

On the Distinction between "Theology" and "Theology as a Christian Vocation"

"Insofar as theological reflection, and hence the theological education that it makes both necessary and possible, are undertaken as Christian vocations (and whether they are so undertaken is, on my view, never necessary but always contingent), they involve the same commitment as is involved in any other Christian vocation. Specifically, they involve the commitment of those undertaking them to carry out their tasks in the obedience of faith working through love. Because the explicit ground of such faith, then, is the Christian witness to Jesus Christ as the event of God's liberating love, Christians called to the tasks of theological reflection and education are indeed committed to carry them out so as thereby to respond to the gift and demand of 'the gospel of liberation.' . . .

"[I]nsofar as theological reflection necessarily involves any prior commitment, it is not committed either to the truth of the Christian witness or to the ongoing struggle of the poor and oppressed for liberation, but is committed simply to understanding the meaning of the Christian witness and to assessing its truth, and hence to the ongoing struggle of any and all human beings to know the truth that will make them free. Insofar, then, as Christians undertake theological reflection as a Christian vocation, it is to this process of critically inquiring about the meaning and truth of their own witness of faith that they commit themselves. Even though they undertake their theological vocation only out of their personal commitment as Christians, and as Christians, moreover, who are committed to the cause of the oppressed, their task as theologians is to subject even this commitment to critical reflection by seriously asking as to its meaning and truth" ("Theological Education and Liberation Theology": A Response," *Theological Education*, 16, 1 [1979]: 48, 50).

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"[A] theology of liberation understands theological reflection to be not only contingently but necessarily an expression of faith, in that such reflection is not really possible at all unless it arises out of the theologian's own prior commitment as a Christian believer. . . .

"Unless and until this commitment of faith is made, liberation theologians contend, there cannot be the kind of critical reflection that is properly Christian theology, whatever other conditions may also be necessary in order for it to take place.

"From my own methodological standpoint, however, such plausibility as this contention may claim turns upon mistaking a contingent connection for a necessary one, thereby confusing two things that should be clearly distinguished—namely, theology as such, as critical reflection on the Christian witness, and theology undertaken as a Christian vocation. Certainly, insofar as a theologian is a Christian believer and has assumed theological responsibility for this very reason, he or she may fairly be held accountable for making the same prior commitment that must be made by any other Christian. But even in this case it is critical to realize that what makes one a theologian, insofar as one is such, is not the commitment of faith one shares as a believing Christian, but only reflectively asking and answering the question as to the meaning and truth of the Christian witness, together with making whatever prior commitment this kind of reflection involves. So far, then, from being a necessary precondition of their work's being concrete and scientific, the involvement of theologians in the process of liberation is really necessary to their being Christians and to their work's being a Christian vocation. On the contrary, what is really a necessary precondition of their theology's being concrete and scientific is that it go beyond merely assuming the truth of their prior commitment as Christians to ask and answer the question of whether the claims implied in this commitment are really true. In fact, unless and until they subject even the constitutive claims of faith itself to the question of truth, their reflection must remain bound so closely to the faith on which it is supposed to reflect that, while it may indeed be a reflection in faith, it cannot be a reflection on faith, because the only things of which it can really be critical are the expressions of faith in witness" (*On Theology*: 138, 142 f.).

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"According to the typical expressions of this insight [*sc.* first worked out by the witness and theology of the so-called social gospel] in contemporary theology, the work of the theologian as the second act of critical reflection on the first act of liberating praxis

is by its very nature directed to the end of achieving social and cultural justice, and thus to liberating all who are now oppressed by the unjust structures of existing society and culture. My quarrel with this claim is that it is made about theology itself and as such instead of about theology *as a Christian vocation*—in essentially the same way in which one might claim, say, that basic research in nuclear physics is by its very nature directed toward constantly improving the United States' arsenal of weapons vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. No doubt, doing nuclear physics *as a committed anti-Communist* would entail doing it with some such end in view. But it is this kind of existential commitment that gives basic research in nuclear physics such an ulterior end, not such research in and of itself. In somewhat the same way, it is the Christian commitment of the theologian, insofar as there, in fact, is such a commitment, that accounts for the theologian's serving the ulterior end of love and justice, including justice in its political aspect. . . . [I]nsofar as theological reflection is pursued on the basis of one's calling to Christian existence, it properly serves the same ulterior end that any other Christian vocation is supposed to serve" ("Theology as a Christian Vocation" [1989-90]: 11 f.).

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