

## Working for Liberation: A Change of Perspective in New Testament Scholarship

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### My Context

I live in West Germany. Even after the so-called joining of the former German Democratic Republic with the Federal Republic of Germany, the rift between the peoples in the two parts of Germany is still so deep that I honestly have to speak of “West Germany” as my context. The still-existing prosperity of West Germany is based on the exploitation of the Two-Thirds World and the repression of the recollection of the poor, including the poor in Germany. In my context, biblical interpretation is shaped by social and political structures. First, it is shaped by the structure of theology as it is carried on at universities and by the majority of the male leadership of the church; I will call this theology “dominant” theology. Second, it is shaped by a broad and lively tradition of Christian practice and reading of the Bible within the new social movements—the peace movement, the women’s movement, the “Third World” movement, the movement of solidarity with the unemployed, and the movement working to restore the integrity of creation. I opted out of the realm of dominant theology and biblical science into the area of the peace movement and the women’s movement. I deliberately took the plunge. In what follows, I will describe the experiences underlying my development. I have paid for my decision with social isolation from the academic community. My male colleagues “excommunicated” me with remarkable brutality and generally try to oppress the new social movements.

I was not alone on my way. Since 1977, I have been working together with a group, the Heidelberger study group (*Heidelberger Arbeitskreis*), from which have come many a publication. Since 1989, every issue of the journal *Junge Kirche* has included a sociohistorical interpretation of a biblical text. This is politically meaningful since this journal, which has

its roots in the Confessing Church (Bekennende Kirche), identifies itself as the mouthpiece for both the peace movement and the movement for social justice. Very, very slowly a connection to the women's movement is being established as well. We, that is, my friends and I, have named our theological approach a "sociohistorical interpretation of the Bible."

### Sociohistorical Interpretation of the Bible

The brief definition that follows, taken from an invitation to contribute sociohistorical interpretations to *Junge Kirche* by Willy Schottroff in 1989, is meant to serve as the basis for further explanation regarding our sociohistorical interpretation of the Bible:

For us, exegesis has to be committed to two social contexts: the social context of the time in which the biblical texts originated and the social context of today's readers and interpreters of the Bible. We investigate as concretely as possible the living conditions of classes, races, and sexes, and the meaning of faith for the everyday life of the people in the past. The practice of faith is always reflected. Our exegesis is part of the Christian-Jewish dialogue and of feminist theology. According to its self-understanding, social-historical interpretation aims at contributing to the development of liberation theology within the European context.

The origin of *liberation theology within the German context* is closely linked with the discussions within the Program to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches. In 1970 the executive committee of the World Council of Churches approved a special fund for humanitarian purposes within the framework of its Program to Combat Racism (two hundred thousand dollars for nineteen organizations).<sup>1</sup> At the time, the public discussion focused on the oppression of the black population in South Africa. The counterargument against the program raised by church leaders and theology professors to the effect that the program was supporting Communists and murderers was both untruthful and demagogic. The decision of the executive committee touched the heart of the problem by characterizing the program as a "redistribution of power." As a result, the comparatively low amount of money assigned became a question of principle. How, according to the gospel, should the rich treat the poor: by way of charity or the redistribution of power?

This discussion challenged many Christians in both parts of Germany to realize that they belonged to the rich who profited from the exploita-

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1. For the history of the Program to Combat Racism, see especially the document "Anti-Rassismus Programm der Ökumene" *epd Dokumentation* 5 (1971).

tion of the so-called Third World. The proper consequences of this insight could only be to participate in the work of the solidarity movement and the peace movement. Such has been the situation since 1970 until the present day. The Bible has been a source of inspiration for this political work of self-organized groups (mostly on the fringes of the parishes). Above all, the biblical interpretation of the peasants of Solentiname, Nicaragua, became the school where we learned to reread the Bible.<sup>2</sup> "Blessed are you poor" (Luke 6:20) could not and cannot mean for us, in our context, to be satisfied with giving donations. It called and calls us to analyze economic interconnections, to name in public the acts of violence of capitalism, and to work for changes. Sociohistorical interpretation, as we and our companions<sup>3</sup> understand it, is closely linked to this social and political work, as is also the materialistic interpretation of the Bible based on the scientific tradition of French structuralism, with its somewhat different methodology.<sup>4</sup>

In the Western European context, liberation theology is supported by those who continue the urgently needed work of the peace movement, even if such work receives little public recognition. Parts of the women's movement and the ecology movement, as far as they relate in a positive way to Christian traditions, also support liberation theology and identify themselves with it. Many women relate to the Bible as a source of encouragement, as a document recording the struggles of their female ancestors, and as a document of patriarchal attempts to suppress women.<sup>5</sup>

At first, we used the term "sociohistorical" in order to point to a basic methodological weakness of German or Western biblical science that we wanted to rectify: dominant biblical science relies on the history of ideas and disregards the social reality behind the biblical texts as well as the social reality of the contemporary interpreters of the Bible. Many exegetes at

2. The first volume was published in 1976 and the second in 1978. The books were quickly reprinted several times, and they are still much in use—and rightly so; see E. Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (4 vols.; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976–78).

3. The reference is to the Heidelberg study group. We have documented our work continually in the Kaiser Verlag, Munich. The titles of our books indicating the path of our work are: W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann, eds., *Der Gott der kleinen Leute: Sozialgeschichtliche Auslegungen* (2 vols.; Munich: Kaiser, 1979), Eng. trans., *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretation of the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984); W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann, eds., *Traditionen der Befreiung* (2 vols.; Munich: Kaiser, 1980); L. and W. Schottroff, eds., *Mitarbeiter der Schöpfung: Bibel und Arbeitswelt* (Munich: Kaiser, 1983); L. and W. Schottroff, *Wer ist unser Gott? Beiträge zu einer Befreiungstheologie im Kontext der "ersten" Welt* (Munich: Kaiser, 1986); M. Crüsemann and W. Schottroff, *Schuld und Schulden: Biblische Traditionen in gegenwärtigen Konflikten* (Munich: Kaiser, 1992).

4. See especially F. Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), and K. Füssel, *Drei Tage mit Jesus im Tempel: Einführung in die materialistische Lektüre der Bibel* (Münster: Liberación, 1987).

5. See 1 Tim 2:11-15; see E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

German faculties still hold on to the claim of being objective, neutral, and, as such, “serious” and scientific. In contrast, the basic methodological demand of liberation theologians is to name and uncover one’s own interests, biases, and partialities. We challenge the practitioners of dominant biblical science as not neutral and for not exposing their interests.

A further explanation of the term “sociohistorical” is necessary, given its use with regard to another method of biblical interpretation. This other approach differs a great deal from ours, first of all, because of its starting point, which is the work of Ernst Troeltsch. Troeltsch and his followers made a sharp distinction between “sect” and “church” as an institution. Consequently, within this approach the Jesus movement is presented as a movement of itinerant charismatic men who lived an elitist ethos, while local communities of “sympathizers,” “normal” people, did not practice such a radical ethos but rather stayed at home with their families.<sup>6</sup> The latter represent the “church,” which is characterized by “love-patriarchy.” The latter term refers to a certain structure of church and society that legitimizes and maintains the power of the rich, the males, and the dominant. Their power and domination is softened but not called into question. The powerful are asked to exercise their power with loving-kindness but not to give it up in favor of real equality. Women, the poor, children, and slaves are admonished to be obedient. The term “love-patriarchy” itself reveals its implicit intention to disguise injustice, for it combines love and oppression within itself.

This sociological concept, with which I disagree at a fundamental level, has gained increasing acceptance not only in the exegetical field but also among the more accessible interpretations of the Bible. With its distinction between radical wandering charismatics and conformist local sympathizers, the approach neutralizes the prophetic tradition and the gospel of Jesus. According to this approach, the Sermon on the Mount is neither relevant nor obligatory for “normal” Christians.

Sociohistorical interpretation, as we understand and advocate it, challenges and criticizes this sect-versus-church concept and works with another set of questions. We call for liberating practice and search for structures and legitimations of oppression. New Testament eschatological texts as well as many other Jewish texts teach us how to understand liberation, namely, as expectation of the *basileia tou theou*, the realm of God, with all its consequences for today’s life within the community of saints. It is the variety of liberation practices and liberation movements (as well as of forms of oppression) that compels us to a concrete, de-

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6. Such is the thesis of G. Theissen (*Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978]). For a critical discussion of Theissen’s approach, which may be seen as a cornerstone of the “new consensus” (W. A. Meeks) within Western social history of the Bible, see Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory of Her*, and L. Schottroff, *Befreiungserfahrungen: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser, 1990) 247–56.

tailed analysis of both our present and the past of the New Testament texts. There is as yet no coherent sociological model for this work, but Karl Marx can still function as a good teacher. Biblical terminology itself is well-suited for an analysis of the two contexts, insofar as it has to do with concrete realities. Thus, for example, in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) the sociological terminology of the Bible is sensitively focused and provides a methodological apparatus that concretely names liberation and oppression.

Since the oppression of women is basic to the functioning of all societies today, the positive relation of this approach to feminist theology must be more than just a polite formulation. To deny this form of oppression is to avoid a truthful insight into our context. The gospel of the poor belongs first of all to those at the bottom, to the "last" (Matt 20:16). Women and children are always the ones who have the most to fight in order to survive hunger, ecological disasters, and wars. Problems and methodological demands raised by the Christian feminist movement since the 1970s constitute a rich source for the growth of liberation theology. Attempts to destroy the feminist work are manifold and brutal, as, for example, in the case of the campaign by evangelical Christians against the recently founded women's study center of the Protestant Church in Germany. Again and again, the oppression of women through the establishment of patriarchal marriage and family is declared to be genuinely Christian, even if the biblical traditions must be perverted to fit this legitimizing purpose.

Without the essential critique of the biblical traditions coming from the women's movement and from liberation theologies within different contexts, there will be no responsible and liberative reading of the Bible. There is no doubt that the Bible is androcentric: in fact, all biblical texts are androcentric and support patriarchy, and a number of them are explicitly hostile against women, for example, 1 Cor 11:3. But this is precisely why it is necessary to criticize biblical traditions. Paul, for example, was as unable to recognize the oppression of women as many theologians of today, and yet he remains an important witness for a certain liberation practice and a witness for hope.

Biblical interpretation, especially in the German context, must proceed within the context of a theology after Auschwitz and the Jewish-Christian dialogue. This means, in part, that Jewish-Christian dialogue must include solidarity with the suffering of the Palestinian people. It means also that, at the very least, we have to unlearn Christian anti-Judaism: that is, to begin with, we must develop a theology that no longer misrepresents and disqualifies Judaism. We have to learn that Torah does not mean "law" as opposed to gospel, that Judaism is not a "legalistic" religion versus Christianity as a love religion, and that the New Testament is a Jewish book, like the so-called Old Testament. We have to call into question a Christology that declares Jesus to be the *only* Lord, who exclusively mediates salvation.

Such an understanding must be rejected as an expression of Christian imperialism that excludes Judaism and other religions from God's salvation. The fact that Christ means life and hope for us must not lead us to disqualify other religions. We have to be aware of the fact that Christian theological anti-Judaism supported the German murder of millions of Jews. The critical discussion of Christian anti-Judaism shakes the very foundations of Christian theological traditions. We will not be able to appropriate the power of the Bible without a critical consciousness of the almost two-thousand-year-old Christian hostility against the Jews and all its acts of brutal violence. Scientific research into the separation between Judaism and Christianity in New Testament times must be seen as an attempt to deny the fact that the New Testament is a Jewish book.

The locus of our sociohistorical interpretation is the Jesus movement of today. People who are not ready to give up—even in the face of wars, militarism, racism, women's oppression, the devastation of creation, and the murder of human beings through poverty—reread the Bible. The biblical texts themselves provide information regarding the social situation of the past and can be supplemented by nonbiblical sources. From Luke 18:1-8, for example, I can learn about the life of a woman and, then, begin the analysis of the social context and develop further sociohistorical questions in regard to both past and present. The starting point of the theological enterprise lies in the experiences of the readers of the Bible, their actual social practice, as we learn from feminist and liberation theologies. The analytical category of "experience" refers not to arbitrary but rather to structural experiences that can be examined within an analysis of analogous situations.

"Different approaches to the Bible" has become a popular topic for conferences today. In some meetings, psychoanalytical, sociohistorical, feminist, historical-critical, and biblio-dramatic approaches are juxtaposed. Each of these approaches implies certain exegetical and theological presuppositions and decisions. The problem is that these decisions are often uncritically taken from the point of view of dominant Western biblical science. The result is that the dominant perspective on and the dominant exegesis of the Bible are rendered as *the* right perspective and *the* right exegesis. However, the fact is that one can base one's psychoanalytical interpretation *either* on dominant exegesis *or* on sociohistorical exegesis within the framework of liberation theologies. There is a decision on method and perspective to be made. Thus, we have to examine every approach by asking: What do "the gospel of the poor," "the option for the poor," and "the problem of antiracism" mean concretely? Each sentence that interprets the Bible can help to build liberation, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation—or prevent them. Thus, it is essential to make a decision regarding one's historical method.

## Talking Theologically about “the Human Being”

I continue with a comparatively harmless experience in my own scholarly work from more than fifteen years ago. Two New Testament scholars from whom I learned a great deal—Rudolph Bultmann and Herbert Braun—employ in their works the *religionsgeschichtliche* (history-of-religions) method by comparing Christian positions with other religious positions present in the “environment” (*Umwelt*) of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> Bultmann, for example, explains the command to love one’s neighbor by contrasting it with “Greek ethics”<sup>8</sup> or writes an essay comparing the understanding of the world and the human being in the New Testament and “Greek antiquity.”<sup>9</sup> Greek philosophers, gnostic myths, and “late Judaism” (*Spätjudentum*)<sup>10</sup> become thereby the partners in the conversation. Braun, who also works with these juxtapositions, coined a proposition that summarizes the enterprise well: he says that if one wants to carry on a meaningful conversation between Qumran and the New Testament, one should ask, “How is the human person viewed on this side and the other?”<sup>11</sup>

In my own work with gnostic texts, it became clear to me that this comparative procedure was not a “conversation” at all, for it always had the same result, namely, that according to the opinion of the authors the New Testament/Christian position was the right one and the position of the others simply “the other.” It also became obvious that it was impossible to draw such a clear-cut line between, for example, the Gospel of John and Gnosticism. Any sharp confrontation always treats and devalues Gnosticism in the light of the Christian dogmatic enterprise: in Gnosticism the human person was *physei sozomenos*, or saved by nature (wrong); in the New Testament she or he obtains salvation by grace (right).<sup>12</sup> The critique of this procedure within the *religionsgeschichtliche* approach led me to conclude that here, from a Christian perspective, the “other” religions—the “environment”—were devalued.

7. The following volumes are typical of this approach: H. Braun, *Gesammelte Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* (2d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1967); R. Bultmann, *Das Urchristentum im Rahmen der antiken Religionen* (Zurich: Artemis, 1949), Eng. trans., *Primitive Christianity and Its Contemporary Setting* (Cleveland: World, 1964).

8. R. Bultmann, “Das christliche Gebot der Nächstenliebe,” *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1954) 1:229–44.

9. R. Bultmann, “Das Verständnis von Welt und Mensch im Neuen Testament und im Griechentum,” *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1954) 2:59–78.

10. The discussion exposing the Christian anti-Judaism of this terminology was unknown at the time.

11. H. Braun, *Qumran und das Neue Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1966) 2:362.

12. L. Schottroff, “Animae naturaliter salvandae: Zum Problem der himmlischen Herkunft des Gnostikers,” *Christentum und Gnosis* (ed. W. Eltester; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969) 65–97; see also my exposition of Johannine dualism in L. Schottroff, *Der Glaubende und die feindliche Welt: Beobachtungen zum gnostischen Dualismus und seiner Bedeutung für Paulus und das Johannesevangelium* (Neukirchen: Neukirchner Verlag, 1970).

As a result of the discussions of the early 1970s, it further became clear to me that “the human being” properly understood, according to Bultmann and Braun, was not only seen from the perspective of Christians but also from the perspective of the so-called First World. A few years later, through the women’s movement and through my own professional experiences, I learned of the crucial importance of gender differences. Whenever today in my context someone speaks theologically about “the human being,” that human being is in fact seen from the perspective of white Christian males of the First World. Behind the *religionsgeschichtliche* comparison the shapes of colonialism and its aftermath in today’s world emerge. The Christian subject, the white, middle-class male of the First World, defends positions of domination by theological means, through the claim, perhaps implicit, that the best, most accurate, and deepest understanding of “the human being” is that of the New Testament or, more generally, that of Christianity. The claim is that “the human being” in question is a category beyond time that includes the reality of all humans, while in fact the human person is seen from a restricted perspective with certain “interests.” For the feminist critique of the category “the human being,” I refer to the critique of patriarchal hermeneutics by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza;<sup>13</sup> for the critique of ideology, to Jürgen Habermas.<sup>14</sup>

Since, however, the New Testament itself, and especially Paul, uses *ho anthropos*, “Adam,” or “I,” with reference to all humans, the feminist critique of the ideology at work in theological discussions regarding “the human being” has a twofold consequence. First, an exact determination of the person in question and the naming of perspectives and interests have to replace current theological discourse about “the human being” as a general category. Second, the New Testament talk about “the human being” has to become sociohistorically anchored. Which humans does Paul talk about, for example, in Rom 7:24? He refers to all humans as under sin. But does the cry for liberation apply equally to the situation of women and men, equally to the situation of the poor and the rich? Even though the critique of patriarchal hermeneutics has had some impact—and I hope more so in the United States than in Germany, where much still remains to be seen—I have still not seen many results in the writings of biblical scholars in the Western context, with the exception of feminist authors. Up to this point, there has been no critique of theological generalizations and their hermeneutics of domination that would lead to a sociohistorical analysis of New Testament theologies, particularly that of Paul. Indeed, a key grounding for Christian theological self-understanding as the true and most accurate view

13. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Memory of Her*, 4–6 and passim.

14. J. Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), Eng. trans., *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1971).

on humans seems to be the Pauline conception of sin. A thoroughly critical rereading of this concept is very much needed.

In the future, the analysis of the context of the subjects of theology by all theologies of liberation has to take sexism seriously as class domination. Therefore, I believe, future New Testament scholarship has to be feminist: it has to analyze patriarchy in its historically changing forms; it has to serve the interest of abolishing all injustice among people, including injustice between the sexes.

The analysis of the social context in which theology is done and Christian faith practiced has to include an analysis of the structures of sexism as well. The following questions have proven helpful to me in this type of analysis: How is the role of women defined by those who dominate society? What does the daily reality of women look like? How do women who do not fit the defined role of the ideal woman (for example, the unmarried woman) live? How are women integrated into the professional world (where often women's work is not defined as "work" in the sense of male professional work)? For example, in the New Testament the admonition to be submissive addressed to the slaves is followed by the admonition to work diligently (Eph 6:6-7; Col 3:23). The admonition to the women, however, demands only submission. Women's work itself is not mentioned. Women are expected to provide their labor for the whole of their lives, but it is so much understood as *part* of their submission that it remains invisible in the parenthesis. At best, the rejection of laziness (1 Tim 5:13) and the term *oikourgos* (home management) (Titus 2:5) show that the female role includes work. Quite typically, however, one can observe how in both the history of the latter text and modern translations women's labor disappears linguistically: *oikourgos* became *oikouros* (domestic); and modern translations are falsely based on the latter term.<sup>15</sup>

My exposition of the need to analyze the real history of women as a task of theology and biblical scholarship has concentrated so much on women's work because I regard the analysis of sexism and its interconnection with economic interests as its starting point and center. The utilization of women's labor happens so invisibly, or more precisely, so often without recognition, that the analysis of the respective forms of patriarchy should start at this point. Violence against women and children is the other side of the exploitation of women and the silence regarding their work. The New Testament scholarship that I propose will view the recognition of women's labor and domestic violence as a central *theological* task. Such scholarship will have to understand, for example, the situation of prostitutes as a problem related to the exploitation of women and as female

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15. See, for example, W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (2d ed.; ed. F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979).

wage labor and stop discussing it as a moral issue (repentance from harlotry). For this it would have an important ally in Jesus (Matt 21:31; Luke 7:36-50).

From a sociohistorical perspective, it is no longer possible to speak of biblical anthropology as a unified concept. The more I know about the social context of the Yahwist or of Paul, the better I shall grasp their ideas. The Pauline concept of the sin of all humankind in its particularity mirrors the experience of powerlessness of the lowly people under the Roman Empire.<sup>16</sup> Paul is thinking, in effect, from the perspective of lowly males. When Eve's guilt is pondered in different religions of the Mediterranean at Paul's time, the claim emerges that the woman's sin was her sexuality.<sup>17</sup> In theology and New Testament scholarship, the sin of "the human being" is described as arbitrariness, striving for emancipation, hubris against God. This definition is so common that one can use commentaries on Romans at random for verification. Paul himself does not say this. The sin of lowly people, especially of lowly women, is not just hubris but the acceptance of their own powerlessness. Theological discourse pointing to arbitrariness on the part of "the human being" as the center of Christian anthropology is oppressive discourse in the interest of domination. Its message is: striving for emancipation is sin. According to this anthropology, there is no escape from sinfulness in this world and especially no escape by one's own power. This, too, is a topos that serves the conservation of domination, and it conceals the gospel of Paul, namely, that through Christ's resurrection God has broken the power of sin.

### Practice of Faith and Orientation toward the Base

In my graduate studies I learned that love of enemy was a sublime idea, an unlimited expansion of the neighborly love command, the proof for the importance of Jesus for the history of humankind. However, through the discussions on nonviolence, I learned from Martin Luther King Jr. that one had to distinguish between the demand of nonviolence on the lips of church and state leaders and a nonviolent praxis of resistance.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the question to be asked of New Testament texts must be: *How* did

16. L. Schottroff, "Die Schreckensherrschaft der Sünde und die Befreiung durch Christus nach dem Römerbrief des Paulus," *Evangelische Theologie* 39 (1979) 497-510; an abbreviated English version appeared in *Theology Digest* 28 (1980) 129-32.

17. L. Schottroff, "Evas Schuld: Die weibliche Urschuld im Judentum, Christentum und in der Gnosis in den ersten Jahrhunderten n. Chr.," *Schuld und Macht: Studien zu einer feministischen Befreiungstheologie* (ed. C. Schaumberger and L. Schottroff; Munich: Kaiser, 1988).

18. For a critique of this discourse on nonviolence ("from above") in the interest of domination, see especially, "Eine Herausforderung an die Kirchen: Das KAIROS Dokument: Ein theologischer Kommentar zur politischen Krise in Südafrika," *Junge Kirche* 47 (1986).

the first Christians *practice* love of enemy? How does one do this, loving one's enemy? Who are those who love, and who exactly are the enemies in a sociohistorical sense?<sup>19</sup> In effect, the question raised by the history-of-religions approach—How do I prove by *religionsgeschichtliche* comparison the uniqueness of the idea of loving one's enemy?—is the wrong question because it is oriented toward domination. From liberation theologians in Latin America I have learned that the question oriented toward the practice of faith has to replace a theology that is oriented toward the history of ideas. In idealist theology, the practice of faith appears as a "deed" that ensues from the content of faith, the development of which constitutes a minor matter. If the "deeds" become the central content of faith, one speaks of justification by deeds and legalism. In the graduation requirement and other institutional structurings of theology in my context, one can see a hierarchy at work where ethics and social ethics are considered minor fields while New Testament and systematic theology are seen as major fields. New Testament scholarship itself repeats this hierarchy internally. So-called ethical lists, for example, are looked down upon as moralistic demands. Thus, with regard to Romans 6 one finds extensive treatment of the systematic grounds for Christian action and discussion of some overall ethical *demands* (love of neighbor) but hardly any research into the concrete praxis of the early Christian congregation. Similarly, the attempt to understand the beatitudes of the poor in the context of the *practice* of solidarity with the poor in the Jesus movement is disqualified as Marxism.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, Christian life is in fact shaped by three crucial models of action: (1) patriarchal marriage (and family); (2) the giving of alms; and (3) the acknowledgment of the political status quo. From this practice, a hermeneutics emerges that finds precisely these models of action in the New Testament. But it does not question these models theologically or historically, for the deeds of faith are but secondary if measured by the genuine tasks of theology. By separating theology and practice, "theology" and theological ethics, and faith and action, the relevance of life-practice for hermeneutics is not recognized at all, and actual practice is not analyzed with regard to society. Thus, the issue is not whether practice influences our biblical exegesis but rather which practice we have and whether we expose it to analysis and change.

The hermeneutics that emerges from a practice of liberation presupposes

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19. I pursued this issue for the first time in 1975: L. Schottroff, "Gewaltverzicht und Feindesliebe in der urchristlichen Jesustradition," *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie: Festschrift für Hans Conzelmann* (ed. G. Strecker; Tübingen: Mohr, 1975) 197–221), Eng. trans., "Non-violence and the Love of One's Enemies," L. Schottroff et al., *Essays on the Love Commandment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 9–39.

20. E. Lohse, "Das Evangelium für die Armen," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 72 (1981) 51–64.

as well as initiates a dialectical process of liberation: liberating practice yields recognition of liberation history, and recognition of (early Christian) liberation history leads to further development of liberating practice. The dialogue with history initiates learning. This means that New Testament scholarship must dwell within the context of a liberating practice unless it wants to lose sight of its goal, the liberation of all humankind to a life of fullness and justice. If I cannot explain to my Christian siblings in the peace movement and in the women's movement what sense my particularly historical work makes, I will have no choice but to question this work and review its conception. This does not mean that I regard differentiated and detailed historical work, whose particularities and erroneous ways are of no notable practical interest, as superfluous. It just has to be made clear which goal and which interests are served by seemingly remote research and with which practice it is connected.

A liberating practice of faith entails participation in the work of liberation at some point, such as, in my context, solidarity work with the unemployed or the always urgently needed antimilitaristic work for peace. Such involvement results in conflicts that ultimately teach an analysis of society much more sharply than any reading of the relevant books. As long as I abstain from conflict-laden daily tasks in my context, I am able to nourish the illusion of neutral scholarship and church. This illusion is based on the drawing of lines that separate religion and daily life, faith and politics, scholarship and practice. If "wholeness" is to be more than a fancy term, this drawing of lines has to be recognized as a method of domination: by crossing these lines I find out which interests are really being served.

The foundations of a liberating practice provided by early Christianity consist of the gospel of the poor and an orientation to the will of God. I am using the formulation "orientation to the will of God" despite my awareness of the history of misuse of this and other similar phrases. Such phrases have often implied the orderly practice, well-suited for domination, that I referred to earlier (marriage, charity, authorities) or have simply functioned as "empty formulas," asseverations of required Christian behavior that were not taken seriously anyway. "Orientation to the divine will" is for me (as for Paul [for example, Rom 12:2]) the best possible way of understanding Christian practice. This formula makes it clear that concrete decisions are oriented toward a goal: the *basileia tou theou*, the new creation, the peace of God, the new heaven and earth, to quote a few New Testament images for this goal. The formulation "orientation to the will of God" makes it clear as well that concrete decisions always have to be substantiated anew by analysis regarding their content. One has to examine what the will of God is (Rom 12:2).

### Hope and Partiality

Bultmann's demythologizing project of 1941 and his commentary on the Gospel of John were the decisive reasons for me, in 1951, to attend seminary. Here I found a credible theology that liberated me from all the old dogmatic junk. I could be a Christian, and I could become a theologian, without having to believe all the things that did not fit my worldview—from the virgin birth to the trumpets at the day of judgment. "One cannot use electric power and radios, in case of illness utilize modern medical and clinical means, and at the same time believe in the world of ghosts and miracles of the New Testament."<sup>21</sup> What a liberation Bultmann's theology meant for me and so many others of my generation! Yet when I look back today, I am startled by my past.

At the very time that Bultmann was writing these words, concentration camps were already in existence; it was wartime. Why does all this not appear in his presentation of the modern worldview? For him, the scientific worldview was a theological problem, but not so Auschwitz and the nuclear bomb. This is not a query regarding Bultmann's personal integrity, which is beyond question, but rather a query regarding his theology in its context, for which such happenings were simply not a theological problem. At a much deeper level, however, this problem is directed at myself. I was more than a generation younger than Bultmann. My childhood was marked by National Socialism, war, and the postwar times. Already during the war, my parents openly talked to their children and the church congregation about the violent regime of Hitler, the murder of the Jews, the existence of concentration camps. I had the best presuppositions to understand that Auschwitz had crucial *theological* meaning. I did not grasp it. I grasped the meaning of the first nuclear bomb in August 1945 for myself, for the world, but not for *theology*. In the following years, I suffered from fear of another war. And I studied theology with the liberating feeling that fortunately I did not have to believe in the virgin birth. Only today, when in Germany anti-Semitic tendencies are beginning to surface once again, do I grasp the dimensions of my theological failure and that of my generation. Why did the discussion of Christian anti-Judaism emerge so late and so marginally for us in Germany? Why did I spend all my years in seminary without making a theological connection between my own daily life, its historical and political dimensions, and my theological studies? It is often said today that the explanation lies in the guilt we had to repress. My problem, however, in those years was more fear than guilt. I was liberated from this fear by Bultmann's repetition of the Pauline *hōs mē* (as though): *oi klaiontes hōs mē klaiontes* (Those who mourn as though they were not

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21. R. Bultmann, *Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen* (Munich: Kaiser, 1941) 31.

mourning) (1 Cor 7:30).<sup>22</sup> "This *elpis* is the being free and open for the future, because the believer in obedience has left the care for herself or himself and thus the care for her or his future to God."<sup>23</sup>

From Ernst Käsemann I learned theological doubt regarding this limitation of faith to the existence of the individual. I discovered that my theological thinking lacked the cosmic dimension (the global reign of Christ) and the daily dimension ("worship in the daily life of the world").<sup>24</sup> "Justification of the ungodly certainly affects me concretely. But this formula is deprived of its weight if salvation for every human being and the whole world is not proclaimed through it."<sup>25</sup> What Käsemann did not articulate, Dorothee Sölle did: it is the human beings in the Third World, Vietnam, and Auschwitz who are meant. Since the early 1970s, collaboration with Dorothee Sölle has become crucial for my scholarly endeavors.

Because of Käsemann's insistence on "apocalypticism as the mother of Christian theology"<sup>26</sup> and because he taught me and others to see the global implications of Christian faith, I believe eschatology to be at the heart of the question of God. Thus, I could grasp the theological importance of Ernst Bloch.<sup>27</sup> The importance of an apocalyptic eschatology for the *whole* of the New Testament and for myself has become clearer and clearer to me. I want to explicate the problem by way of an example: the so-called delay of the parousia.

Since the discovery of the importance of eschatology for Jesus by Johannes Weiß, Albert Schweitzer, and others, it has been widely held that very early on—already in New Testament times—disappointment about the nonarrival of the parousia, the delay of the parousia, had played a significant role. A variety of texts, for example, in the Synoptic Gospels, have been interpreted in the light of this assumption. Statements like the demand for watchfulness (for example, Mark 13:33, 37) and corresponding parables have been understood as expressions of the delay of the parousia, and this delay of the parousia has been seen as the decisive force in the formation of early Christian congregations.<sup>28</sup> This hypothesis I believe to be historically incorrect. In effect, demands for watchfulness and even state-

22. See R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1941) §40.2 and passim.

23. *Ibid.*, § 35.3.

24. E. Käsemann, "Gottesdienst im Alltag der Welt," *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964) 2:198–204.

25. E. Käsemann, *Paulinische Perspektiven* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1969) 138, Eng. trans., *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

26. E. Käsemann, "Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie," *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, 2:100.

27. E. Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), Eng. trans., *Atheism in Christianity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972).

28. See E. Grässer, *Das Problem der Parusieverzögerung in den synoptischen Evangelien und in der Apostelgeschichte* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1960).

ments in the parables that the Lord was delayed (*chronizei* [Matt 24:48 par.; 25:5]) represent expressions of expectation of an imminent parousia, utterances of a life carried by the hope that it would not be long before the realm of God arrived and that it would include heaven and earth. The delay of the parousia in New Testament times plays a role only in the mouth of the *mockers* (2 Pet 3:3-4; 1 Clem. 23:3). Similarly, the “redactors” Mark, Matthew, and Luke—in the time after 70 CE—live by this hope of the nearness of the *basileia tou theou*, the worldwide revelation of God in action. Thus, the delay of the parousia as a model of explanation in New Testament scholarship is an invention of scholars; in effect, they see their enlightened and chronological thinking already at work in parts of the New Testament, preventing people thereby from finding their way to hope and liberating practice. This assessment of the importance of eschatology for all of Christianity during New Testament times does have consequences for the interpretation of particular passages. For example, all interpretations of the parables with respect to the conditions of the church/congregation, for example, ecclesiological interpretations, become questionable. Even Mark 4:13-20 par. (the supplementary interpretation of the parable of the sower) does not talk about church groups with different ways of behavior but about the eschatological consequences (thrive/pass away) of certain ways of behaving.

New Testament scholars often assume that expectation of an imminent parousia is the ground for ethics, meaning an interim ethics. By the same token, an ethics that shaped the world would be dependent on the willingness of the ones involved to make long-term preparations for the world. With this explanatory construct the orientation toward action of the early Christian communities is misinterpreted. On all levels of the tradition, the nearness of God, the proximity of the *basileia tou theou*, engenders an all-encompassing shaping of daily life as well as perspectives for action. Humans long for salvation, yearn for the revelation of the Human One (traditionally rendered as the “Son of Man”) from the clouds of heaven (Mark 13:24ff.), and shape their lives as children and imitators of God (Matt 5:9, 45). Like the delay of the parousia, the interpretive model of interim ethics is to be explained by the distance of scholarship from the subject under consideration.

Existentially, early Christian eschatology is very important for me. My analysis of the ecological, military, and political situation of the world is very negative. Therein, I see myself in agreement with many people who politically and religiously have taken very different stances. The probability that humans will really be able to prevent a self-produced catastrophe from happening decreases from year to year. The crucial religious or Christian issue of today is whether hope is sensibly and honestly possible. Is not the insistence of faith on the nearness of God a transparent attempt to comfort oneself and close one’s eyes in face of the future? Is hope but cowardice?

Many people of my class in my context have given up. For this I cannot condemn them. I hear their critique, that hope for the nearness of God is something like the singing of children in a dark basement. This critique is a more serious questioning of early Christian eschatology and of Christian faith today than the scientific worldview is. Today, I can demythologize the trumpets on the day of judgment as a mythic image of past times, as Bultmann did. In so doing, the hope for the nearness of God by which the first Christians lived is not called into question; it is only categorized in terms of concrete historical forms. It is not the temporal conceptions belonging to a specific historical situation that prove to be the problem, but hope itself. It is my experience that through participation in the struggle of resistance—even if in a very small way—hope does grow. Therefore, I can repeat all the yearning expressions of the New Testament that implore the realm of God without restrictions. I too will continue to wait and to hope.