

A Review on Philosophical Hermeneutic for the Critique of Theological Hermeneutic of Jose Miguez Bonino¹⁾

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I. Introduction to Some Hermeneutical Issues in Liberation Theology of Jose Miguez Bonino

The challenge from liberation theologies suggests that the norm for interpreting both contemporary experience and the biblical texts should be the particular experience of oppression and liberation, not universal experience. This hermeneutical norm assumes that "all theology knowingly or not is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed."²⁾ Fiorenza interprets the significance of liberation theology's "hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed" as the advocacy stance. The task of making explicit the interpreter's ideological stance and of taking an advocacy position for the oppressed involves adopting the Marxist tool for social analysis and ideological critique in the Liberation Theology of Latin America.

The "advocacy" stance of Liberation Theology, as found for instance in Jose Miguez Bonino's representation of the issues involved in this theology, can be clarified. Jose Miguez Bonino's Latin American theology of liberation interprets the Scripture in terms of praxis as a new hermeneutic factor in the historical level, not merely in the cognitive level of understanding. The biblical interpretation should include the practical purpose of praxis in the concrete historical conflict in Latin America.³⁾ In this new way of interpreting the Bible,

1) This article is abstracted and developed from my MTS thesis(May 1988) at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary: "The Hermeneutic of Paul Ricoeur: Used to Analyze the Hermeneutic of Liberation Theologies for A Revisionist Model for Contemporary Theology"(Duk Ki Kim)

2) Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 1986, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology", Donald K. McKim, 1986, *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 360.

3) Jose Miguez Bonino, 1980, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 87.

there remains a hermeneutic question of whether the praxis-oriented theological hermeneutic of liberation is conceived as a form of subjective application of the Bible to present historical situation without an objective process of biblical exegesis. The significance of the issue arises not merely because the praxis is a subordinate factor to the hermeneutic reflection on the Scripture, but because the praxis in historical level is the independent and dominant factor to defending the biblical truth. Bonino rejects the idea that biblical truth is preexistent to and independent of its historical effectiveness. It appears to him that the biblical truth is not merely applied to the context and practiced in the situation after it is understood, but is manifested in the process of changing the world through praxis in history according to the Marxist analysis of society. Bonino raises two issues engaged in his hermeneutic in Latin American liberation theology.⁴⁾

- 1) Is this view reducing the biblical truth to ethical action, depreciating the vertical dimension?
- 2) Is this view simply a version of the Marxist view of knowledge?

The first question 1) is concerned about the relation between the text and praxis; the second question 2) is related to the interdependence between the Marxist analysis of society and truth. In another word, the critical issues are focused on the relation between understanding the text and it's application to the historical context for praxis, on the relation between biblical truth and the scientific method.

Concerning the controversial issue of whether the Marxist analysis is adequate for a Christian interpretation of the text and the contemporary situation, Bonino argues that the Marxist analysis of society is not only a tool, nor is it an atheistic philosophical formulation an a metaphysical theory. It is a concrete and specific social analysis with its own hypothesis about the relation of human history to material goods. Another rationale for the use of the Marxist analysis is proposed as follows. Since every interpretation of the text is dependent on some preunderstanding, as Bultmann argues, the ideological

4) Ibid. 88-89.

framework of the preunderstanding leads to the given praxis. The question remains whether the Marxist analysis of ideology is adequate to the reader's own rationality of praxis.⁵⁾

In the process of arguing the issue, two hermeneutical issues are involved; a) how the presupposition engaged in Marxist analysis is related to the religious authority or tradition; and b) whether the Marxist analysis itself is right pre-understanding or valid tool in comparison with others.⁶⁾

The another issue emerges, when Bonino obstinately appropriate the view of Marxist tool for analysis; how is the original text determinative for the Christian obedience through the mediation of Marxist analysis of social conflict?⁷⁾ The issue provides some hermeneutical question about the nature of text, the scope and function of hermeneutical reflection and the relation between understanding and application. Ultimately can we appropriate the Biblical truth from the text for praxis? If than, how?

Those two issues, 1) and 2), can respectively be discussed in the dialogue with Bonino's theological hermeneutic of praxis according to both Gadamer's philosophic hermeneutic and Habermas' critical hermeneutic. The dialogue and discussion between Bonino's theological hermeneutic and Gadamer's and Habermas' hermeneutic is established in terms of juxtaposition, mutual illumination, and critical correlation. Especially, in conclusion, the philosophical hermeneutic of Ricoeur, due to its nature and function, may be used to examine and reflect upon the hermeneutic presuppositions and philosophical assumptions behind both the theological hermeneutic of Liberation theology and the two philosophical hermeneutics.

II. Some Reflections from Philosophical Hermeneutics of Gadamer, and

5) Bonino, Ibid., 87.

6) Ibid., 95. Bonino himself poses the question, saying, "The only legitimate question is therefore whether this analysis and this projection do in fact correspond to the facts of human history." Also, Thiselton raises the issues of right preunderstanding. See Anthony C. Thiselton, 1980, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 113.

7) Bonino, Ibid., 98.

Habermas on Bonino's Theological Hermeneutic of praxis

A. Gadamer's Critical Hermeneutic on Praxis and Text

According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, a text is not to be conceived as a tradition of the accumulation of historical germs for recovering the original meaning. The text is the new world, where we can encounter new being. But Bonino implies that the text is a source book for Christian obedience in discipleship, due to his emphasis on praxis. Bonino, however, comes close to Gadamer's hermeneutical viewpoint of the text as unfolding a new world when Bonino denies that the text of the Bible is a book of 'pure kerygmatic truths or events.' Yet his presupposition about the view of the text might be critically evaluated by Gadamer. Bonino's hermeneutical thrust to interpret the text for the present struggle of praxis may be seen when he concludes the issue of preunderstanding, stating, "Is it altogether absurd to reread the resurrection today as the death of the monopolies, the liberation from hunger, or solidary form of ownership?"⁸⁾ This is quite opposite to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic that the text does not primarily function to project the historical knowledge. For Gadamer the textual tradition as 'given' functions to reconstruct our own world as a whole.

In the connection with Gadamer's view of text, he seriously warns that the tradition may not be dissolved by critical reflection. In his debate with Habermas regarding the hermeneutic reflection on universality, Gadamer argues that the tradition can not be conceived as the thematic object reflected away.⁹⁾ For Gadamer, tradition is not a matter of subjection or abdication of our reason's reflection, nor even a matter of obedience or resistance, but a question of recognition and acceptance or rejection. Therefore, the tradition ultimately belongs to the ontological sphere as 'given', like Heidegger's Dasein. If we

8) Bonino, Ibid., 101.

9) Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1986, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection", Bruce R. Wachterhauser ed. *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 291.

critically review Bonino's hermeneutical interest in light of Gadamer's viewpoint, above mentioned, it becomes clear that Bonino understands tradition as Scripture primarily as a matter of Christian obedience for historical praxis. This implies that critical reflection on praxis can elucidate the Biblical truth.¹⁰⁾ The historicity of biblical truth provides the imperative guidance for historical praxis. For Gadamer, on the other hand, hermeneutic reflection on tradition ultimately teaches us our historical finitude and who we are in the encounter of the new world unfolded in the tradition.

Gadamer emphasizes that tradition leads us to the recognition of our finitude before we take another praxis through reflecting on the tradition, contrary to what Bonino implies.¹¹⁾ In this sense, tradition does not merely project "the actual historical state of affairs", but also self-reflection on our intention to participate in any praxis by a transcendental critical distance without providing a direct guidance or reference point for historical praxis.¹²⁾ According to Hoy's summary of the debate between Gadamer and Habermas, Gadamer sees the relation between praxis and tradition functioning through self-reflection, which Gadamer sees as "intersubjective, with the purpose, for instance, of unveiling knowledge-orienting interests..."¹³⁾ Hoy concludes the debate, emphasizing the significance of hermeneutic as critique:

Instead of being yet another method, Gadamer's hermeneutics is a call for methodical self-reflection on the part of all the humanistic enterprises. In that sense, however, hermeneutics is essentially linked to praxis. Another major question involved in the Habermas-Gadamer debate, therefore, hinges on the relation of hermeneutic criticism and actual praxis.¹⁴⁾

10) Bonino, Ibid., 102. He concedes to Casalis' 'hermeneutical circulation' "between the text in its historicity and our own historical reading of it in obedience," stating that "...the critical use of the instruments that help us to reach a better understanding of this historicity is indispensable for a reflection on our Christian obedience today." Also, E. Schüssler Fiorenza, summarizes the view of liberation theologians' hermeneutic in the same way as Bonino did. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 1986, *In Memory of Her* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company), 34-36.

11) David Couzens Hoy, 1978, *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 59-60.

12) Ibid., pp.128-129.

13) Ibid. 119.

14) Hoy, 119.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic, therefore, is suspicious of whether Bonino's hermeneutic of praxis leaves a room for self-reflection.¹⁵⁾ Because of the lack of self-reflection, the verifiability of the "right" preunderstanding is posed as a question by Anthony C. Thiselton; who is concerned about the pre-understanding of liberation theology being mainly shaped by praxis through a Marxist interpretation of the Bible.¹⁶⁾ Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic, therefore, warns Bonino not to use the Bible for praxis without self-reflection, but leaves the question of justifiability of Bonino's pre-understanding open: How can we proceed from the historicity or 'matter' of text(theoretical knowledge) to the demand of Christian obedience for historical praxis (practical knowledge)?

B. Habermas's Hermeneutical Critique on Truth and Marxist Social Analysis

Jürgen Habermas develops his critical view on language in order to criticize the Gadamer's feature of an overemphasis on cultural tradition in his hermeneutics. Unlike Gadamer's view of language, Habermas is convinced that language as a kind of meta-institution is bound to the social process of domination and social labor. Thus he believes that language is "also a medium of domination and social power; it serves to legitimate relations of organized force."¹⁷⁾ In this sense, language can produce systematically distorted communication as false consciousness under the ideological domination of technology and science.¹⁸⁾

When he criticizes philosophical hermeneutic of Gadamer, Habermas is

15) Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1986, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection", *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, 294. Here Gadamer discusses how the philosophical hermeneutic can function as a critique on ideology, concluding, "Thus only through hermenetical reflection am I no longer unfree over against myself but rather can deem freely what in my preunderstanding may be justified and what unjustifiable."

16) Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 111-113.

17) John B Thompson, 1981, *Critical Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 80-82. and see Habermas, 1986, "A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method", *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, 243-276.

18) Robert Wuthnow, 1984, "The critical theory of Jürgen Habermas"(ch. 5), *Cultural Analysis* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 222-228. Wuthnow states that systematically distorted communication means false consciousness for Marx, regarding science and technology as sources of the systematically distorted communication in Habermas' critique of ideology.

concerned with analyzing and interpreting the interests hidden in the social and political relation in communication and the use of technology and science. He sees the technical or instrumental interest as projecting distorted communication in the dimensions of labor and power. Habermas is convinced that the distortion can be analysed phenomenologically, using the psychoanalytic framework of illusion, projection and rationalization.¹⁹⁾ Unlike Gadamer's hermeneutic, Habermas wants to explain the distorted communicative action as violence in discourse, dissimulation through a theoretical apparatus of desymbolization and resymbolization in the process of psychoanalysis as well as understanding the symptom itself.

His approach to the critique of ideology is based on the internal critique of Marxist social theory at cognitive level. Like Bonino, Habermas sees the source of ideological distortion in social and economic relations, which Marxist analysis illuminates. But unlike Bonino, Habermas criticizes this Marxist analysis as itself lacking the possibility for self-reflection which would lead to emancipation in communication. Habermas accepts Marxism's judgement that the "relations of production" puts "the self-productive subject as the forces of production"²⁰⁾ into class conflict. Unlike Marx, however, Habermas stresses that the phenomena of distorted communication, domination in discourse, and ideological dissimulation, occur only in the relations of production, not in the forces of production. This insight necessitates distinguishing between two kinds of action: technical interest and practical interest, instrumental action and communicative action, and empirical-analytic science and historical hermeneutic science.

For Bonino, any interpretation of tradition implicitly determines its ideology and its praxis according to the sociology of knowledge and the witness of Christian faith in Scripture.²¹⁾ The Christian faith calls for a new hermeneutic to be suspicious of traditional Western interpretation of the text. Liberal

19) Paul Ricoeur, 1986, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology", *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, 322-323.

20) Ibid. 319.

21) Bonino, Ibid., 91-92.

interpretation placed religious truth in the area of subjectivity and individuality, and projected a false image of God as timeless and impersonal in ideological hiding. The false ideology can be analyzed by the socio-analytical sciences to reinterpret the Christian heritage. Bonino suggests three rationales for the new interpretation: 1) the demise of metaphysics, 2) the benefits of socio-analytical sciences which uncover the concrete historical logic in Christian faith and the ideological function of religious language, 3) the nature of the biblical witness as time-bound and place-bound.

Both Habermas and Bonino value the ideological critique to uncover the authentic truth in social dynamics. Habermas views the distorted truth in our everyday communication; Bonino discovers its ideological projection in Western interpretation of our religious heritage. But Habermas criticizes social analysis as insufficient in itself to disclose the false ideology, because it cannot explain the source of the distortion in communicative action without distinguishing two kinds of action, science and interested. In this sense, Habermas stresses the role of psychoanalysis, not merely to discern and unmask the 'ideology frozen', but also to reconstruct unlimited and unconstrained communication in the interest in emancipation.

Unlike Bonino, Habermas argues that the dominant ideology of the present day is that of science and technology when he critically discerns the role of state in advanced industrialized society. Because the state plays a significant role in controlling the economic management for growth, the oppressing class' interests are not justified solely by the hiddenness of the mechanism of surplus-value.²²⁾ Consequently the state must legitimate its authority to maintain and operate the system. In this sense, ideology is not merely dependent on class conflict, but also the cultural power influencing legitimation on the level of psychological and moral deprivation and cultural subjugation. In the light of Habermas' critical evaluation of modern ideology, Bonino's oversimplification of the source of ideological distortion must be reevaluated under the Habermas'

22) Wuthnow, *Cultural Analysis*, 180-181.

alternative theory of cultural praxis in the global interconnection in power relation.²³⁾

III. Conclusion: a Rendezvous between Bonino's Theological Hermeneutic and Gadamer's, Habermas' Philosophical Hermeneutic.

We can pose the question of how Bonino's theological hermeneutic overcome Gadamer's and Habermas' limited task and logic, of how Gadamer's hermeneutic and Habermas' critical science can cooperate each other in solving in an advanced way Bonino' hermeneutic issues. Gadamer's hermeneutic provides a limited possibility of self-reflection for ideological critique, because it fails to make conjunction both between self-reflection and exegesis and between hermeneutic of understanding and exegesis even at the epistemological level beyond the ontological boundary. Habermas' critical science also only provides the limited possibility of the ideal communication of emancipation in interest, because it does not present an alternative theory of cultural interpretation affecting the legitimation of the state's decision in policy.²⁴⁾

Confronting the two tasks, mentions above, we need to learn Ricoeur's critical hermeneutic which takes seriously the inevitable role of critical distanciation in interpreting the text as well as of the hermeneutic experience of attachment to the tradition. The original intention and its sociological and cultural situation are de-contextualized and re-contextualized in the act of subsequent reading. Critical distanciation and temporal gap are essential to make 'effective historical efficacy'. In this sense, exegesis, which is more concerned with the reconstruction of the original intention and situation, should be accompanied by the hermeneutic experience of understanding. The 'matter of text', which unfolds a new mode of reality to the reader, suspends the ordinary language by functional and poetic re-description of the text. This imaginative dimension of the metamorphosis of the ego and dis-appropriation of the self is

23) Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology", 335-339.

24) Ibid., 337-338.

crystallized into the 'matter of text' in the hermeneutic of process of understanding.

Moreover, Ricoeur's critical reflection reinforces the importance of literary function of re-signification, 'imaginative variation of the ego' in psychoanalytic dimension and the creative aspect of re-description for the critique on ideology. Gadamer's limited view of self-reflection by intersubjective understanding and Habermas' unfulfilled task of developing the cultural theory affecting the state's rationale for legitimation are supplemented by Ricoeur's suggestion of the imaginative power of re-description of the text and psychoanalytic reflection.²⁵⁾ Thus since the antinomy between Gadamer's self-reflection by intersubjective understanding through tradition and Habermas' enlightenment by emancipation in interest can only be solved by hermeneutic renovation of language, we need to remark Ricoeur's emphasis on poetic function of narrative re-description.

Thus we concretely suggest a stepping stone to overcome the limit of both through the biblical prototype of Gospel of Mark. Its hermeneutic principle of eschatology manifested in Marcan narrative seemingly functions by the normative way in contravening the past tradition of Old testament and the future expectation of Kingdom of God. In this sense, it deserves to be noted that the Marcan narrative vision of Gospel story encourages the dialectic of the remembrance of tradition and the anticipation of liberation to eliminate the dichotomy between the reinterpretation of cultural heritages and the liberating interest in future emancipation.

Illuminated by Ricoeur's insights, Bonino's hermeneutic of liberation can be more constructively integrated with critical self-reflection in psychoanalytic and poetic dimension for the demand for Christian praxis. In this sense, Bonino's theological hermeneutic of praxis can be more dynamically refined once it is actively associated with Ricoeur's critical hermeneutic, which elaborates the liberating hermeneutic of eschatology, illuminated by Habermas' and Gadamer's

25) Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology", 330-332.

philosophical hermeneutic. The liberating hermeneutic of Christian praxis can be derived from the literary and psychoanalytic aspect of the Christian heritage by the mediation of self-reflection and poetic re-description. This, in turn, can provide a concrete transcending and distancing critique of ideology on class conflict and science in emancipating communication.

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