

How do I distinguish my understanding of the dialectic of theory and praxis from that of other theologians who, in my opinion, in effect collapse the dialectic?

Most theologies distinguish, in one way or another, between Christian praxis and the critical reflection on such praxis that they call "theology." Typically, however, most theologies insist that the critical reflection, or theory, corresponding to Christian praxis is and must be done *in* praxis as well as *on* it. The effect of this insistence, I hold, is to collapse the dialectic of theory and praxis, instead of maintaining it; and this is so even though those who insist continue to think and speak as though the dialectic were intact. How do I account for this?

If it is true, as I have come to say, that we live understandingly on two levels, not just on one, "understanding" turns out to have not only one sense but two. Similarly, "reason" can mean either the reason involved in leading our lives so as to make or imply claims to validity or the reason involved in critically interpreting our praxis and critically validating our claims. But, then, why can't one say much the same thing about "theory"? In other words, the term "theory," also, can be used to refer both to the moment of understanding or reason without which what we do and how we do it would not be *human* action at all, and so would not be, properly, "praxis," *and* to the act or process of critically reflecting on praxis so as both to interpret its meaning and to validate its claims to validity in a critical way. Without "theory" in the first sense, "praxis" would not be "praxis," and there would be no claims to validity to validate. But without "theory" in the second sense, there could not be either any fully critical interpretation of the meaning of praxis or any fully critical validation of the claims to be valid that it itself makes or implies.

(It occurs to me that all this is, in a way, anticipated by the Heideggerian-Bultmannian distinctions between "existential" [*existentiell*] and "existentialist" [*existential*] understanding, on the one hand, and between the "work-thinking" [*Arbeitsdenken*] of ordinary life and "science" [*Wissenschaft*] in the proper sense of

the theoretical reflection necessary to critically validating the claims made or implied in such work-thinking, on the other.)

Because "theory" is thus ambiguous, it is always possible that two very different positions will both distinguish between theory and praxis, even while being in no way any less different for doing so. Therefore, it is essential to press the question of *how*, exactly, "theory" is to be understood, before one can know for sure which of two possibly very different positions one has on one's hands. By the same token, I can distinguish my position from the counterposition simply by exposing the difference between their respective understandings of "theory."

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