Political theology: from Luther to Liberation

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Introduction

It is an undeniable truth that religious faith constitutes a social phenomenon, influencing both the sphere of public policy and the domain of the institutional formation of social life. This holds true even in the contemporary period of late modernity, wherein religions are transformed into «functional substitutes». Furthermore, the return of religions—as emphasized in sociological research (regardless of whether they were ever truly absent)—emerges as a response to the contemporary reality of socio-economic insecurity, the threats of cultural homogenization driven by globalization, and existential vacuum and anxiety (Kotsiopoulos, 2020). Western modernization was convincing in its capacity to protect nature, human life, and social order, and the same time religion was «in retreat»! Now that such a persuasive capacity has ceased to be strong, religions are returning to the forefront, offering to function as means for the «prevention and management of crises» thereby acting as «functional substitutes for politics» (Georgiadou, 2007: 63).

Luther remains to this day one of the most emblematic figures in the field of Western theology, a sign of contradiction and ambiguity. As has been repeatedly emphasized and underlined, he was a central figure in world human history who, through his works and deeds, managed to provoke diverse fermentation processes, oppositions, and syntheses both within the theological sphere and within the realm of secular humanistic and social studies and sciences. The judgments and assessments regarding his work are so numerous—often conflicting with one another—that we can argue there is a need for a typological investigation, classification, and recording of these viewpoints.

Luther's political theology and it's cultural impact

Ludwig Feuerbach, who is considered to be one of the main influences of K. Marx, considered Luther as the pioneer of his own transformation of theology into anthropology and sociology; Nietzsche regarded him as a reformer of the Church and theology; and the philosopher M. Scheler as an introducer of human interiority and anthropocentrism. The neo-Marxists Bloch and Marcuse viewed him as a genuine exponent of the impasses and contradictions of bourgeois society and morality (Delikonstantis, 1995: 409).

As Lohse wrote in 1981: «*Methodologically, we should be made skeptical by the fact that until now every theological and ecclesiastical movement, and frequently also various political trends, have claimed Luther's heritage for themselves: Protestant Orthodoxy as well as Pietism, the Enlightenment no differently than large segments of Romanticism, the conservative theology of the 19th century in the same way as the*

liberal one, and dialectical theology equally with the 'German Christians' of National Socialism. The same holds true for various political currents. Thus, in the 20th century, the National Socialists invoked Luther, and later, with certain hesitations and some restrictions, the communists did so as well. If almost everyone claims in one way or another to be Luther's successors, this naturally expresses the exceptional significance that Luther retains to this day. Even movements that pursue something entirely different cannot escape him. Luther's significance is so great that obviously even revolutionary movements cannot escape it in the long run» (Lohse, 1981: 211). Therefore, numerous and diverse conclusions can be drawn from Luther's words, and because of this, the phenomenon of his political exploitation and instrumentalization is observed. Most importantly, however, there are substantial differences and conflicting theological assessments not only between Roman Catholic and Protestant researchers, but also among scholars originating from the same field.

It is no exaggeration to emphasize that basic theological positions of Luther's teaching can serve as a prototype for corresponding political and social theories, even though such an outcome does not appear to have been among his intentions. Thus, his demand and struggle for the internal reform of the Western Church «in head and members», his spiritual anguish over overthrowing the bureaucratization of the Church—which binds, if it does not abolish, human freedom and calls God's grace into question—and his reaction to the legalistic petrification of sacramental experience and to the institutional and authoritarian character of the ecclesiastical community could readily be utilized within the sphere of social and political theory at a broader level of political and social challenge against any established authority that negates individual freedom and undermines human rights (Kotsiopoulos, 2008. Papatolios, 2017).

Indeed, Luther's systematic support for the individual's unmediated relationship with God and for the subjective interpretation of the Bible, free from papal or institutional mediations and authoritative ecclesiastical interpretations, could readily be transformed within the field of Political Sociology into the theoretical framework of citizen autonomy rather than heteronomy—a fact that validates and establishes the independent «civil society» vis-à-vis the State and its power. Furthermore, his conviction that Divine Justice is not the punitive justice of the scholastic theologians, but rather the Philanthropic donation of Divine Grace even to the sinner who is unworthy of it, could be interpreted as the benevolent stance of the Almighty State toward its citizens, who have the right to enjoy its philanthropic providence and care. However, Luther's arbitrary interpretation that man is saved by faith alone (*sola fide*) —whereas the text of the Holy Scripture states that «*the righteous shall live by faith*»[1] and not by faith alone—combined with his Augustinian-rooted conviction concerning «absolute predestination», can constitute the cause at the level of social theory for him to be accused of passivity and fatalism, which breeds citizens with a theoretical rather than a practical and active interest in the institutional organization of society and the State.

However, as has been proven by research in the field of Sociology of Religion, the doctrine of absolute predestination is responsible for fatalism and inaction at a social and theological level, but also for social activism and intense theological and socio-political activity. This occurs, for instance—as emphasized by the great sociologist M. Weber—in the case of Capitalism, which has in many ways been

influenced by Protestant ethics and particularly by the doctrine of absolute predestination. According to this analysis, the Protestant believer, because of their belief in «absolute predestination» does not know whether they will achieve the salvation of Paradise. This insecurity of theirs, their theological and spiritual uncertainty, subconsciously engenders a need for self-affirmation. This success functions as a «self-fulfilling prophecy» and reassures the believer that they are chosen by God. This intense economic activity brings about the «accumulation of capital» thereby fostering the development of Capitalism (Weber, 1978: 106, 150).

This view of the doctrine of absolute predestination is intertwined with other corresponding Calvinist beliefs concerning the accumulating «worldly asceticism» the profession as a divine calling, rationalism, and individualism, resulting in the presence of a necessary theological and political-philosophical substratum for the development of capitalism (Kotsiopoulos, 2012: 162. Denaxas, 2025).

Critical reflections about «Liberation Theology»

Liberation theology differs from the fundamentalist movements of the Islamic East and bears no relation to what, in the field of political sociology, we term «political religion» as a civil religion, a «religion civile». This state-centric conception of civil religion, moreover, normatively and rationalistically consolidates the organization of the State and aims at social cohesion by subordinating Gospel faith to the social and political morality of the State, which functions as a new deity. This logic instrumentalizes religious faith within the framework of a new state theocracy, wherein—as Rousseau points out— «*there are no other high priests than the magistrate, nor other priests than the rulers, yet it is truly advantageous for the State that every citizen should have a religion that inspires them to love their duties*» (Rousseau, 2006: 209).

Liberation Theology's Gospel is interpreted politically and revolutionary, anti-authoritarian and movement-based. And the liberating God is the God of the poor and the weak, the God of the suffering and the destitute. According to the phrase of the representative of liberation theology, the assassinated Roman Catholic Bishop Oscar Romero (Archbishop of San Salvador): «*Our Church is persecuted precisely for its alignment with the poor and because it tries to incarnate itself through the interests of the poor... It would be sad in a country where gruesome murders are taking place if we did not count clergymen among the victims. It is the testimony of a Church incarnated in the problems of the people*» (Katerelos, 2002).

In the 1960s, during which the trends of liberation theology or political theology developed, the Roman Catholic Brazilian Archbishop Dom Helder Câmara would create a sensation with his positions and his struggles for a Christianity of action rather than mere prayer. He would criticize «*the magical and fatalistic Christianity that we transmitted to the Latin American masses*» (Camara, 1974: 15), denounce international hypocrisy that speaks with enthusiasm about human rights while in practice and daily life they are not respected, and endeavor to raise awareness within the legal community at the 6th World Congress organized by the World Secretariat of Catholic Jurists of Pax Romana, stating that it is their duty to protect human dignity. «*I expect more from you than you are able to give. If you saw what my eyes see, if you were present at what happens daily around me, you would understand my vehemence.*

What would the prophets Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah say if they resided today in Africa, Asia, or Latin America? What would Christ say if it were He speaking to you now?» (Camara, 1974: 25).

For this reason, he calls upon them to take initiatives in all international fora and international organizations where they work, in order to address major multinational and economic monopolies and abuses of power, wherever they may originate. He does not rule out violence—at least in exceptional cases—referring to the papal Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which nevertheless holds serious reservations regarding its use (Camara, 1974: 49). The essential requirement, however, he points out, is the postponement of no changes at the socio-political and cultural levels that the entire world urgently needs. Moreover, he understands the thirst for revolutionary violence on the part of people suffering in the Third World who do not tolerate the sluggishness and indifference of the world's powerful. Yet this does not prevent him from declaring that the Church must concern itself solely with the cultural revolution. After all, the revolution of structures necessarily presupposes the cultural revolution.

The capitalist system is denounced as an enemy of peace, and he considers the anti-religious stance of socialism to be attributable to Christians who have made themselves complicit in the capitalist mindset and their refusal to engage in dialogue with Socialism. Nonetheless, he avoids linking Christianity with Socialism and calls for efforts to be undertaken to liberate this system from its unjust prejudices against Christianity. This would, moreover, afford it the opportunity to be enriched by what he terms incomparable Christian values. This enrichment will lead to a «personalist socialization», free from the dictatorship of the government and the party, creative of an atmosphere that expands human existence and the human community (Camara, 1974: 111).

The father of Liberation Theology, the Peruvian theologian and priest G. Gutiérrez, will emphasize that liberation from oppressive socio-economic structures is not enough; personal transformation leading to a deeper internal freedom against every kind of oppression is also necessary (Gutiérrez, 2008: 68). In his view, the political reading of the Gospel brings the dynamic and liberating character of utopias back to the forefront. Utopian thought, moreover, generates and provokes social mobilizations and revolutions. For this reason, he will emphasize that it is connected to historical reality, since both denunciation and announcement coexist as structural elements in its construction (Gutiérrez, 2008, 404). Gutiérrez considers the distinction between ideology and utopia to be imperative. Ideology performs the function of preserving the existing order and, to this end, elevates everything it cannot confront into dogma. Utopia, by contrast, is believed to lead to an authentic and scientific knowledge of reality and to an action that transforms the existing state of affairs (Gutiérrez, 2008: 407).

Conclusion

All the above theological currents of thought, which we have presented only schematically rather than analytically, are encapsulated in the firm conviction that the Gospel does not teach passivity, resignation, conformity, tolerance of injustice, racial discrimination, oppression, and imperialism. After all, Christ liberated humans from sin as well as from its social consequences, which are manifested in the problems of

oppression, poverty, misery, and disease. In any case, however, the problem of revolutionary violence as a means of overturning existing negative structures remains, regarding which explicit and clear references are avoided. Furthermore, Luther's dualistic view that spiritual authority exists solely for the pious and the other, political authority, for the impious leads either to an absolute separation of Church and State or to the autonomy of these authorities from man. In any case, however, this separation later led to state controlled Church and Caesaropapism. Theology must avoid its ideologization and secularization by maintaining its eschatological, non-violent, spiritual, and soteriological character. This means it cannot be transformed into an agent of violent radicalism oriented toward the pursuit of social and political demands. After all, Christ does not die like a political or national revolutionary, despite all the accusations leveled against Him (Eagleton, 1971. Nikolaidis, 1987: 182).

Notes

[1] *Romans* 3, 28.

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