or whether he accepts as given the common critical assumptions about the nature of the Pentateuch.

This does not mean that those who view the Pentateuch as the Word of God will agree at all points as to what this implies for critical study. Nor does it mean that scholars who hold more or less conservative views can ignore each other's work, though this often happens: there must be dialogue and a coming to grips with the evidence and arguments produced by those of differing positions.

Diversity in the Pentateuch

Perhaps the crucial ingredient in modern debate about the Pentateuch is the fact of diversity within the Pentateuch. There are within the five books different kinds of writing (narrative, law, exhortation);[3] and there are variations upon themes within both the narrative sections (*e.g.* Gn. 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:6-11) and the legal (Ex. 23:14-17; 34:22-24; Lv. 23:1-14; Dt. 16:1-8). This diversity of content has, since Wellhausen and before, led many scholars to suppose that the Pentateuch is also diverse in origin. Conservative scholars on the other hand have seen it as their task to defend the Mosaic provenance of the 'five books'. Some recent evangelical scholars have questioned the necessity of defending Mosaic authorship, feeling that the conclusions of modern scholarship about the Pentateuch's formation pose no threat to belief. But, although the work of critical scholarship has clearly furnished much insight into the meaning of the Pentateuch, it is still surely true that a belief in the Bible as the Word of God must entail the view that the Pentateuch is a unity in some real sense, not a collection of contradictory traditions. In the remainder of this paper we shall outline the major recent developments in Pentateuchal study, contrasting the approach which begins with the premise of diversity with one which begins with that of unity, and finding that it does make a difference to our interpretation of the whole Pentateuch. We shall finish by observing two specific areas in which debate continues.

From Wellhausen to Noth — beginning from diversity

In order to take stock of current views of the Pentateuch, we need to go back to Wellhausen, who,

[1] In G. W. Anderson (ed.), *Tradition and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1979), p. 113.
[2] *E.g.* P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 24ff.

[3] S. R. Driver has made the classical statement of the style of writing more or less peculiar to Deuteronomy, in which exhortation plays a large part. *Deuteronomy* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1895), pp. lxxvii-xciv.

though he has been superseded in many important respects, is still the fountainhead of modern critical views.[4] Wellhausen's literary analysis of the Pentateuch into four documents (J, E, D and P) was immensely powerful and persuasive because it was not only a piece of literary criticism (others before him had identified four documents), but was also a reconstruction of the history of Israel. It is in my view the latter aspect of Wellhausen's work, with its belief in the increasing priestly domination of Israel's religion and in the creativity of the exilic period,[5] that has proved durable, and this has given the literary aspect of his work a vitality which might not otherwise have survived the work of his successors. This is why there is still so much commitment to a Josianic Deuteronomy, and an exilic P. The centrality of 'D' — Wellhausen's most important single idea — is primarily a historical idea, although its literary analysis remains a live issue.

It would be wrong, indeed, to say that Wellhausen's basic literary postulates have been rejected. On the contrary, most scholars are still committed to the belief that features such as duplicate narratives and divergent law-codes (as noted above) indicate diverse origins of the material. Indeed they have gone far beyond Wellhausen in postulating, not a small number of constituent documents, but an immensely large number of fragments, originally oral in nature, and having arisen among disparate groupings which only gradually came to constitute Israel. This is called the traditio-historical method and has come to dominate Pentateuchal study largely through the works of G. von Rad and M. Noth.[6]

Von Rad's seminal contribution was the separation of the Exodus and Sinai themes on the grounds that there was no mention of Sinai in certain formulae which he considered early, *viz* Dt. 26:5-9; Dt. 6:20-24; Jo. 24:2-13.[7] These passages he believed to constitute an ancient confession commemorating an experience of deliverance from Egypt, but which betray no knowledge of the Sinai event. The theophany and covenant-making on Sinai belong, in von Rad's view, to a quite separate stream of tradition, which has been introduced to the 'Hexateuch' (he regards *Genesis-Joshua* as the real editorial unit, rather than the Pentateuch as such) as a subordinate element to that of the exodus.[8] He advances several reasons for maintaining this, the chief being that the main features of what he regards as the exodus tradition do not appear in the Sinai pericope, though he also believes the section shows signs of being an interruption in the narrative.[9] What is significant, however, is the new approach. Whereas the literary critics had begun with a number of authors to whom they attempted to allocate the material,[10] von Rad is beginning with the material and working outwards. This produces an attitude that is less interested in authors than in streams of tradition and the boundaries between them.[11]

Noth built upon von Rad's work, accepting the division between exodus and Sinai, and adding three more major Pentateuchal themes, *viz* Guidance into Arable Land (which he distinguishes from Guidance out of Egypt = exodus), Promise to the Patriarchs and Guidance in the Wilderness. Noth again postulates the original separateness of his five themes, locating the different streams among originally disparate clan or tribal groupings before these grew together to form Israel. The formation of Israel's traditions about her origins is, therefore, a kind of 'pooling of resources', each group contributing its own experience. But the process was gradual and highly complex, with the traditions influencing and even competing with each other. Moses, *ex hypothesi,* can only have belonged originally in one of the themes, and must have been incorporated into the others because of his strength in that theme (which Noth identifies as that of Guidance into Arable Land). Abraham has ousted Isaac, who is probably to be regarded as more original and ancient precisely because of his shadowiness in the material that we now have.[12] Thus the celebrated story of the pretence that a wife is a sister must have been originally told

[4] Wellhausen's most influential work is *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1885-) and in various other editions. Expositions and critiques of it are available in plenty. G. W. Anderson, *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1959), embodies a sympathetic understanding (though it goes beyond Wellhausen and is no mere account of his thought). For critical assessment see, *e.g.* R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: IVP 1970); O. T. Allis, *The Five Books of Moses* (Philadelphia: PRAC, 1943); K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London, IVP: 1966).

[5] *Cf.* P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (London: SCM, 1968), pp. 7ff.

[6] M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1948), and in English, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood-Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972); G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1965), pp. 3ff.

[7] Von Rad, *op. cit.,* pp. 3f.

[8] *Ibid.,* p. 19.

[9] *Ibid.,* pp. 13ff.

[10] Obviously I overstate here to make a point. The isolation of a number of authors (JEDP) began with observation of the material. And many literary critics were prepared to postulate more authors as they felt the material compelled them to.

[11] Von Rad in fact maintained an interest in authorship, seeing the Yahwist (J) as the creative compiler of many of Israel's old traditions; *Old Testament Theology,* I (London: Oliver & Boyd 1962), pp. 107ff., esp. pp. 123f.

[12] Following H. Gunkel, Noth believed that brevity in traditions was a sign of antiquity, as were stories' anonymity and attachment to cult-places. On criteria such as these the Joseph story, *e.g.,* is late and fictitious.

about Isaac but was subsequently swallowed up by Abraham as he became more dominant in the Israelite consciousness. The genealogical relationship between Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is, of course, artificial, since these three must originally have been hero-figures within entirely separate groups. Clearly these trends tend to postulate even greater original fragmentation than Wellhausen did.

The work of von Rad and Noth has been criticized on various grounds. R. E. Clements has charged both with erecting theories on a conspicuous lack of evidence. There is no evidence, he argues, for von Rad's ancient 'credos'[13] (though those who hold a higher view of the historicity of the Pentateuch might differ on the basis of Dt. 26). Nor can Noth demonstrate that the Pentateuch has woven together kernels of originally separate events.[14] On the other hand the presence of the name Yahweh in both exodus and Sinai themes, the difficulty experienced by Noth's successors of eliminating Moses from at least four of his five themes, and the unifying factor of Kadesh, suggest rather that more of the material belongs originally together than von Rad or Noth admitted.[15] More fundamental questions have come from Schmid and Rendtorff[16] who have raised the crucial issue for criticism of how the new traditio-historical approach is to be combined with the long-established results of literary criticism. In other words, what is to be done with JEDP? Both von Rad and Noth left room for a documentary stage in the development of the traditions. But this is now challenged by Rendtorff, who believes that the sorts of original sources postulated by Noth and von Rad are of a fundamentally different character from the traditional documentary ones, and call into question the very existence of a Yahwist – *i.e.* of a unified theological strand in the early development of the Pentateuch. Schmid has not actually abandoned the Yahwist, but places him in the seventh century, much later than he has usually been dated, and in close association with the Deuteronomist.[17]

Yet this is but the latest development in the traditio-historical approach to Pentateuchal study. It may be the death-knell of J and E. D and P, however, will be harder to shift. And it need hardly be said that what we are witnessing in Pentateuchal studies is not that *metanoia* for which conservative scholars have been clamouring for a century or more. The details of this or that scholar's reconstruction may find greater or lesser acceptance. But the method, as expounded above by Noth, is firmly established.

D. J. A. Clines – beginning from unity

Critics of conservative scholars protest that in any argument they always rush back to presuppositions. This, however, is not a failure of nerve, nor proof of their inability to defend their position. Rather, the question whether any statement or set of statements is consistent with the belief that the Bible is God's Word is a fundamental question, and a question about method. This is not the place to labour the point.[18] But it is a matter of fact that, depending on whether one begins with a unitary or a fragmentary view of the Pentateuch, one actually observes different kinds of things and gains an entirely different impression of the whole.

D. J. A. Clines' book, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*[19] is significant in this respect, precisely because it does not constitute an outright rejection of the findings of previous research. Clines is less concerned to deny this or that element in the work of scholars who employ the traditio-historical method, than to urge that concentration on it diverts attention from the canvas in its wholeness that is spread before them. He contends that scholars have been so concerned with what he calls 'atomism' (concern with details) and 'geneticism' (concern with origins) in biblical literature that they have lost sight of the whole entities contained in it, and of the fact that they function as such.[20] He then develops what he sees as the theme of the Pentateuch, based on the three-fold promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, in a way which suggestively embraces virtually all of the Pentateuchal literature.[21] Clines sees the significance of his method in the fact that he does not begin with traditional literary-critical theory, but rather ends

[13] R. E. Clements, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 111f.
[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 112f.
[16] H. H. Schmid, *Der Sogennante Jahwist* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976); R. Rendtorff, *Das Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977).
[17] With Schmid's position may be compared with that of J. van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1975); *cf.* below n. 54. For a fuller and basically sympathetic account of modern trends, see E. Ball, 'Observations on some recent Pentateuchal Studies', *Churchman* (forthcoming 1983).

[18] On the whole subject see S. Erlandsson, 'Is there ever Biblical Research without Presuppositions?', *TSF Bulletin*, 65 (1973), pp. 1-5.
[19] *JSOT*, Supplement 10 (1978).
[20] Clines, *op. cit.*, pp. 7ff. The author is motivated by the desire to bring to bear modern techniques of literary criticism, broadly understood. Indeed this is a trend within Old Testament studies as a whole, and numerous works have emanated from JSOT in this mould and relating to the narrative books of the OT; *e.g.* J. Jobling, *The Sense of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978). *Cf.* in this regard W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).
[21] 'The theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfilment – which also implies the partial non-fulfilment – of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs.' The three elements of the promise – posterity, divine-human relationship, and land – are to the forefront respectively in Gn. 12-50, Exodus – Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, p. 29. (He also shows how Gn. 1-11 anticipates the theme, pp. 61ff.)

with it, making the point that his holistic reading of the Pentateuch is not after all incompatible with the attempt to trace a history of its formation.[22] He then argues that of the two essential aspects of the promise to the patriarchs, *viz* (1) promise and (2) 'partial non-fulfilment', the former certainly and the latter probably can be found in the three major blocks of material which literary criticism professes to have discovered (the Yahwist or JE, Deuteronomy and the Priestly material).[23] Clearly Clines' challenge to traditional methods is not as radical as those who advocate the basically Mosaic origins of the Pentateuch would like it to be (especially when he interprets the original function of the whole Pentateuch in relation to an early-post-exilic dating of the final redaction).[24] Nevertheless his work is a salutary corrective to the approach which, having isolated sources, attempts to describe the several theologies contained in them without external controls. Did the Yahwist's narrative originally contain an account of the conquest? Some answer with an emphatic affirmative, either tracing J through to Joshua, or speculating that the end of the account has been lost.[25] Clines' work shows, however, that the theme of non-fulfilment is stamped upon the whole Pentateuch, and therefore that the quest for a 'lost' or hidden ending of the J document is at best unfruitful. The fact that the theme of non-fulfilment is stamped on the Pentateuch as a whole is of overriding importance.[26]

Clines' book is one of the most interesting and useful currently available on the Pentateuch. It is so because he offers a challenge to mainstream critical opinion that is itself creative.[27] Yet it does also contain a fundamental challenge to those who, like Clements, believe that the history of the Pentateuch's formation is so complex that there is no returning to a unitary view.[28] We saw that the nature of von Rad's and Noth's advance upon Wellhausen was that they began from 'within' the text, with small fragments – the smaller the better – and worked 'outwards', postulating all the time new sources. Most modern writers proceed thus, only seeking, as a logically final step, evidence of attempts to bring the series of fragments into harmony with each other. The effect of seeking the logic of the whole first is quite radical, for then one is operating with a framework which exercises a hermeneutical constraint. Instead of regarding duplicate accounts as the deposit of an evolution which a redactor has only superficially controlled, one begins to ask how they relate to and illuminate each other.[29] For my part I think that this sort of approach compels us to ask: is the belief that the present final form of the Pentateuch is coherent and meaningful as a totality ultimately compatible with any and every theory about the Pentateuch's formation? There are people today who argue this.[30] But in fact it is doubtful if one can view the Pentateuch as a collection of originally diverse traditions and at the same time claim that it is a fully coherent whole in its present form; the gap between origins and end-results on this view cannot ultimately be closed, as the following discussion will show.

Some current fashions and directions

I want now to indicate two areas in which there is discussion – and room for discussion – within Pentateuchal study, *viz* (1) the question of demythologization and (2) 'Deuteronomism'.

1. *Demythologization.* Von Rad popularized the belief that the authors of Deuteronomy – in the seventh century – took a novel view of the nature of the cult. Whereas the older biblical writers had believed the tabernacle/temple to be the actual home of God, and the ark of the covenant his real footstool (*e.g.* 2 Sa. 6:6-11; Ps. 132:7f.), Deuteronomy now insisted on the fact that it was nothing more than a box containing the tablets on which the law was written (Dt. 10:1-5).[31] Accompanying this 'demythologization' in the realm of religious ideas, there went a 'secularization', *i.e.* an attempt to diminish the influence of temple and clergy upon the life of the people. Deuteronomy's permission to slaughter animals non-sacrificially (12:15ff.) is an example of this secularizing tendency. Not only does Deuteronomy differ from earlier writers, however, but P – the 'priestly' strand – is then held to try to re-establish the former sacral conceptions. These underlie, for example, the description of the making of the ark (Ex. 25:10ff.), particularly in the ideas of the

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 89.
[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 89ff.
[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 97f.
[25] See O. Kaiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), p. 194.
[26] *Op. cit.*, p. 95.
[27] Other writers have looked for characteristics and style within the parameters of traditional Pentateuchal criticism; *cf.* W. Brueggemann, 'The Kerygma of the "Priestly Writers"', *ZAW*, 84 (1972) pp. 397-414.
[28] See above, n. 1.
[29] This is done well by F. D. Kidner, *Genesis* (London: IVP, 1967). See his remarks on Gn. 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:6-11, *ad. loc.*
[30] B. S. Child's commentary on Exodus (London: SCM, 1974), is by way of being a programmatic attempt to demonstrate the possibility. The theory behind the practice is stated in the introductory sections (especially III and IV) of his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979). His approach is commonly called Canonical Criticism. Despite its attractiveness it is open to serious criticism. See the symposium of reactions to his *Introduction* in *JSOT*, 16 (1980).
[31] G. von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy* (London: SCM, 1953), p. 40. The whole discussion on pp. 37-44 is relevant.

cherubim (sometimes depicted in the Psalms as 'bearing God', Ps. 80:1) and the mercy-seat, where God promises to meet with Moses (Ex. 25:22). Similarly Leviticus 17:3ff. is said to go back on Deuteronomy 12 by insisting again on sacrifice at one place only.[32] D and P are sometimes further contrasted in terms of their supposedly characteristic name-theology (D) and glory-theology (P) – Deuteronomy's use of God's name (as at 12:5) insisting, it is said, that God himself is not present at the sanctuary.[33]

This discussion raises two issues. The first is in fact that with which we closed the preceding section – *viz* is original discreteness compatible with final coherence? But it is clear that the sorts of claims made by von Rad and others about the differences between Deuteronomy and P preclude any real coherence within the completed Pentateuch. On the contrary, contradiction and polemic are of its essence. Here, then, is strong evidence that for those who hold to the coherence of the Pentateuch as we know it the work of establishing its real and underlying unity must continue.

This brings us more specifically to the point at issue. The assertion that Deuteronomy demythologizes and secularizes can be one of the thornier problems for many students of the Pentateuch. Yet it seems to me that there is much inaccurate thinking behind this apparently powerful thesis. On the relation between Leviticus 17 and Deuteronomy 12, for example, everything depends upon a wrong interpretation of 1 Samuel 14:32ff., where the action recorded is usually regarded as being a sacrifice, and therefore representing the conditions against which Deuteronomy is said to have reacted.[34] In fact, however, it has been well shown that 1 Samuel 14:32ff. presupposes some such law as that of Deuteronomy itself (Dt. 12:15ff.), and therefore that there are no grounds for the view that Deuteronomy represents a departure from the practice of Saul's day.[35] On the question of the ark, much can be explained in terms of changing situation rather than conflicting ideology. In the desert wanderings, God often had occasion to meet dramatically with (Moses and) Israel from the tabernacle (*e.g.* Nu. 14:10). Deuteronomy, however, is legislating for the regular, ongoing and unspectacular worship in the land. It is impossible to develop the point further here.[36] But in general it may be said that in the whole discussion much depends on how one selects and gives weight to biblical passages and vocabulary. And Noth's misunderstanding of 1 Samuel 14:32ff. shows the extent to which a false initial idea can lead to weak exegesis which then reinforces the false idea. J. Milgrom has made a number of damaging observations on the way in which Weinfeld has handled biblical vocabulary in constructing his view of a demythologizing Deuteronomy.[37]

2. *'Deuteronomism'.* One of the most influential contributions to modern Pentateuchal study derives from a work that mainly deals with Joshua-2 Kings. M. Noth (again) argues, however,[38] that the real beginning of this sequence, which he believes is the work, in its final form, of a single author, is the book of Deuteronomy; and indeed that chs. 1-4 of Deuteronomy were prefixed to an already existing form of the book expressly as an introduction to the whole complex, Deuteronomy-2 Kings. This proposal has come to dominate Deuteronomy studies,[39] and has wider implications for the Pentateuch in that it leads to the idea of a *Tetrateuch* (*viz* Gn.-Nu.) as a basic editorial unit rather than von Rad's *Hexateuch* (Gn.-Jo.).[40] This in turn has implications for such questions as whether the Yahwist originally included a conquest narrative in his account.

At first glance Noth's Deuteronomist (Dtr) does not appear to threaten traditional views of the Pentateuch too seriously. It is not unreasonable to think that someone in the exile edited a large body of inherited material and used it to show that it was Israel's chronic apostasy that had brought about the exile.[41] (The regular form particularly of 2 Kings together with the fact that the story ends with the final deportation to Babylon and its immediate

[32] See M. Noth, *Leviticus* (London: SCM, 1965), pp. 129f.

[33] Von Rad, *Studies*, pp. 38f. Another major work committed to the belief that Deuteronomy is the achievement of crusading demythologizers is that of M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972): see especially pp. 19ff. For a different view, see J. G. McConville, 'God's Name and God's Glory', *TB*, 30 (1979), pp. 149-163.

[34] *E.g.* Noth, *Leviticus*, pp. 129f.

[35] By J. M. Grintz, 'Do not eat the blood', *ASTI*, 8 (1970-1971), pp. 78-105.

[36] I have done so in 'God's Name and God's Glory' *(op. cit.)*, pp. 153ff.

[37] D. Milgrom, 'The Alleged "Demythologization" and "Secularization" in Deuteronomy', *IEJ* (1973), pp. 156-161. See also his *Studies in Levitical Terminology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1970). For a full-length study of the character of deuteronomic law in relation to other Pentateuchal law, see my forthcoming monograph, *Cultic Laws in Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: JSOT).

[38] In *The Deuteronomistic History*, first published in German in 1943, but now issued in translation by JSOT, Sheffield, 1982.

[39] M. Weinfeld, *op. cit.*, distinctive and influential in its own way, accepts Noth's basic proposals as a presupposition, as on, *e.g.* p. 3.

[40] G. von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), pp. 1ff. *Cf.* his *OT Theology*, I (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), pp. 129ff.

[41] It should be said that there is now some argument as to how many major 'deuteronomistic' redactions of Jo.-2 Ki. there actually were. See R. D. Nelson, *The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), for the view that there were two.

consequences suggests this.) But the theory does, of course, build on a Josianic 'Ur'-Deuteronomy, and suggests that certain parts of the book (especially chs. 1-4) are exilic.

And there is a more serious consideration. Noth published his monograph on 'Dtr' some years before G. E. Mendenhall pointed out parallels between the structure of Hittite treaties and certain sections of the Old Testament – and the application of the treaty parallels to Deuteronomy came later still.[42] The treaty structure of Deuteronomy is still perhaps the most important single factor in modern Pentateuchal criticism, though not all scholars take it seriously as such.[43]

The debate as to how strongly the parallels argue a second millennium date for Deuteronomy as opposed to a first millennium date cannot be entered here.[44] But it is worth pointing out that, in claiming that chs. 1-4 were affixed to Deuteronomy by the exilic author, Noth took no account whatever of the book's treaty form, nor specifically of the fact that those very chapters constitute precisely the so-called 'historical prologue'of the treaty.[45] Some modern scholars have attempted to marry the insight as to treaty-structure with Noth's theory.[46] Others, however, despite the benefit of a hindsight which Noth could not have, have failed to confront the issue.[47] If then, the Hittite parallels do argue a second millennium date for Deuteronomy, the implications are weighty, not only for the Pentateuch but for criticism of everything from Genesis to 2 Kings.

Ancient Near Eastern studies have produced a further argument against the deuteronomistic theory. Essential to Noth's view is the premise, long held,[48] that there is a distinctive deuteronomic style, and that this style is a phenomenon datable to a particular period (*viz* the seventh century). K. A. Kitchen and others, however, have urged that many of the features of so-called deuteronomic style in fact constitute the stock-in-trade of treaty language in large parts of the ancient Near East, and spanning long periods of time.[49] In particular the motif of threatened loss of land is widespread and conventional in the treaties, and therefore is a poor guide to the dating of any document.[50]

Concluding observations

It is impossible in the space available to treat every aspect of Pentateuchal study.[51] The present remarks should be seen merely as supplementary to the standard introductory literature, not least in preceding issues of this journal (and its predecessor).[52] Much important modern literature has not been mentioned. The character of the patriarchal narratives is perhaps the burning issue of the day (not treated here largely because of the Selman article just noted), and the student should be aware of A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (eds.). *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives,*[53] which contain much material that counters the scepticism of the trends set by T. L. Thompson and J. van Seters.[54] On the question of literary compositeness or unity, reference should be

[42] G. E. Mendenhall, in *Biblical Archaeologist,* 17 (1954), pp. 26-46, 50-76. The application of his discovery to Deuteronomy was made by M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), and by K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: IVP, 1966), pp. 90-102.

[43] As a factor in dating Deuteronomy, it is dismissed as 'overpressed' by R. E. Clements, *op. cit.,* p. 118. On the other hand, P. C. Craigie takes it completely seriously in his commentary on Deuteronomy, *op. cit.,* pp. 22ff.

[44] Kline, Kitchen and Craigie stand on one side of it. For the other see M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomic School,* pp. 59ff.; D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: PBI, 1963).

[45] See Kitchen, *op. cit.,* or Craigie, *op. cit.,* pp. 22ff., for an account of the treaty-form and how it works out in Deuteronomy.

[46] See A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (London: Oliphants, 1979), pp. 29f., who attributes the present treaty-form to the second dtistic. layer of redaction. On such a view, however, it is hard to explain why Deuteronomy is cast in a form nearest to second millennium *Hittite* treaties.

[47] As A. G. Auld, *Joshua, Moses and the Land* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), a recent study of the book of Joshua which leans heavily on Noth.

[48] See above, n. 3.

[49] K. A. Kitchen in J. B. Payne (eds.), *New Perspectives on the OT* (Waco:Word, 1970), pp. 1-24, especially pp. 17ff. The point is currently being worked out in detail by J. Niehaus of Liverpool University, who has outlined it in a paper read at the Tyndale Fellowship OT Study Group, 1982, entitled 'Observations on the Deuteronomistic History', and deposited in Tyndale Library, Cambridge.

[50] Kitchen, *ibid.,* pp. 5ff.

[51] For a full-scale and very new treatment see V. P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch,* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982).

[52] *E.g.* K. A. Kitchen, 'The Bible in its Context', *TSF Bulletin,* 59-64 (1971-1972); G. J. Wenham, 'Trends in Pentateuchal Criticism since 1950' *TSF Bulletin,* 70 (1974), pp. 1-6; M. J. Selman 'Comparative Methods and the Patriarchal Narratives', *Themelios,* 3 (1977), pp. 9-16. Standard conservative works, while in some respects dated, are still useful: *e.g.* D. T. Allis, *The Five Books of Moses* (Philadelphia: PRPC, 1943); G. Ch. Aalders, *A Short Introduction to the Pentateuch* (London: Tyndale Press, 1949). R. K. Harrison's *Introduction to the OT* (London: IVP, 1970) contains an important account of the rise of critical Pentateuchal study.

[53] Leicester: IVP, 1980. All the essays are valuable. Those by G. J. Wenham and J. J. Bimson, might be singled out. Wenham takes on the religion of the patriarchs and the critical questions arising from the names they use for God; Bimson pins down a date for them at an early point in the wide range of possibilities canvassed. This follows the thesis presented in his *Redating the Exodus* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978; [now in a second edition by Almond Press]) that the exodus in fact occurred in the fifteenth century as suggested by the biblical data and not in the thirteenth century as is widely held by scholars, including many conservatives. The claim of Thompson that the patriarchal narratives do not even intend to be historiographical can only be countered by evidence that they do in fact reflect historical circumstances, and these essays go a considerable way towards doing just that.

[54] T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974); J. van Seters, *op. cit.*

made to G. J. Wenham's fascinating demonstration of the unity of the flood-narrative, taking into consideration both literary features and the Babylonian parallel account, the Gilgamesh epic.[55] Not least among modern developments is the fact that conservative commentaries on Pentateuchal books are beginning to appear in some numbers.[56]

Our survey of modern trends in writing on the Pentateuch has shown that there is no shortage of good conservative writing, both defensive and creative. It is worth stressing again at the end of this survey that it is important not to be merely defensive. Often, indeed, energy can be wasted by the attempt to defend that which should not be defended. It is nowhere claimed, for example, that Moses wrote Genesis. And indeed, a large part of the narrative in which Moses figures is in fact in the third person. The significance of the fact that Deuteronomy 1:1 locates Moses' speeches in the plains of Moab 'beyond the Jordan' (implying an author's stance actually *in* the promised land) should not be missed. And as soon as we agree that Moses may not have done it all himself, the possibility is open to a variety of hands. The student who accepts the Bible as the Word of God then, should not fear the idea of multiple authorship as such. It could well be that certain narratives have undergone expansion. On the other hand, it is right to question the assumptions underlying specific theories of multiple authorship, theories which view the Bible's story of the origins of Israel and the world as so much fiction, and the formation of the Pentateuch as the coalescence of divergent and even conflicting traditions of dubious authenticity.

[55] G. J. Wenham, 'The Structure of the Flood Narrative', in *VT*, 28 (1978), pp. 336-348. Contrast G. von Rad's careful separation of the supposed J and P narratives in his commentary on Genesis (London: SCM, 1961), pp. 112-135.

[56] *E.g.* Craigie on *Deuteronomy, op. cit.*, Wenham on *Numbers* (Leicester: IVP, 1981), and on *Leviticus, op. cit.* This last work is notable for its interpretation of clean and unclean food and other aspects of the rituals of ancient Israel, and also helpfully draws attention to the work of those scholars who, in dating P prior to D, have delivered a challenge to the traditional documentary hypothesis. Watch for further volumes in the NICOT series, and for a new series by Word books.

Doing and interpreting: an examination of the relationship between theory and practice in Latin American liberation theology

Miroslav Volf

This paper was presented to the conference of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians in 1982. The author comes from Yugoslavia and taught at the Biblical-Theological Institute in Zagreb before beginning his doctoral studies at Tübingen University.

As is well known, Latin American liberation theology understands itself not as another 'genitive theology' (as is, for instance, theology *of* work), but as a *new way of doing theology in general.* The new definition of theology as 'a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word'[1] suggests that in Latin American liberation theology we have to do with a 'Copernican change in theology'.[2] The hermeneutical-methodological *novum* of this theology from which one can explain most of its special characteristics is that it proposes to invert the traditional relationship between theory and practice. Unlike theology till recently, liberation theology puts practice – in particular, the practice of liberation – in the centre of theological work. It is from this centre that theological reflection should originate, and towards this centre that it should lead. To return to the metaphor of a Copernican change, after theologizing had proved to be unfruitful when practice rotated around theory, liberation theologians decided to try to reverse the process and make theory rotate around practice.

This Copernican change in theology has its prehistory in philosophy. I am not referring to Kant as the metaphor may suggest. Rather, I am thinking of a new conception of philosophy which has developed in modern times.[3] At least in some circles, philosophers have come to believe that the proper task of

[1] G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM, 1974), p. 13.

[2] J. Miguez-Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* (London: SPCK, 1975), p. 81.

[3] For the history and the discussion of the problem, see N. Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1967), and H. Arendt, *Vita activa* (München: Pieper, 1981), esp. pp. 244-317.

philosophy is not to operate in a field of abstract thinking and ask, for instance, questions about presuppositions of knowledge. Instead, philosophy should be seen as a means of changing the world. The idea that the results of philosophical inquiry should be of benefit to the society is, of course, not new. One has only to think of Plato's *Republic.* Nevertheless, Plato would have been alarmed by this new understanding of philosophy. For it satisfied Plato if philosophy directed itself to changing society. His modern colleagues, however, can justify the pursuit of philosophy only to the extent that it accomplishes its goal of changing society. Indeed, that goal is its primary purpose.

The new understanding of the relation between theory and practice finds its classical and most influential expression in the thinking of Karl Marx. His (and his teacher, Hegel's) views on that problem are still influential in the philosophical discussion on the theory-practice problem today. Liberation theologians' reflections on this problem are deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition mentioned and cannot be understood apart from it.

In the first part of my paper I will discuss the philosophical background of liberation theologians' understanding of the relation between theory and practice. I will concentrate here on Karl Marx, whose name recurs often in the publications of liberation theologians. This background will set the stage for the second part of my paper in which I will discuss the adoption and theological adaptation in liberation theology of Karl Marx's understanding of the relation between theory and practice. In the third and last part I will attempt to give a critical assessment of the important hermeneutical-methodological suggestion offered by liberation theologians.

Before starting the analysis I would like to make two comments. Liberation theology intends to be a contextualized theology. Thus it is, as some liberation theologians like to remind Europeans, difficult even to understand it from outside, let alone to evaluate it critically. Yet, the Latin American situation provides not so much the content but the *occasion* for the liberation theologians' understanding of the relation between theory and practice. The content is quite European. I hope also that my decision to treat liberation theology more or less as a unit will not do too great an injustice to the often overlooked diversity that exists among liberation theologians. On the basic problem I am dealing with I can detect enough agreement to justify a unified treatment.

1. The philosophical background

Until modern times, traditional attitudes in western philosophy (and to a somewhat lesser degree in western theology) toward the problem of the relation between theory and practice have been determined by the Greek philosophers' attitude toward that problem. Theoretical knowledge, which consisted in contemplating the unchangeable order of the universe and its divine origin, was pursued for its own sake. The point of contemplation was precisely to go beyond the mere utility and purposefulness of things and to understand them as they are in themselves. To contemplate was an end in itself and the highest possible human activity. It was considered the activity of the divine in man. Practical involvement in the world, though important, was an inferior type of activity.[4]

In modern times a radical change has come about in the traditional hierarchical classification of *vita contemplativa* (the contemplative life) and *vita activa* (the life of action). Theory understood as contemplation of truth has practically been done away with.[5] Over against the Greek preference for theory as opposed to practice a new consciousness has developed: the truth opens itself up, not to beholding but to doing and to changing. Philosophers have thus, as Hegel put it, ceased to be secluded monks. They have become 'entangled in the situation of the present – in the world and its course and progress'.[6] In his philosophy Hegel tried to reconcile the Greek emphasis on the self-sufficiency of theory with the increasing modern stress on practice. It is beyond the scope of this paper to indicate the shape this attempt took.[7] For my purpose it suffices to indicate that Hegel left a legacy which impressed subsequent philosophers as an absolute philosophical system which argued (and quite irresistibly so)[8] for the unity of reason and reality. 'What is reasonable is real; what is real is reasonable."[9]

The conditions (reality) in the 1830s, however, were anything but reasonable. It was in the context of 'a perfect unphilosophy' (einer vollendeten Unphilosophie),[10] that Marx together with other young Hegelians developed his programme of the *actualization of philosophy.* This idea is already present in his *Dissertation.* 'What was an inner light [Hegel's philosophy] becomes a consuming flame

[4] *Cf.* Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* X, 1177b.
[5] Arendt, *op. cit.,* p. 283.
[6] G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke,* XX (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 76. Here, as elsewhere below in citations from German works, an English translation has been given.
[7] On the topic, see M. Riedel, *Theorie und Praxis im Denken Hegels* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965).
[8] *Cf.* Marx's letter to his father about his first encounters with Hegel's philosophy, *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Werke,* I (referred to in future as *MEW*) (Berlin: Diez, 1956), pp. 3-11.
[9] Hegel, *op. cit.,* VII, p. 20.
[10] K. Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1978), p. 107.

that turns outwards. The consequence is that the world's becoming philosophical is at the same time philosophy's becoming worldly' (daß das Philosophisch-Werden der Welt zugleich ein Weltlich-Werden der Philosophie . . . ist).[11] Philosophy must direct itself to the miserable and contradictory world outside and become a 'practical person' (Marx). As a critique of the existing state of affairs philosophy must be a theory with the goal of liberating practice.[12] Once the world has become 'theoretical' (corresponding to theory) theory loses its reason for being. In this way the unity of theory and practice will be realized.[13]

The malicious story sometimes told about Hegel holds true for his pupil. When confronted with the facts (of the world) contradicting the proposed theory Marx indeed said: So much the worse for the facts. The world had to be changed.

The whole programme of the actualization of philosophy is expressed *in nuce* by Marx's famous – and for the methodology of liberation theology very important – eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. 'The philosophers have only given different *interpretations* of the world; the crucial thing is to *change* it.'[14]

The reasons why reality itself, not merely the ideas about it, had to be changed are developed in Marx's book *German Ideology*. Marx had come to believe that 'Consciousness can never be anything other than conscious being, and the being of man is his real life-process' (das Sein der Menschen ist ihr wirklicher Lebensprozeß).[15] For this reason the starting-point of Marx's new view of history is not thought but material production. From the standpoint of material production he tries to explain the various forms of consciousness (religion, morality, *etc.*).[16] The autonomy of theoretical products is only a sham. They are mere 'ideological reflexes and echoes'.[17] Thus practice should not be derived from ideas, but *vice versa:* the formation of ideas should be explained from material production.

As a result of the division of labour, however, theory has a tendency to become self-sufficient and seemingly live a life independent from practice. Marx calls such theory ideology because it is not aware of its own presuppositions in the real world. Moreover, it serves to justify the world of which it is a reflex.

Marx wrote *German Ideology* in order to show that because consciousness is conscious existence it is impossible to change even ideas, let alone their material causes, by mere intellectual critique, as young Hegelians claimed.[18] Only when reality is changed do ideas change too. Marx's main point of criticism of Feuerbach and the young Hegelians was, however, not their ineffectiveness. His point was that an attempt only to interpret the existing world differently does not produce only an additional interpretation. By merely interpreting the world one actually *confirms* it as it presently exists.[19] Interpretations alone, no matter how revolutionary they may claim to be, are in fact reactionary. They are ideologies – a designation liberation theology associates with much of western theology.

Marx calls ideology a false consciousness. He does not locate its falsity in its failure to correspond to reality. Its falsity lies rather in its failure to be emancipatory. Obviously, Marx is working with a new notion of truth which had profound influence on liberation theology. In the second thesis on Feuerbach Marx criticises the traditional concept of truth as *adequatio intellectus cum re.*

> The question as to whether there is any objective truth in human thinking is not a question of theory, but a *practical* question. It is in praxis that man must prove truth, *i.e.* reality and power, this worldliness of his thinking. (In der Praxis muß der Mensch die Wahreit, *i.e.* Wirklichkeit und Macht, Diesseitigkeit seines Denkens beweisen.) The debate about the reality or unreality of thinking that is isolated from praxis is a purely scholastic question.[20]

The truth is not arrived at by making theory correspond to reality. In Marx's opinion, this attempt would be only an interpretative approval of the existing situation. Mere interpretations are, in deepest sense of the word, mis-interpretations because they implicitly acknowledge that 'the being of a thing or of a person is at the same time its essence' (das Sein eines Dinges oder Menschen zugleich sein Wesen ist).[21] But for Marx the essence of the world as the 'truth of the here and now' (Wahrheit des Diesseits) must first be established.[22] True thinking as opposed to false consciousness is for

[11] Marx, *MEW, EB* I, p. 329. For the whole question of actualization of philosophy, see T. Vereš, *Filizofsko-teološki dijalog s Marxom* (Philosophical-theological dialogue with Marx) (Zagreb: Filozofsko theološki institut Družbe Isusove, 1973), pp. 145-160.

[12] *Cf.* M. Riedel, *System und Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 21.

[13] Löwith, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

[14] Marx, *MEW*, III, p. 7.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 5. 'The new philosophy,' writes Feuerbach two years before Marx wrote his *Theses on Feuerbach*, 'bases itself upon the truth of love. . . . Love (is) the criterion of being – the criterion of truth and reality. Where there is no love, there is also no truth.' (L. Feuerbach, *Sämmthliche Werke*, II (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1959), p. 299).

[21] Marx, *MEW*, III, p. 42.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 379.

Marx thinking which reveals its power to establish the truth of this world. Revolutionary practice is the criterion of truth. This means that the question whether a theory is true (in traditional sense) loses significance. The most important question is whether a theory serves the development of man's human potentialities.[23]

If in Greek philosophy theory was an end in itself, with Marx it loses its independence and becomes completely subordinate to revolutionary practice.

2. Liberation theology

A brief look at the situation in Latin America will help us understand better the need for liberation theologians to work with what they like to call 'Marx's epistemological revolution'.[24] Latin Americans perceive their own economic-political situation in the following way:

> The sociopolitical, political, and cultural situation of the Latin American peoples challenges our Christian conscience. Unemployment, malnutrition, alcoholism, infant mortality, illiteracy, prostitution, an ever-increasing inequality between the rich and the poor, racial and cultural discrimination, exploitation, and so forth are the facts that define a situation of institutionalized violence in Latin America.[25]

Moreover, the relation of Latin America to the countries of the so-called First World cannot be adequately described by such neutral terms as under-development and development. It is rather a relationship of dependence and dominance. The suffering of the majority of Latin American people is not due to some natural cause, but results from unjust structures.

What is the task of theology in this situation? Should it and can it be to ask the traditional theological questions such as 'What should we *believe*?' or 'How should we *speak* about our faith so that the *unbeliever* can *understand* us?' As Gutierrez has pointed out, theology in Latin America is faced not with the non-believer but with the non-person who is not interested in a new interpretation but in a new way of life. In this situation the theological question will not be how to speak of God in a world come of age, but how to proclaim him as a Father in a world that is not human.[26] A mere theoretical justification of God in terms of finding some way to understand the relationship between a good God and a situation of oppression will not suffice. It is not, suggests liberation theology, that our *thinking* about God has to be reconciled with reality. 'It is reality that must be reconciled with the Kingdom of God, and the quandary of theodicy must be resolved in praxis rather than in theory.'[27] The central question which theology must answer is thus: 'What is to be *done*?'[28]

From the central theological question, What is to be done?, follows the central hermeneutical question, What method should theology use in order not to lose sight of the Word of God, and at the same time be true to the necessity of liberation? In other words, what structure should the hermeneutical process have so that theology can be a *theology* of a particular kind of *liberation,* a liberation theology?

In order to give a proper answer to its basic theological and hermeneutical questions, liberation theology finds it necessary to make a radical change in traditional theological methodology. The first step in theological work should *not* be to go to the biblical documents and only *after that* try to apply a thereby acquired theory to a concrete situation as was traditionally done.[29] Such a procedure presupposes the existence of a historical and absolute, pre-existing truth. For liberation theology (drawing here from Marx) truth lies not in the realm of ideas but on the plane of history.[30] Along these lines, Assmann argues for the necessity of overcoming the 'word-action' scheme of theological work, in which the step from theory to practice is often never taken so that it becomes simply a 'word-word' scheme. Following the modern understanding of the relation between theory and practice, liberation theology sees a need to replace the traditional scheme by an 'action-word' scheme of theological thinking. Praxis ought to be the centre of gravity around which theological work rotates. As Sobrino puts it, liberation theology is a 'by-product of a concrete faith that is pondered and lived out in terms of the question raised by involvement in the praxis of liberation. Its aim is to make that involvement more critically-minded and creative'.[31] Theology should arise from a particular kind of praxis and aim at it.

The most crucial insight of liberation theology is, however, not that theologizing which is true to its task should be done out of a particular praxis and for

[23] *Cf.* L. Kolakowski, *Die Hauptströmungen des Marxismus* (München: Pieper, 1976), p. 199.

[24] J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (NY: Orbis, 1978), p. 35.

[25] 'Documento Final', I, 1, 1, cited by Miguez-Bonino, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

[26] G. Gutierrez, 'Liberation Theology and Proclamation', *Concilium,* 10, (1974), nr. 6, p. 69.

[27] J. Sobrino, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

[28] *Cf.* C. Geffré, 'A Prophetic Theology', *Concilium,* 10 (1974), nr. 6, p. 11.

[29] *Cf.* Miguez-Bonino, *op. cit.*, p. 88; Geffré, *loc. cit.* For a short but helpful discussion of this problem by different liberation theologians see J. A. Kirk's excellent article, 'The Bible in Latin American Liberation Theology' in N. K. Gottwald and A. C. Wire (eds.), *The Bible and Liberation* (Berkeley: Radical Religion Reader, 1976), pp. 157-165.

[30] Miguez-Bonino, *op. cit.*, pp. 72, 88.

[31] Sobrino, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

a particular praxis. In fact, this insight is but a consequence of the more basic insight that consciously or unconsciously one always in reality *does* theologize from a particular practice in life. Sociology of knowledge has shown that there is no such a thing as 'autonomous knowledge', which would not be closely tied with a given life situation. This means that 'Knowledge . . . always contains . . . implicitly or explicitly a praxis-related and ethical character.'[32] Knowledge is never ethically neutral.

The rejection of 'autonomous knowledge' forms the basis for liberation theologians' criticism of western theology. Western theologians, who are for the most part led by the ideal of objectivity, are generally not conscious of the connection between their theologizing and their life and practice. They are thus unaware of the real origin and function of their theologizing. When theology limits itself to the task of mere interpretation, it actually leaves 'the reality to the status quo and justifies it at least indirectly'.[33] Western theology, allegedly merely interpretative, functions in reality as an ideology. It serves the function of preserving the established order.[34]

From this general supposition that, to a large extent, practice influences theory both in its origin and in its goal, follows, according to liberation theologians, an imperative to do theology from a particular praxis. Though the term 'praxis' (as orthopraxis) is hardly used univocally by liberation theologians,[35] it generally refers to practical political involvement for the liberating the poor and the oppressed. Orthopraxis is, however, not an immediate and naive reaction to the cry of the people for liberation. This cry of the people must be heard through the medium of the social sciences, which analyse the causes of poverty and oppression.

Only when involved in the praxis of liberation as mediated through the social sciences should a theologian come to Scripture as the source of revelation. The interpreter must come to the text not merely with a proper pre-*understanding,* as Bultmann urged, but with proper pre-*involvement.* Based on this pre-involvement, the task of a theologian is to read afresh the gospel message in the light of it. This re-reading of the Bible aims again at praxis. It should help the praxis of liberation to become more radical and universal.[36] Sobrino describes this process of re-reading the gospel witness to Christ in the following way: 'We are trying to attain our understanding of Jesus based on a praxis that follows Jesus in proclaiming the kingdom, in denouncing injustice, and in realizing that kingdom in real life. . . . That, in turn, will lead to a new round of discipleship.'[37] This hermeneutical process is described by Miguez-Bonino as a constant movement 'Between the text in its historicity and our own historical reading of it in obedience.'[38] From pre-involvement one comes to the text of the Bible with the intention not to acquire a new self-sufficient theory but to inform and illuminate praxis. Praxis which has been informed in this way then becomes a new starting-point from which one comes to the biblical text. One is thus involved in a 'hermeneutical circulation'.

The fact that one pole in the hermeneutical circulation is the text in its historicity corrects a possible misunderstanding of the emphasis on orthopraxis for correct interpretation of the text. Orthopraxis is meant not to displace the historical-critical method of interpretation but to supplement it.

In the hermeneutical circulation between the praxis of liberation and the biblical text, the praxis of liberation is given a privileged position by the more radical wing of liberation theology. The hermeneutical circulation serves not so much to discover what both orthodoxy and orthopraxis should be. The point at issue is to determine what orthodoxy should be on the basis of *already known orthopraxis.* Following Assmann, Segundo says: 'We do not accept that a single dogma can be studied under any other final criterion than that of its impact on the praxis.'[39] Praxis of liberation is thus considered *the* criterion for determining the *truth* of a particular theology. Humanizing praxis verifies or falsifies that theology. Important for the evaluation of theologies is not so much their *cognitive content,* but the *liberative impulse* they provide. This, of course,

[32] J. Sobrino, 'Theologisches Erkennen in der europäischen und lateinamerikanischen Theologie', in K. Rahner *et al.* (eds.), *Befreiende Theologie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1977), p. 124.

[33] *Ibid.,* p. 33.

[34] Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation,* p. 249. As Mannheim put it, 'There is implicit in the word "ideology" the insight that in certain situations the collective consciousness of certain groups obscures the real conditions of society both to itself and others and thereby stabilizes it' (K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (NY: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1936), p. 40).

[35] It is surprising that one rarely finds a precise definition of 'praxis' by liberation theologians. Thus it has a wide range of meaning, from mere 'activity' as opposed to 'passivity', as in the phrase 'praxis of hearing the word of God' (Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads,* p. 175), to a more technical Marxist sense as '. . . human activity which reshapes the person himself and the world' (die menschliche Tätigkeit welche den Menschen selbst und die Welt umstaltet) (J. C. Scannone, 'Das Theorie-Praxis-Verhältnis in der Theologie der Befreiung', in K. Rahner *Befreiende Theologie et al.* (eds.), p. 78). This, of course, causes confusion, and that not only for the interpreter.

[36] Gutierrez, 'Liberation Theology and Proclamation', pp. 67-70.

[37] Sobrino, *op. cit.,* p. xxv.

[38] Miguez-Bonino, *op. cit.,* p. 102.

[39] J. L. Segundo, 'Capitalism-Socialism: A Theological Crux', *Concilium,* 10 (1974), nr. 6, pp. 115-116.

makes sense only under the presupposition of 'autonomy of praxis'.[40]

If the praxis of liberation is both a theological starting-point and at the same time the decisive criterion of the truth of a theology, then praxis of liberation becomes the decisive *locus theologicus.* The primary 'text' for the hermeneutic is not the written witness to Jesus of the prophets and apostles, but the 'global reality of history clarified by the voice of the human sciences'.[41] The Bible has to be read anew from the perspective of the 'Bible of history', understood as the Word revealed in the cosmos and the development of humanity.[42]

When liberation theologians plead for a hermeneutic of liberative praxis they are trying not only to take seriously 'Marx's epistemological revolution'. In addition, they claim that a hermeneutic of praxis is demanded by the Christian revelation.[43] For example, Sobrino's decision to let his Christology grow out of a hermeneutic of praxis derives from the prior determinative question, 'What kind of hermeneutic seems to be one that will indeed do justice to our present object of study, *i.e.,* Christ?'[44] For Sobrino only a hermeneutic of following Jesus (or of praxis) is adequate for understanding Christ and his work.

One of Sobrino's most important presuppositions for understanding the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for example, is 'a specific praxis which is nothing else but the following of Jesus'.[45] He grounds this view in the fact that resurrection appearances in the New Testament are always bound up with a calling to mission.[46] A hermeneutic adequate for understanding the resurrection must be one of apostolate. The resurrection of Christ can be understood only in the process of proclamation, and, above all, the transformation of the world. This desire and intention to bring something new to the world is the common horizon which is shared by both the text and the interpreter and which makes it possible for us to comprehend the resurrection. Only in that case will the interpreter be following in the footsteps of the texts.'[47]

Liberation theology claims also more direct biblical evidence which supports a hermeneutic of praxis. The Old Testament prophets seem to identify the knowledge of God with doing of his will (*cf.* Je. 22:16). In Johannine literature correct knowledge of God is contingent on correct practice (Jn. 7:17). (In the third part of the paper I will discuss some further biblical evidence supporting a hermeneutic of praxis.)

Modern inversion of the traditional understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, some biblical impulses, and a situation of oppression have led liberation theologians to put the praxis of liberation in the centre of theological thinking. For them, praxis is a starting-point, a goal, and in some cases, the decisive criterion of theologizing. The hermeneutic of liberation theology is aptly summarized in Assmann's words, '. . . from action through the Word to the word of action'.[48]

3. Assessment

Liberation theologians have rendered important service to theology in forcefully drawing fresh attention to the fact that theology must always be oriented to practice. The Greek concept of theory as self-sufficient contemplation is hardly applicable to theology.[49] The first theological efforts in the New Testament are good witnesses to that fact. They arose not from detached contemplation, but out of concrete situations in the life of the church. Furthermore, they were aimed at the life of the church.[50] This was not merely historically conditioned and coincidental to the structure of the theology expressed in these texts. For Christian theology has to do, not with the unchanging order of the universe, but with salvation. Christian theology is based on salvation as already realized in Christ and aims at mediating this salvation in history by the church. Because its purpose is the mediation of salvation to the world, Christian theology is an eminently practical science. Protestant orthodoxy has expressed this truth by defining theology as a practical *habitus* or *scientia.*[51] In modern European

[40] F. Castillo, *Theologie aus der Befreiung des Volkes* (München/Mainz: Kaiser/Grünewald, 1978), p. 23.

[41] R. Vidales, 'Some Recent Publications in Latin America on Liberation Theology', *Concilium,* 10 (1974), nr. 6, p. 134.

[42] Vidales, *loc. cit.*

[43] For a brief analysis of biblical passages dealing with doing as a presupposition for knowing God, see Miguez-Bonino, *op. cit.,* pp. 89-91.

[44] Sobrino, *op. cit.,* p. 20.

[45] *Ibid.,* p. 256.

[46] *Ibid.,* p. 254. Sobrino admits that praxis as a hermeneutical principle for understanding the resurrection is present in the New Testament in 'a highly stylized way' (*ibid.,* pp. 253-254).

[47] *Ibid.,* p. 254.

[48] H. Assmann, *Oppression — Liberacion, desafio a los christianos* (Montevideo: Terra Nova, 1971), p. 42, cited by Vidales, *op. cit.,* p. 132.

[49] Augustine's attempt to strike a balance between his desire for contemplation of God influenced by Greek philosophy, and Christ's commandment to love is instructive. In *De civitate Dei* he writes, 'What counts is whether he lovingly holds to truth and does what charity demands. Indeed, one has to avoid being committed to leisurely life so as to give his thought to one's neighbour's needs as well as being so absorbed in action as to dispense with the contemplation of God' (xix, p. 19).

[50] G. J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977), p. 67.

[51] *Cf.* E. Hirsch, *Hilfsbuch zum Studium der Dogmatik* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1964), pp. 301-302.

theology this truth has found expression in the designation of practical theology as the crown of theological studies.[52]

After agreeing with liberation theologians in their emphasis on the practical orientation of theology, I wish to plead against them for the ultimate priority (in logical, not necessarily in temporal terms!) of theory in theologizing. This priority seems to me to be implied by the nature of Christian revelation. As the biblical witnesses indicate, God's final and perfect revelation to mankind occurred in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1ff.; Jn. 1:1-18). This revelation is accessible to us only through the medium of a particular kind of theory – the written word of the Holy Scriptures. It is only through this prophetic and apostolic witness that Christ, the Truth, is accessible to us.

The task of theology is to make it possible that this Truth– no other – makes men free. Thus, in order to be practical, theology has first of all to be theoretical. Correct practice will always ultimately depend on correct interpretation. Against the background of final revelation in Christ, ortho-praxis cannot be considered as an *autonomous locus theologicus* from which orthodoxy is developed and judged. In so far it wants to be *Christian,* and not only world-changing, practice must fall under the critical judgment of the Word of God. Otherwise, theology is in danger of merely trying to say and to do what other emancipatory movements are saying and doing anyway.

If the Greek concept of theory as an end in itself is not appropriate to theology, neither is the modern notion of theory as a mere instrument of humanizing practice. This must be said precisely in the interest of humanizing practice. For practice can be humanizing only if it is obedient to the revelation of God, who, as Luther said, became man so that we, proud and unhappy gods, might become true men.[53] Not least for that reason, Christ the Truth, witnessed to in the Scriptures, has to remain the decisive criterion of the truth or falsity of any theory or practice claiming to be Christian.

Both of the above-mentioned theses – the eminently practical nature of theology, and the ultimate logical primacy of theory – can be traced back to the *locus classicus* of the doctrine of inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Because the Scriptures are *theopneustos* (inspired) they have primacy over practice and determine what correct practice is. But they are not given in order to become an object of abstract argumentation, as seemed to be the problem in the circles in which Timothy moved, but in order to make the man of God 'equipped for every good work' (2 Tim. 3:17). As a leading Yugoslav New Testament scholar, Bonaventura Duda, has said, 'the Word of God indeed is and wants to become the "mother of deed" '.[54]

Since theology is bound to God's revelation in Christ, it must maintain the ultimate logical primacy of theory. This, however, does not mean that practice is irrelevant in the *hermeneutical process.* In this process one must speak of the mutual influence of theory and practice upon each other.

By emphasizing the necessity of correct practice for correct understanding liberation theologians have made a lasting contribution to theology.[55] This they have done by taking seriously the challenge of Marx and the sociology of knowledge. The way we live – and the economic aspect of our lives is an important one – does influence the way we perceive reality. In saying this I do not want to repeat the all too obvious mistake of Marx in reducing the ideal super-structure ultimately to the economic factor – important as that may be. Nor is the sociology of knowledge, in its more sober forms, free from objections. As Karl Popper has indicated, the problems of the sociology of knowledge are seen already when one applies its method to the sociology of knowledge itself.[56]

Yet it remains true that social situations in which men live have a much deeper influence on their thought than traditional epistemologies have allowed for. Theologians must give more serious thought to this fact. Is it accidental - to give some contemporary examples – that a conservative North American can see the Bible as 'the undisputed book on financial success' (W. C. Wagner), whereas a radical Latin American claimed to be a revolutionary precisely because he was a priest and a theologian (C. Torres)? Theologians must face the fact that their own social situation has influenced and does

[52] 'Practical theology is the crown of theological study, because it presupposes everything else and for this reason is the end-point of study, because it leads into immediate outworking' (weil sie alles andere voraussetzt und deswegen zugleich für das Studium das letzte ist, weil sie unmittelbare Ausübung vorbereitet) (F. Schleiermacher, *WW,* 1/13 (Berlin: Rumer, 1850), p. 26).

[53] M. Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos,* 1519-1521, *WA,* V, p. 128.

[54] B. Duda, *Svijeta Razveselitelj (Christ: The Joy to the World)* (Zagreb: Kršćanska Sadašnjost, 1980), p. 38.

[55] It would actually be more proper to speak of the contribution of political theologians. The understanding of the relation between theory and practice in liberation theology is a radicalized version of the treatment of this problem by political theologians. *Cf.* J. Moltmann, 'Existenzgeschichte und Weltgeschichte', *Perspektiven der Theologie* (München: Kaiser, 1968), pp. 135ff. and J. B. Metz, *Zur Theologie der Welt* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1968).

[56] *Cf.* K. R. Popper, *Falsche Propheten* (Bern: Francke, 1958), pp. 260-274.

influence their reading of the Bible. They must make a genuine effort to analyse their social situation and in this way try to overcome their – to use liberation theologians' phraseology – 'ideological captivity'. (This holds true of course no less for 'radicals' than for 'conservatives'.) Only then will theologians be able to distinguish the voice of their own culture and that of the Word of God. Only then will they be able to apply God's both critical as well as comforting Word to their situation.

From the importance of practice (life situation) in general for theological understanding follows the importance of *ortho*-praxis for correct theologizing. Theologians should not have had to be reminded of that by Marx and his followers. Both the Old and New Testaments make it clear that there is a close relation between man's knowledge of God and his obedient doing of God's will.[57] According to Paul, love (obedient doing) and knowledge are closely related. In Colossians 1:9, Paul prays that the Colossians might be 'filled with the knowledge of his (God's) will' so that they may 'walk in a manner worthy of the Lord' and thus also increase 'in the knowledge of God'. In his prayer for the Philippians (Phil. 1:9f.) the sequence is inverted. Instead of knowledge – good works – knowledge as in Colossians, he speaks of love – knowledge – good works. This knowing-doing relation can also be expressed negatively, as in Romans 1:18, where Paul speaks of suppressing the truth by unrighteousness. A similar idea is expressed when John writes, 'For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practises the truth comes to light that his deeds might be manifested as having been done in God' (Jn. 3:20-21; *cf.* 17:6-8; 1 Jn. 4:8). In the New Testament 'Knowledge and loving action form . . . an inextricable and growing unity' (eine sich verschränkende und eine sich bildende Einheit) so that the one is unthinkable without the other'.[58]

The necessity of practice for correct understanding is indicated also by the nature of biblical texts. The texts arose for the most part out of the pastoral and missionary practice of the church. The struggle for their correct interpretation should also occur in the context of pastoral and missionary involvement. Two days before his death Luther wrote the following in his hyperbolic way, '. . . No-one (I imagine) understands Cicero's letters, unless he has had twenty years' involvement in some prominent position in the state. No-one should think he has adequately tasted the Holy Scripture, unless he has been involved in church leadership along with the prophets for a hundred years' (er habe denn hundert Jahre mit den Propheten Kirchen geleitet).[59]

Both the content and the nature of the biblical documents indicate that liberation theologians correctly emphasize the importance of orthopraxis for understanding the biblical message. A hermeneutical circulation between the text and the interpreter's obedience in love is an important constituent of a proper theological hermeneutic. This circulation should actually be a 'hermeneutical spiral' which grows 'out of our commitment in faith and corrects that commitment as we proceed. The more we know, the more we are called to respond obediently. And this is because the more we obey, the more He makes Himself known.'[60]

In the hermeneutical process, it is thus equally true that correct practice is a presupposition for correct theory as it is true that correct theory is a presupposition for correct practice. Correct interpreting takes place only when theory and practice mutually influence each other. But practice, though of crucial importance, cannot serve as a *criterion* of proper interpreting. In a hermeneutical process it is only an *instrument* for finding a theory which corresponds to the theology expressed in biblical texts. As the witness to Christ, Scripture is the only criterion of the truth of a particular theology.

Precisely because obedient doing is important for interpreting, it is of crucial importance to have a concept of doing which corresponds to the biblical texts themselves. Doing cannot be seen as autonomous if it is to offer any real help in interpreting the biblical documents. A too narrow understanding of doing, for instance, is likely to result both in 'underinterpreting' or even disregarding some aspects of the biblical message and 'overinterpreting' others.[61] This seems to me to be the case in liberation theology with its reduction of doing to the praxis of political liberation.

The biblical concept of doing as a presupposition for knowing certainly *does* include involvement – and in our situation also political involvement – in the liberation of the poor and the oppressed. But the biblical concept of doing cannot be reduced to political, liberative action alone. Paul speaks in the

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 105.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[59] Cited by H. Fausel, *D. Martin Luther*, II (Stuttgart: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 1977), p. 311.
[60] H. M. Conn, 'Theologies of Liberation: Toward a Common View', in S. N. Gundry and A. F. Johnson (eds.), *Tensions in Contemporary Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), pp. 428-429.
[61] The exodus motif is, for instance, both 'overinterpreted' in that a particular message is read into it, and 'underinterpreted' in that some of its important aspects are disregarded.

context of the relation between doing and knowing of *'every good work'* (Col. 1:10; *cf.* 2 Cor. 9:8; 2 Tim. 3:17) – a technical term for works of charity done to *both* rich and poor.[62] And the unrighteousness by which the truth is suppressed encompasses the *whole realm of the ethical,* in its most private and its societal aspects.

The emphasis on the importance of correct doing for understanding of the biblical message should by no means lead to the neglect of the historical critical method.[63] It should rather supplement it. The obedient doing can supplement the historical-critical method in that it *makes possible the preunderstanding* necessary for the interpretative task. Although Bultmann, to whom we owe the concept of pre-understanding, is not aware of the influence of doing upon understanding, he pays little attention to it. His concept of preunderstanding is consequently inadequate. The question 'of the truth of human existence'[64] is *as such* insufficient to constitute a proper preunderstanding for the interpretation of the biblical message. In its concrete content this question needs to be shaped by obedient doing of God's will. For it is he who *practises* the truth that comes to the light (Jn. 3:21).

Latin American liberation theology has rendered an important service by drawing fresh attention to the practical nature of theology. To the extent, however, that it emphasizes the autonomy of practice (following the modern inversion of the relation between theory and practice) it undermines the basic structure of Christian faith. A theologically appropriate understanding of the relation between theory and practice must take into consideration the *already-not yet* structure of Christian existence. Because of the *not yet* aspect of Christian existence, theology cannot accept the self-sufficiency of theory disinterested in practice. And because of the particular historical *already* in Christ, theology cannot accept practice freed from independent normative theory.

The most important contribution of liberation theology is its emphasis on the significance of doing (in its societal form) for correct understanding. Its limitation is excessive enthusiasm about its own discovery. For to the degree that liberation concentrates mainly on political involvement and disregards other aspects of doing significant for interpreting, its important hermeneutical discovery will produce – *mis*-understanding.

[62] *Cf.* J. Jeremias, 'Die Salbungsgeschichte Mc 14, 3-9', *ZNW,* 35 (1936), pp. 75-82.

[63] To be sure, the historical-critical method should not cling blindly to its basic principles (criticism, analogy, historical correlation and subjectivity) as formulated by E. Troeltsch in his famous article, 'Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie' (reprint in G. Sauter (ed.), *Theologie als Wissenschaft* (München: Kaiser, 1971), pp. 105-127). Stuhlmacher's addition of the principle of *Vernehmens,* which prevents the exclusion of new phenomena by the hermeneutical method itself, might be an important enrichment of the method (*cf.* P. Stuhlmacher, *Vom Verstehen das Neuen Testaments* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), pp. 205ff.).

[64] R. Bultmann, 'Das Problem der Hermeneutik', *Glauben und Verstehen,* II (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1952).

Evangelical revival and society: a historiographical review of Methodism and British society c.1750-1850

David Hempton

The author is lecturer in the Department of History in the Queen's University, Belfast.

> There is no character for whom the worldly (or selfish) man feels so much contemptuous pity as for an enthusiast, until some undeniably great result forces him to confess that enthusiasm is a powerful reality.[1]

Enthusiasm became such a powerful reality in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England that the comparative decline of spiritual excitement in the twentieth century (at least in advanced western countries) has forced many theologians into an historical pilgrimage to discover the reasons behind earlier Protestant success. This pilgrimage has often centred on John Wesley whose 'radical protestantism' is now seen as an important model for contemporary church renewal movements.[2] In fact

[1] F. W. Newman, *The Soul* (London, 1849), p. 248.

[2] See, *e.g.*, H. A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Illinois, 1980), and R. F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: an Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Exeter, 1981).

functional approach to church order, lay participation, the importance of Spirit and Word as against tradition and creeds, and his concern for spiritual discipline have been eagerly seized upon by a new generation of evangelicals disillusioned with the institutional characteristics of western churches. Accepting therefore that the study of church history can have some contemporary value, the purpose of this short bibliographical review is to assess the role of Methodism in English society during the industrial revolution through the eyes of its most useful historians. Three questions in particular need answered: Why did Methodism grow so rapidly after 1790? Why did it decline from about 1840 onwards, and what was its impact on British society? To grapple with these questions, of course, in no way undermines the fundamental point that God is the supreme agent of any spiritual revival.

1. Why did Methodism grow so rapidly after 1790?

Explanations of Methodist expansion and its unevenness have occasioned much painstaking research and considerable historical ingenuity, but the results are still tantalisingly inconclusive. Professor Hobsbawm made the first modern contribution when he stated that Methodism and political radicalism grew in roughly the same places at approximately the same time for broadly similar reasons.[3] One was simply a religious, and the other a political, expression of more profound changes in the structure of English society. Edward Thompson, while not entirely rejecting that view, offered an alternative hypothesis. He suggested that Methodist revivalism took over at the point of temporal and political defeat and was, therefore, 'a component of the psychic processes of counter revolution'. Thus Methodism is portrayed as 'the chiliasm of the defeated and the hopeless'.[4] This interpretation outraged Thompson's conservative and Methodist opponents, but it has been supported by recent regional studies which have given statistical weight to otherwise more general and individualistic impressions.[5]

An entirely different explanation is offered by Professor Ward in *Religion and Society in England 1790-1850*.[6] In his view the French Revolution was not only crucial for western political establishments but also for religious ones. This was certainly true in England where concepts of church state unity were not only theoretically formulated in Burkean language,[7] but given practical and economic expression in English localities where the alliance between gentry and clergy had been cemented in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. English society being what it was, therefore, the crisis of authority occurred in religion as well as in politics. Consequently Ward views Methodism *and* the nationwide growth of county associations for promoting itinerant evangelism as major challenges to the paternalistic Anglican establishment. From this perspective *popular evangelicalism is seen as a religious expression of radicalism and not an opiate substitute for it.* Thus, religious associations eroded the established church not by political means, but through the cottage prayer meetings and itinerant preaching of quiet humble people.

The main reason for the different approaches of Thompson and Ward is, of course, ideological. Whereas Thompson assumes that religion by its very nature is inexorably a conservative force, Ward seeks to invest popular religion with the same kind of divinity and dignity with which Thompson has already invested popular radicalism. It is also a question of perspective. Contemporary radical leaders thought of Methodism as a conservative deflection from temporal objectives whereas Anglican bishops branded it as an English version of French revolutionary excitement.

These debates have been placed on a firmer statistical foundation by the researches of Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley.[8] In explaining patterns of church growth they make a useful distinction between endogenous and exogenous factors. Under the former they list many Methodist advantages such as Arminian theology, cell structure, lay participation, Sunday schools, emotional fervour, sense of community, and effective discipling. Moreover, the link between connexionalism and

[3] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (London, 1964).

[4] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963).

[5] See *e.g.* John Baxter, 'The Great Yorkshire Revival 1792-1796: A Study of Mass Revival among the Methodists', in Michael Hill (ed.), *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, 7, (1974), pp. 46-76.

[6] W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England 1790-1850* (London, 1972). For a shorter and clearer summary of his argument see Ward, 'The Religion of the People and the Problem of Control, 1790-1830', *Studies in Church History*, 8 (1972), pp. 237-257.

[7] In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* Burke writes that 'instead of quarrelling with establishments as some do, who have made a philosophy and a religion of their hostility to such institutions, we cleave closely to them. We are resolved to keep an established church, an established monarchy, and an established democracy, each in the degree it exists, and in no greater' (Penguin edition, 1976, p. 188).

[8] R. Currie, A. Gilbert and L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford, 1977). See also, A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England* (London, 1976).

itinerancy[9] proved to be a particularly successful combination of central control and local initiative. Although all these things played their part in Methodist success, the main argument of the book is that 'a church's power to recruit arises from its proximity to, congruity with, and utility for those whom it recruits'. In other words external social factors were also important. For example, the Church of England was weakest in those areas which were industrialising fastest. Thus Methodism, as a new and flexible movement, could adapt more quickly to rapid demographic and social changes than its more cumbersome Anglican competitor. Moreover, Methodism was particularly successful amongst certain kinds of workers. According to Currie *et alia*

> During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, artisans, colliers, and miners were very heavily over-represented, merchants, manufacturers and tradesmen somewhat over-represented, labourers rather (and farmers heavily) under-represented, and the aristocracy virtually unrepresented, in the ranks of Non-conformity.[10]

Thus Methodism appealed most to those skilled manual workers, including miners, who dominated the first stage of Britain's industrial revolution, while Nonconformist churches in general were unable to repeat this success with the factory workers of the later Victorian period. Incidentally this explains why the Methodist contribution to trade unionism was strongest in mining and agricultural areas and weakest in areas dominated by factory workers.

Of course all these explanations of Methodist growth are not mutually exclusive, and, taken together, they represent a considerable improvement on the interpretations offered in the older denominational histories. Nevertheless, Professor Ward's argument is particularly persuasive not only because it is based on the widest range of sources and is therefore the most comprehensive, but because it matches Richard Carwardine's account of the equally dramatic growth of American Methodism in the same period. Within a generation Methodism became the largest American denomination due to 'the appeal of an Arminian theology whose individualistic, democratic, and optimistic emphases found a positive response in an expanding society where traditional patterns of authority and deference were succumbing to egalitarian challenge'.[11] This expansive optimism is the main reason why Methodism never caved in to the millennial speculations of some Reformed churches, and gives the lie to Thompson's chiliastic emphasis.

Summary. Methodism grew rapidly in the period 1790-1840 because its theology, organization and missionary orientation struck a chord with new industrial workers who had little time for an Anglican church, which, generally speaking, represented established social and political interests.

2. Why did Methodism decline?

Even in its heyday Methodism suffered from serious internal conflicts, and, as is frequently the case within religious connexions, the resolution of these difficulties resulted in greater denominational self-consciousness. The rising generation of Methodist preachers after Wesley's death had to face four main problems:

a. *How could they assure the government of Methodist loyalty at a time when Methodist environs were suspected of political disaffection?* The government's ace card was the threat of legislating against itinerant preaching which was the nerve centre of Wesleyan organization. Fear of this possibility coupled with a genuine aversion to popular politics convinced Wesleyan preachers of the need to expel radicals from the connexion. This policy was pressed into action in the period 1815-1820 when the post-war depression and an emerging class consciousness posed serious problems of control for Methodist preachers. In these Peterloo years, Manchester, the world's first industrial city, was the centre of attention. Wesleyan preachers were well served there by a tough circuit superintendent who expelled four hundred from the membership roll in his first year. His policy was disturbingly simple.

> The objects we have kept in view are 1st., to give the sound part of this society a decided ascendancy. 2. So to put down the opposition as to disable them from doing mischief. 3. To cure those of them who are worth saving. 4. To take the rest one by one, and crush them when they notoriously commit themselves. The plan is likely to succeed. . . . They are growing tired of radicalism, and as that dies religion will revive.[12]

Everything was done that could be done to save Manchester Methodism from radical infection including the expulsion of Sunday scholars and

[9] The *connexion* was the whole organization of Wesleyan Methodism. The term originated in the *societies* which met in *connexion* with Mr Wesley. The *itinerant preacher* was a full-time regular preacher assigned to a *circuit* (group of societies) by Conference. Each circuit also employed laymen as local preachers.

[10] Currie *et al., op. cit.*, p. 56.

[11] Richard Carwardine, *Trans-atlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Westport, Connecticut, 1978), p. 10.

[12] W. R. Ward, *The Early Correspondence of Jabez Bunting 1820-1829* (London, 1972), pp. 61-62. See also the second volume of this correspondence, Ward, *Early Victorian Methodism* (London, 1976). Both volumes contain useful introductions.

teachers for wearing radical emblems. The preachers were supported by leading Wesleyan businessmen and the results of this class conflict within Methodism was class separation as the Manchester rich built their splendid chapels in the suburbs while the poor wore their symbolic white hats in the modest Swan Street chapel.

There can be no doubt that the political and social tensions of early nineteenth century Britain put Methodist leaders in a difficult position. They believed that submission to authorities was a Christian duty, regardless of circumstances. Moreover, most of them believed, with some justification, that radical aims and methods – from parliamentary reform to machine-breaking – would not answer their grievances, which were fundamentally social and economic. Choices for Methodists then, as with Latin American Christians now, were not easy; one could simply have wished for more anguish in the making of them.

Whatever the validity of the preachers' behaviour, the results of it are more straightforward. Telling men on rock-bottom wages that poverty was a Christian blessing was simply encouraging them to separate their economic from their religious life. Those who did not abandon religion altogether were forced either to join a more radical denomination or else squeeze religion into a smaller compartment. The all-embracing holiness crusade of earlier Methodist societies was gone for good. Henceforth religion was to be more of a commodity than a way of life. Western churches have never escaped from this legacy, although thankfully, many now see the problem.

b. *What was to be done about Revivalism?*[13] The fine line dividing acceptable mass evangelism from revivalistic excesses is one that troubled Wesleyan preachers in this period as much as it had, on occassions, troubled Wesley himself. For example, the private accounts of the great Yorkshire revival of the mid-1790s by Joseph Entwistle, whose wisdom and simple devotion were admired by many, convey the tension of a man committed to revival but disturbed by the means.

> Our warm friends from Woodhouse were there: they had gone beyond all bounds of decency, such screaming and bawling I never heard. Divided into small companies in different parts of the chapel, some singing, others praying, others praising, clapping of hands, *etc.*, all was confusion and uproar. I was struck with amazement and consternation. What to do I could not tell. However, as there appeared to be no possibility of breaking up the meeting, I quietly withdrew. They continued thus until five o'clock in the morning. What shall I say to these things? I believe God is working very powerfully on the minds of many; but I think Satan, or, at least, the animal nature, has a great hand in all this.[14]

Such unease as existed, however, was tempered by the impressive figures of Methodist growth and the centrality, amongst Weslyan revivalists at least, of those distinctively Methodist instruments of itinerant preaching and love feasts. It was when revivalist groups posed similar problems within Methodism as Methodism had itself posed for the Church of England (separate chapels, connexional system, and distinctive worship), that many preachers converted unease into outright opposition.

Generally speaking, revivalism flourished either in very cohesive communities or amongst the rural immigrants to the northern industrial towns. Groups were usually led by small tradesmen with only a smattering of secular education but with a spiritually intense knowledge of the Bible. Most of the groups were beyond the control of institutions of any kind and the result was a powerful concoction of social protest laced with supernatural stimulants. This quite humble religious culture threw up a kaleidoscope of spiritual experiences from camp meetings to exorcisms, and from divine interventions to celestial visions. Many young preachers of some theological awareness, foremost among whom was Jabez Bunting, now felt they were in danger of jumping out of the frying-pan of Anglican stiffness into the fire of revivalistic excesses. As with the radicals the Wesleyan leadership decided that the best method of control was expulsion, but it was as much an expulsion of religious styles as it was of people.

In dealing with revivalism, therefore, conservative Methodist preachers tried to squeeze Methodism into a more rationalistic mould. This tactic preserved Wesleyan respectability, but it also reduced the power supply to Wesleyan evangelism.

c. *Who should control the Sunday schools and what were they to be used for?* The growth of Sunday schools from their evangelical origins in English provinces in the 1780s to their Victorian heyday is one of the most important themes not just of English educational history but of working class culture in its widest sense. Because, as Professor Laqueur has demonstrated,[15] by 1851 there were over two million Sunday scholars, a figure that represents seventy-five per cent of working class children between the ages of five and fifteen. Thus, in its own way, the recently

[13] For recent analysis of this phenomenon in nineteenth-century England see Carwardine, *op. cit.*, and John Kent, *Holding the Fort: Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (London, 1978).

[14] Baxter, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-55.

[15] T. W. Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability. Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture 1780-1850* (New Haven and London, 1976).

demolished Stockport Sunday School, a great northern cathedral which accommodated 6,000 people at its peak, is as symbolic of the English industrial revolution as are the Manchester mills or the Crystal Palace exhibiion.

Because they provided tangible benefits of literacy and cheap education, Sunday schools which were originally undenominational, were the only religious institutions that the nineteenth century public in the mass had any intention of using. The problem for the Methodists was that Sunday schools were notoriously ineffective as religious recruiting agencies, because less than four per cent of total Sunday school enrolment would at any one time belong to a church or chapel. In response, Wesleyan leaders had two policies; they wanted to tighten up denominational control, and they refused to teach writing on Sundays. Eventually both policies were successfully implemented, but it was a costly victory. Not only did the conflict reopen old sores within the connexion between preachers and laymen, but it was also well known in English localities that the Wesleyans were against secular instruction on Sundays whereas other groups continued the practice. The obvious inference was drawn by the English working classes.

The struggle for control of the Sunday schools showed that the Wesleyans were unable to remodel undenominational schools in their own image; they could only fracture them and brush some of the pieces into their own connexion. In short, what they got was denominational control at the expense of popular support. Most important of all, it was yet another example of the great divorce between the secular and the sacred, and between religion and popular culture, which has so bedevilled churches in the twentieth century.

d. *How should Wesleyan Methodism develop as a denomination in the nineteenth century?* To the problems of control posed by Sunday schools, revivalism, government pressure and radicalism were added administrative and financial difficulties. General changes in the structure and organisation of the Methodist community, such as the increases in the number of preachers (particularly married ones), and of ornate but poorly financed chapels, were cruelly exposed by the post-war economic recession. More collections offered no answer to these deep-seated structural problems. The result was the decline of rural itinerancy, the virtual disappearance of the circuit horse, and financial reliance on big urban chapels with their wealthy clientele. Such chapels were competed for by the available preaching talent so that the younger preachers had different yardsticks of success from Wesley's itinerants. Thus, the growth of big preaching centres equipped with star men, which were so admired by nineteenth-century Nonconformists and are looked back on with such nostalgia by many twentieth-century evangelicals, were not so much symbols of success as testimonies to the death of virginal Methodism. These changes also saw the end of Wesleyan Methodism as a real force in working class culture and politics, though Primitive Methodism was still influential in agricultural and mining districts.[16]

Summary. The Wesleyan ministerial leadership struggled hard to maintain control of the connexion in the first half of the nineteenth-century and withstood pressure from laymen, political radicals, revivalists, Sunday school leaders and government ministers. The result of this was the development of Wesleyan Methodism as a secure denomination replete with ministers, buildings and committees, but was also the end of Methodism as a dynamic religious force in English society. In short, early Methodism had mounted a successful challenge to one religious establishment, but through its denominational quest for respectability it was, by 1830, well on its way to creating another.

3. The impact of Methodism on British society

Halévy's view that evangelicalism in general and Methodism in particular saved England from violent social and political change has acted as a kind of smoke-screen in Methodist history. Like many chancy historical generalizations based on ideological convictions, the 'Halévy thesis' has occasioned a rash of material more distinguished by its quantity than its quality. There is even an article on the historiography of Halévy's thesis which arrives at the uninspiring, but entirely predictable, conclusion that 'the thesis has not been conclusively proved, but neither has it been disproved'.[17] The difficulty with this kind of material is that there is now a whole generation of students with views on the revolution thesis, who nevertheless know little or nothing about the social and political history of Methodism itself. However, no bibliographical review of Methodism would be complete without some attempt to grapple with the issues raised by Halévy and his supporters.

[16] See Nigel Scotland, *Methodism and the Revolt of the Field* (Gloucester, 1981).

[17] E. S. Itzkin, 'The Halévy Thesis – A Working Hypothesis? English Revivalism: Antidote for Revolution and Radicalism 1789-1815', *Church History,* 44 (1975), pp. 47-56. Although Ms Itzkin has been unable to reach any solid conclusions, her article is a useful synthesis of material which I have not wished to duplicate.

The most stimulating modern contribution is Bernard Semmel's book *The Methodist Revolution.*[18] He argues that while Wesley had no affinity with the ideas of the leading philosophers there are nevertheless important links between Wesleyan Arminianism and Enlightenment liberalism. Thus, Wesley is a man of the Enlightenment in his concern for religious toleration, his hatred of persecution and violence, his desire that all men should be saved (not just the Calvinist elect), his strenuous advocacy of slavery abolition, and his doctrines of perfection and assurance which could be seen as the theological equivalents of Enlightenment optimism. Moreover, in rejecting the twin elements of religious and political instability in seventeenth-century England, Calvinistic Antinomianism and Catholic absolutism, Wesley was firmly in the tradition of John Locke, the apostle of English liberalism. Even conversion and an austere life-style can be given an enlightened gloss by using the more liberal concepts of freedom of choice and self-improvement through personal discipline. Thus, Methodism was England's democratic revolution in the age of democratic revolutions, because it brought to masses of men a new individual liberty to decide their own faith and destiny. Methodists were, therefore, folk who could help themselves, and through their voluntary religious societies they acquired the inner discipline to enjoy their newly-found freedom in what was otherwise a bleak environment. Semmel can, therefore, conclude with Halévy that Methodism was an essential element in England's transition from a 'traditional' society, characterized by collective behaviour under authority, to a 'modern' democracy based on individual freedom. The consequences of this were 'the most characteristic qualities of nineteenth-century England – its relative stability, its ordered freedom, and its sense of world mission'.

Although persuasive on the surface, Semmel's picture of Methodism as a popular religious vehicle for Enlightenment liberalism is full of problems. His concepts of 'attitudinal modernization' on the one hand, and of the difference between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies on the other, are largely determined by his own views of American cultural development.

Professor Ward's recent work on continental Protestantism is more securely earthed.[19] He states that the roots of eighteenth-century pan-revivalism (including the Wesleyan revival) can be traced to the displaced and persecuted protestant minorities of Habsburg dominated Central Europe, in Silesia, Moravia and Bohemia. This revival was partly a reaction against the confessional absolutism of much of early eighteenth-century Europe, and also an attempt to express religious interest outside the stranglehold of politically manipulated established churches. The social milieu of these displaced minorities was low and their idea of religion fitted well into the dominant motif of the German Enlightenment, that is religion 'as the means and way to a better life'. Revivalistic religion and pietism (according to Ward they are substantially the same thing, the former was simply more urgent than the latter) survived on a diet of Bible study, Reformation classics and a cell structure pastored by itinerant ministers. Even camp meetings originated in religious provision for the large Swedish army in Silesia. This continental Protestantism influenced English religious development through its meeting with the Wesley brothers in Georgia. When John Wesley emerged from the religious crisis provoked by his encounter with the Salzburgers and Moravians, he became one of the most electric churchmen in history. Weary of the entrenched theological and ecclesiological divisions of the past, Wesley was distinctive in his theology (evangelical Arminianism), his flexibility (willingness to use laymen), his optimism (a strong belief in the life transforming power of the gospel), his tolerance (men and women of all denominations were accepted for class membership), and his commitment to self-help through discipline and sharing of resources. Moreover, like other European Protestants, he was reacting against the pastoral inefficiency and political chicanery of a mediocre establishment. Professor Ward asserts that most of what Wesley achieved was forfeited by the nineteenth-century Wesleyan leadership, because of its increasing rigidity, sectarianism and ministerial professionalism.

If there is any lesson from the study of European Protestantism in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries for contemporary Third World countries (and I am extremely nervous of such comparisons for

[18] Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (London, 1974). See also Robert Moore, *Pit-Men, Preachers and Politics. The Effects of Methodism in a Durham Mining Community* (Cambridge, 1974). Moore's work is a sociological study of the Deerness valley mining villages in County Durham and his main theme is that 'the effect of Methodism in a working-class community was to inhibit the development of class consciousness and reduce class conflict'.

[19] W. R. Ward, 'The relations of enlightenment and religious revival in central Europe and in the English-speaking world', *Studies in Church History,* Subsidia 2 (1979), pp. 281-305. Also, W. R. Ward, 'Power and Piety: the origins of religious revival in the early eighteenth-century', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester,* 63 no. 1 (1980), pp. 231-252. See also, Sheridan Gilley, 'Christianity and Enlightenment: An Historical Survey', *History of European Ideas,* 1 no. 2 (1981), pp. 103-121.

the same reason that liberation theologians are nervous of western theology – that is, each historical context is unique),[20] it is this. Quite humble people, with the help of biblically based theologians, were able to circumvent establishments in both church and state, and by doing so, created a powerful religious culture which eventually gained political recognition. But, it has to be said that, despite occasional panics, England during the period of the industrial revolution was politically freer than any other country in Europe. As a result, in periods of political excitement, the government threatened a more repressive religious policy, but it was never implemented. It is therefore difficult to extend the example of English Methodism to societies which have little or no political and religious freedom.

In conclusion, what then can be said of the Halévy thesis? Surely the main point is that it is not a testable historical hypothesis. One cannot deal with it by assuming that evangelical religion was simply the last and greatest ingredient in England's solid social cake. Evangelicalism was undoubtedly an important ingredient, but must be weighed in the scales with other stabilising features such as the overwhelming constitutionality of English popular politics, the insignificant number of genuine revolutionaries, the solidity of the English banking and mercantile system, the fact that the English Parliament, though heavily aristocratic in composition, was influenced by public opinion, the ability of the aristocracy to make timely concessions while retaining control of English society through alternative means (*e.g.* education, army, civil service, *etc.*), and the powerful chauvinistic tradition of the free-born Englishman.

Conclusions

Halévy's thesis, though no doubt of intrinsic interest to those concerned with the relationship between religion and social stability, has obscured other important aspects of Methodist history and its contemporary relevance. For example, how should a religious group relate to the political concerns of its members? How should churches organize themselves so that they utilize the human resources at their disposal? Have western churches evolved with too much emphasis on buildings, structures and ministers? What is the relationship between religion and popular culture on the one hand, and between church and community on the other? These and other questions suggest themselves from the last great evangelical revival in western Europe. What historians and students must not do, however, is to substitute the serious study of Methodism as a religious and social movement, with the ideological preoccupations of the current generation. If they resist this temptation they will discover that a religious movement, when based on genuine biblical principles, can be both popular and socially radical. That is the challenge of Methodism in its pioneer, as opposed to its fossilized, phase.

[20] See, *e.g.* J. A. Kirk, *Liberation Theology* (London, 1979).

Bibliography

The best starting-point for students interested in this field is R. E. Davies and E. G. Rupp (eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain,* 2 vols. (London, 1965, 1978).

Other books (not cited in these notes) published within the last decade which shed light on Methodist history include:

D. A. Gowland, *Methodist Secessions* (Manchester, 1979).

A. G. Hayes and D. A. Gowland (eds.), *Scottish Methodism in the Early Victorian Period* (Edinburgh, 1981).

James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-1875* (Oxford, 1976).

Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe 1789-1970* (Oxford, 1981).

Space prevents me from citing other important books and articles. Omission, therefore, is not intended to be a comment on their quality.

Talking points

The divorce debate — where are we now?

David Field

The author, who is on the staff of Oak Hill College, London, has written a number of books on Christian ethics (notably Free to Do Right *and* Taking Sides).

Writing or reading an article on the ethics of divorce is rather like compiling or consulting a medical textbook at the scene of a serious road accident. To do any good at all, you need to have a clear mind and adequate technical knowledge. But to approach a person's suffering in a coldly academic way is an affront to his or her humanity.

As all ministers know, ethical and pastoral concerns interpenetrate whenever a marriage breaks down. 'What is right?' and 'What will help?' are questions that have to be asked in the same breath. Probably the best way into the contemporary debate about divorce is to explore the interface between principles and compassion.

For many years now, the churches have been under increasing social pressure to revise or clarify their stance on divorce and remarriage. According to the statisticians, one in four British marriages now ends in divorce, and one new marriage in every three involves a divorcee. The pattern in the USA is similar; 25% of American couples who married in 1970 had divorced by 1977, and an estimated 48% will eventually do so. When the proportion of divorcees who remarry is brought into the reckoning (about 80% in both the USA and the UK), the pastoral pressures on the churches to involve themselves more fully with divorcees and their remarriages is obviously enormous.

The churches have responded in various ways. Most Protestant denominations, looking back to the Reformers' rejection of Rome's claim that sacramental marriage is indissoluble, have always allowed for divorce and remarriage. Some, especially in the United States, are now going further and providing special services for the dissolution of marriage which include 'vows of release'.[1]

The Church of England is the major Protestant exception. The seventeenth-century Anglican divines were divided almost equally between dissolublist and indissolublist views of marriage. In the eighteenth century the former became dominant, but this trend was later reversed. Today, the Church of England makes no official exceptions to its veto on all remarriage in church after divorce, on the grounds that marriage is indissoluble save by death. It must be added that this rigorist stance is by no means universal in episcopalian churches outside England.

Even the Church of England, however, has shown signs of bending before the wind of social change. Two major Anglican Reports in the last eleven years have advocated changes in the church's practice, based on a comprehensive doctrinal review. In both of them, pastoral considerations predominate. *Marriage, Divorce and the Church*[2] suggests that divorce need no longer be regarded as an offence to the Christian conscience if a majority of church members approve it. 'At times,' it pleads (lamely?), 'the church may have moral insight prior to and at least as fundamental as the theological insight necessary to explain it.' *Marriage and the Church's Task*[3] is even plainer in its appeal to the church to trim its ethical sails to the pastoral wind. 'The gospel of forgiveness cannot effectively be declared . . . so long as those conscientiously seeking the blessing of the Church on subsequent marriage must be turned away.'

Roman Catholic practice, too, has proved adaptable in the face of rising divorce trends. Doctrinally, the Roman Church remains adamant in opposing all divorce and in ruling out all remarriage. But the grounds on which an ecclesiastical court can declare a marriage null (thus releasing both partners to marry 'again' for the first time) are much wider than those recognized by the civil authorities. Among recent additions to the grounds of nullity that the church recognizes are 'lack of due discretion' (covering psychological immaturity at the time of the wedding); 'inability to fulfil the obligations of marriage' (the obligation of fidelity, for example); and 'error' (which includes serious character-changes in either husband or wife since marriage). A Roman Catholic bride, then, may be a divorcee in the eyes of the state on her wedding day, but a single woman in the eyes of the church. In a typical year (1975), 698 marriages which involved divorcees were solemnized in British Roman Catholic churches.

[1] P. K. Jewett provides an example in *The Reformed Journal*, Jan. 1977, pp. 22f.

[2] P. 72.

[3] P. 87.

The nature of marriage

From this brief survey of the social and ecclesiastical scene, it will already be apparent that one's attitude to divorce will be dictated by one's convictions about marriage. The next step, therefore, in analysing the divorce debate is to identify and relate conflicting theories about the nature of marriage and its permanence.

For present purposes we can discount those who view marriage as no more than a private contract or romantic alliance, terminable at will by the couple concerned. Such views are neither rare nor unimportant, but the vast majority of Christian participants in the debate would agree that marriage means much more than that. Although the couple's consent is crucial to starting a marriage, their agreement is not enough to end it. They have the choice whether to get married, but they cannot stipulate the terms on which the institution itself operates.

From the Christian point of view, there are two main starting-points in defining the nature of marriage. The first is to regard it as primarily a *covenant.* Each partner makes an undertaking which is accepted by the other and is publicly witnessed. The undertaking itself is one of committed faithfulness for life; permanence is a premise, not an ideal.

This covenantal description of marriage is clearly biblical. In both Old and New Testaments marriage is used to describe God's covenant relationship with his people, and God's relationship with his people provides the pattern for marriage. G. R. Dunstan finds five marks of comparison between the two: first, there is an initiative of love which invites a response and creates a relationship; secondly, there is a moral affirmation (an oath or a vow) which secures the relationship; thirdly, there are obligations (commandments) which undergird it; fourthly, there are blessings promised to the faithful; and fifthly, there is an element of sacrifice (in the case of marriage, an end to dependence on parents and to the freedom of singleness).[4]

The second major starting-point in defining the nature of marriage is to regard it primarily as a *sacrament.* It was Augustine who gave this view its main impetus in the western church. Biblically, it hinges on the Latin Vulgate's translation of Ephesians 5:32, where 'mystery' (Gk. *musterion*) is rendered 'sacramentum'. To Augustine, this sacramental bond was 'the imprint upon natural marriage of Christ's indissoluble bonding of himself to his people'.[5]

Augustine treated the marriage bond, in this sacramental sense, as a binding *moral* obligation. Later, however, the sacramental view was developed much further. Schillebeeckx puts it well: 'In the scholastic view of marriage which was elaborated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the *sacramentum* was not seen purely as a symbol, but as an effective symbol which brought something about – an objective bond that could not be broken. According to the church Fathers the dissolubility of marriage was not *permissible;* but according to the schoolmen its dissolution was not *possible.*'[6]

As far as divorce is concerned, this developed sacramental view can lead to only one conclusion. Marriage is as permanent as baptism. In the words of an Anglican, J. L. Lucas, 'A Christian will no more talk of an ex-wife than of an ex-mother, or of remarriage than re-baptism. . . . The indissolubility of marriage, like the indelibility of baptism, flows from the unlimited commitment undertaken and the everlasting relationship entered into.'[7] There are only two circumstances in which the sacramentalist can approve the remarriage of a divorceee: first, if the original union can be proved void (hence the Roman Catholic preoccupation with grounds of nullity); and secondly if, as a marriage, it can be shown to be non-sacramental. The latter point reflects a 'two level' distinction between Christian (sacramental) and pagan (non-sacramental) marriages, sometimes linked exegetically with 1 Corinthians 7:15.

The sacramental view of marriage was strongly attacked by the continental Reformers, notably by Luther in *The Babylonian Captivity.* The covenantal view, which they preferred, was held to allow for the possibility of divorce, while still upholding the moral obligation on a married couple never to separate. Hence the historical Catholic/Protestant Divide on the issue of divorce. If marriage is a covenant, the bond can be broken. If it is elevated to the status of a sacrament, it cannot.

This distinction is a little too sharp, as we shall see in a moment, but it is worth preserving if only to expose the use of 'weasel words' which so often confuse the modern debate. A recent report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission on the Theology of Marriage, for example, declared that the covenantal and sacramental understanding of marriage are really one – but it did so only at the expense of defining the sacramental nature of marriage as 'the moral sense of of enduring obligation'.[8] To most sacramentalists, the word 'sacrament' means far more than that.

[4] *Theology,* 659, pp. 246ff.
[5] *To Have and To Hold,* p. 41.
[6] *Marriage: Secular Reality and Saving Mystery* (1965), II, p. 70.
[7] *The Vinculum Conjugale,* in *Theology,* 78, pp. 228f.
[8] *Anglican-Roman Catholic Marriage* (London, 1975), p. 10.

'Ontological' is another word that is used in slightly different ways when predicated of the marriage bond. In a valiant attempt to paper over some wide ethical cracks, *Marriage and the Church's Task* affirms that the marriage bond has an ontological character because it unites two people at the centre of their beings. Again, one has to say that most people who use the term 'ontological' in the context of marriage mean far more by it than that.

'Indissoluble' is itself a slippery word. Words ending in -ble have either of two meanings: they may carry the sense of 'can' (like 'audible'), or of 'ought' (like 'detestable'). The same is true of their negative forms. 'Indissoluble,' alas, can be used in both senses, which makes it a favourite with ecclesiastical crack-paperers and a menace to ethical analysts. 'Marriage is indissoluble' may mean either 'the marriage bond *ought not* to be broken' or 'the marriage bond *cannot* be broken', depending on the writer's viewpoint.

To return to the sacrament/covenant distinction, there are some scholars who arrive at indissolublist conclusions (of the stricter kind) from a covenantal starting-point. They stress two aspects of the marriage covenant in particular: the nature of the 'one flesh' relationship into which the covenant partners enter, and the indelible character of the vows which they make. The one-flesh relationship, they argue, is analogous to kinship in the Bible. Divorce cannot terminate the kinship relationship of marriage any more than disruptive factors like loss of love or rejection can destroy other familial relationships. A disowned son remains a son nevertheless; likewise a divorced wife. And the covenant model for the marriage vows is the promise of God – which remains constantly valid in the face of the most extreme provocation. In any case (the argument goes), the marriage vow of permanence loses all its credibility if it can be made twice or more by the same person with different partners.

Others counter these points by stressing the *dis*continuity of marriage and familial relationships on the one hand; and of God's promises and man's vows on the other. The one-flesh relationship of man and wife is not at all the same as the kinship relationship between child and parent, because a man can choose his wife but not his mother. And although God's promises can never be broken, man's vows can. As Oliver O'Donovan puts it, 'God is not a man that he should change his mind; but neither is a man God that his word should abide for ever. In human beings, as in God, consistency is a virtue; but in human beings virtues are *potentia*, not *actus*.'[9]

[9] *Marriage and Permanence*, p. 17.

The Bible and divorce

Direct biblical comments on divorce are few. In the Old Testament we have the Mosaic law of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which does not so much set out grounds for divorce as limit its effects; and Malachi's trenchant comment ' "I hate divorce", says the Lord God of Israel' (Mal. 2:16). The New Testament preserves Jesus' teaching on divorce, with the slightly different emphases the Synoptists record (Mt. 5:31f.; 19:3-12; Mk. 10:2-12; Lk. 16:18); and Paul's rulings on broken marriages involving Christians at Corinth (1 Cor. 7:10-16).

Commentators agree on three things: first, that the *facts* of divorce (and remarriage) were accepted in Bible times, even though its *grounds* were hotly disputed; secondly, that Jesus' teaching on divorce was regarded as extremely strict by all who heard it; and thirdly, that Jesus' insistence on the husband's culpability, if he committed adultery against his wife, was innovative in the Jewish world.

Beyond this, however, there are serious areas of disagreement over the exegesis of the biblical material – within conservative scholarship as well as outside it. We can clarify the differences by asking a series of questions.

1. *Did Jesus permit divorce in any circumstances?*

Mark and Luke appear to reply in the negative. Matthew's answer seems more positive, in that he records an exception to the general rule ('except for marital unfaithfulness').

Inevitably, this exceptive clause (Mt. 5:32; 19:19) has become the focal point of discussion. There is little doubt about its authenticity, but plenty of debate about its meaning and status.

Three problems confront those who believe that Jesus himself intended to make an exception to his veto on divorce. First, there is the silence of the other New Testament witnesses – Mark, Luke and Paul. Secondly, there is the disciples' dismay (Mt. 19:10), which is not easy to explain if Jesus simply meant, 'Sexual unfaithfulness is the only proper ground for divorce'; because this was already a well-known rabbinic interpretation of Deuteronomy 24. And thirdly, the exceptive clause apparently makes Jesus contradict his creation-based argument for marital permanence, set out by Matthew only a verse or two earlier.

Faced with these difficulties, many scholars conclude that Matthew has softened Jesus' strict teaching to meet the needs of his readership. Others, who find this solution unacceptable, look for alternative ways of cutting the exegetical knot. In recent years the hot favourite has been the so-called 'preteritive' interpretation, which explains the

exceptive clause as an aside. Thus a paraphrase of Matthew's words might read, 'Whoever divorces his wife (quite apart from the matter of unfaithfulness – which is irrelevant), commits adultery.' This is attractive, in that it brings Matthew into line with Mark and Luke and makes excellent sense in context. Unfortunately, it strains Greek grammar to breaking point, especially in chapter 19.

Another widely-canvassed solution to the problem is to narrow the meaning of the word *porneia,* which lies at the heart of the exceptive clause, so that it becomes a ground for annulment rather than divorce. The most popular suggestions are 'incest' (which *porneia* certainly means in 1 Cor. 5:1) and 'unchastity during betrothal'. The difficulty here is that the argument in Matthew is about grounds for divorce, not about invalid unions – a matter covered by a different set of non-controversial Old Testament laws. And anyway *porneia* normally has a much wider meaning, embracing all kinds of sexual unfaithfulness.

We may conclude that these attempts to avoid the most obvious sense of Matthew's exceptive clause cause more difficulties than they solve. But if Jesus did make this exception himself, did he mean it to cover remarriage, as well as separation?

2. *Did Jesus permit remarriage in some circumstances?*
Since the Reformation, Protestant writers have generally assumed that the Matthaean Exception opens the door to remarriage when a first union has been broken by *porneia.* Recently this assumption has been strongly challenged. W. Heth and G. Wenham, for example, argue at length that Jesus' words in Matthew were never understood in this way in the patristic period. The meaning of the exceptive clause in Matthew 19, they suggest, can be adduced from Matthew 5, where Jesus is at pains to exempt from the charge of adultery husbands who divorce their wives for unfaithfulness. A man in this position cannot *make* his wife an adulteress by divorcing her, because she has made herself one already. That does not mean, however, that he is free to remarry. Matthew makes this more clear in chapter 19, by adding Jesus' saying about eunuchs to the divorce pericope. Those who 'have made themselves eunuchs because of the kingdom of heaven' include divorcees who forego marriage in obedience to Jesus' command.

Other scholars counter this argument by referring the patristic interpretation of Matthew 19 to the prevalence of sexual asceticism in the early church, rather than to a nearer and clearer insight into the mind of Christ. Moreover, they point out, the context of Matthew 19 is the rabbinic dispute about the meaning of Deuteronomy 24. In that debate the divorcee's right to remarry was assumed. As the Mishnah makes plain, an essential part of a bill of divorce was the clause, 'You are free to marry again'. The modern distinction between divorce proper *(a vinculo)* and legal separation *(a mensa et thoro)* was not something a Jew would have easily grasped. So if Jesus had used the word 'divorce' in a sense that barred remarriage – without making it crystal clear that he was doing so – he would certainly have been misunderstood.

3. *Did Jesus reject the Mosaic divorce law?*
This, of course, is part of a much larger question. Jesus' treatment of the Old Testament law raises issues far too complex for discussion in a brief article of this kind. But as far as divorce is concerned, the answers fall into three general categories.

Some believe Jesus was deliberately rejecting the law of Deuteronomy in favour of the creation ideal set out in Genesis. He was, in R. Schnackenburg's words, 'annulling the right to divorce granted by Moses . . . now the order established at the creation is to prevail'.[10] D. Catchpole is even more emphatic: 'What Moses commanded, the historical Jesus rejects.'[11]

Others, while coming to the conclusion that Jesus abolished the right to remarriage which Deuteronomy allowed, are reluctant to drive so deep a wedge between his teaching and the Old Testament law. G. Wenham, for example, argues that Jesus' complete veto on remarriage only takes the law's emphasis to its logical conclusion. Deuteronomy limited remarriage; Jesus simply tightened the limitation.[12]

Others, again, regard Jesus' teaching and the law's stance as complementary. Mark makes it clear that the Lord was facing a test question – would he, or would he not declare his opposition to the Mosaic law? 'Once it is seen that Jesus' opponents are hoping to trap Jesus into denying a prescription of the law,' comments *Marriage and the Church's Task,* 'it can scarcely be maintained that he actually did so.'[13] He was not setting his own teaching against the law itself, but against the permissive Hillelite interpretation of it; hence the reference to what has been *said* (rather than to what has been *written*).

4. *Did Paul sanction divorce for desertion?*
In both Romans 7:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 Paul

[10] *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament,* p. 136.
[11] *The Synoptic Divorce Material as a Traditio-Historical Problem,* in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library,* 57, p. 120.
[12] See G. J. Wenham, *May Divorced Christians Remarry?,* in *Churchman,* 95:2, pp. 150ff.
[13] P. 145.

omits any mention of the Matthaean Exception. But in 1 Corinthians 7:15 he apparently introduces a fresh ground for divorce in the case of spiritually mixed marriages. Although he is careful to distinguish his ruling from Jesus' command, it carries the full weight of his apostolic authority. If a non-Christian spouse deserts, he writes, the Christian husband or wife *is not bound (ou dedoulotai).*

The italicized words continue to be much debated. Schnackenburg and other Roman Catholic exegetes deny that Paul here opens up the possibility of remarriage after desertion.[14] A few Protestant commentators take a similar line. C. K. Barrett, for instance, thinks Paul was writing about enslavement 'to a mechanical retention of a *relationship* the other partner wishes to abandon' (italics mine).[15]

A strong case can be mounted, however, to show that Paul did indeed have divorce (with the right to remarry) in mind at this point.[16] He certainly uses the verb *deo* of the marriage bond (rather than simply of the husband/wife relationship) later in the same chapter (v. 39), as well as in Romans 7:2. Also, as Atkinson points out, 'free to be deserted' would make nonsense of the paragraph.[17]

A few would go further and maintain that Paul's explicit permission for the *agamoi* (unmarried) to marry (vv. 27f.) embraces divorcees as well as single people, because he has already used the adjective *agamos* to describe a separated wife in verse 11. This does seem a little perverse, though, as the thrust of verse 11 is to deter a divorced Christian woman from marrying again.

5. *How should biblical teaching be applied today?*
There is as much debate about the application of biblical teaching on divorce as there is about its exegesis. The conclusion that Jesus banned divorce altogether does not lead automatically to an ecclesiastical veto on divorcees remarrying today. Nor does the belief that he permitted divorce under some circumstances lead automatically to provision for remarriage in church.

A key question is whether Jesus' divorce teaching represents *halakah* (rules governing conduct) or *haggadah* (vivid teaching which stops short of legislation). In other words, did Jesus intend to lay down an absolute law, or was his purpose rather different? 'It is at this point,' comments Montefiore caustically, 'that scholars so often part company. It cannot be coincidence that their academic conclusions are here often in agreement with the discipline of the Church to which they belong.'[18]

There is general consensus that Jesus' words in the gospels are cast in the form of law. Some would account for this by discerning a move in both the synoptists and Paul away from doctrine to discipline, under pressure from their early congregations for clear case-law decisions. Jesus phrased his teaching as principle, insight and challenge; his biographers re-phrased it as precept and code. This process of contextualization, Houlden reckons, has resulted in four quite distinct New Testament policies on divorce, all arising from a challenging, non-legislative aphorism of Jesus.[19]

Others are more prepared to accept the shape of Jesus' teaching in the gospels as original, but point to his general approach to law as the correct context in which to read and apply his commands. His practice was not to legislate, but to set out kingdom ideals. Therefore his 'law' on divorce and remarriage must not be read as new legislation to replace Moses' code, but as a 'call to repentance' (Thielicke),[20] a set of 'superb insights into the true nature of matrimony' (Montefiore),[21] or as 'a formula for avoiding the breakdown of marriage, not an iron law putting into equal bondage the callous, the innocent and the penitent' (Brown).[22]

At the conservative end of the spectrum stand yet others who feel that even this represents an unwarranted dilution of Jesus' teaching. Whatever his usual practice, his words on divorce have a legislative force which must not be dodged in contemporary application.[23] Both the phrasing of the exceptive clause in Matthew 5 (which almost certainly represents the Hebrew of the Deuteronomic law), and the juxtaposition of a strong affirmation of law in Luke 16, reflect Jesus' original intention. The earliest commentators treated this aspect of Jesus' teaching as binding *halakah;* and so should we.

My brief has been to describe the debate, not to participate in it. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude without a reminder of our starting-point. As the New Testament itself testifies, it is inadequate simply to discuss divorce in a detached, academic way. However complex the arguments, urgent pastoral decisions have to be made – even as the debate continues.

[14] He does, however, admit that the 'Pauline Privilege' finds a place in Canon Law (*op. cit.* p. 249).
[15] *1 Corinthians* (London, 1968), p. 166.
[16] See, *e.g.,* the commentaries of Bruce, Héring, Morris and Conzelmann.
[17] *Op. cit.,* p. 124.
[18] *Marriage, Divorce and the Church,* p. 91.
[19] *Ethics and the New Testament,* p. 80.
[20] *The Ethics of Sex,* p. 110.
[21] *Marriage, Divorce and the Church,* p. 94.
[22] *DNTT,* 3, p. 542.
[23] *Cf.* K. E. Kirk, *Marriage and Divorce* (London, 1948), pp. 74ff.

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