CHAPTER FOUR

CLODOVIS BOFF – KEEPING THE DIALECTICAL TENSION

4.1 Introduction

Liberation theology has always seen its task as the placing of the poor at the centre, as the privileged locus theologicus, or point of encounter with the Triune God. In the first chapter, I followed how liberation theologians have tried to describe who these poor people are. The very different ways in which they have carried out this task\(^1\) may be taken to indicate at least two points. The first is that the different understandings of the poor could demonstrate that liberation theologians find in the poor a useful concept to enable them to carry out some other task – for example, a critique of social structures or the institutional church. But by the necessary move to the poor as a concept or a theoretical construct, the danger enters, as Marion showed us, of treating the poor as an idol, as what is all-consuming of the gaze,\(^2\) or as what offers too much visibility.\(^3\) If this conceptualisation of the poor does happen, there is no a priori reason to assume that it is done abusively, or even consciously, but neither does that mean that the poor cannot be treated in Marion's sense, idolatrously.

On the other hand, one may also decide that the description of the complexity of the situation and reality of the poor stems from a careful attention to the needs and problems of the poor, since these cannot be simply reduced to one thing. To the extent that the diversity of approaches is reflective of such a careful listening, it would reduce the possibility of the poor becoming liberation theology's idol in Marion's sense. Another way of putting this is to use the idea of “ethical indignation” which has been claimed as foundational for the development of liberation theology.\(^4\)

The two explanations are not mutually exclusive, and both may be to some extent correct. However, there is still a need to understand and explain the apparent inability of liberation theologians to settle clearly on exactly

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1. See, for example, the discussions on the meaning of the Option for the Poor in Chapter 1, section 1.1.5
2. See the discussion in Chapter 3, sections 3.5.1 and 3.5.2, with references to Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance* and, especially here Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, p.10
3. See Chapter 3, section 3.5.3, with reference to Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess*, pp.68-69
4. See, for example, Maria Clara Luchetti Bingemer, “Teologia da Libertação: Uma Opção pelos Pobres”, *REB* 52/208 (1992), pp.917-927; here p.919 “Liberation theology was born of an ethical indignation, counterbalanced by a revelation. The revelation of the face of the Lord himself which shines forth and manifests itself with the force of an epiphany, in the face of the poorest, of the one in whom life finds itself most under threat, attacked and diminished.” See, too, André Corten, *Os Pobres e o Espírito Santo*. *O Pentecostalismo no Brasil*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1996 (orig. French, 1995), p.13 who notes that this ethical indignation was one of the reasons for the development of liberation theology in the 1960s or Jung Mo Sung, “Sujeito e defesa da vida das vítimas” in Luiz Carlos Susin (ed.), *Terra Prometida: Movimento Social, Engajamento Cristão e Teológica*, Petrópolis, Vozes / SOTER, 2001, pp.225-247, here pp.229-232, where he argues that there can only be ethical indignation when the other is recognised as subject. Although Levinas is not referred to directly in this text, the background is unmistakeable.
where the *locus* from which they theologise is to be found. The discussion in the second chapter focussed on the question of idolatry, and the closely related theme of ideology. Although liberation theology has given fresh impetus to idolatry as a theological concept, there has been less time spent on an ideological self-critique. Has liberation theology really managed to avoid becoming ideological and if so, how? Much of its efforts in this regard have been in relation to its alleged over-dependency on Marxism.\(^5\) However, it is less clear that liberation theology has ever considered whether its treatment of the poor may not also be at risk of becoming ideological,\(^6\) and thus idolatrous in precisely the way Marion describes the idol.

The previous chapter began with a consideration of the Second Council of Nicaea, where, for the first time, an attempt was made by the Church in council to determine the distinction between what is idolatrous and iconic. The treatment itself, however, was marked by ideological overtones, concerned with questions of power and influence, alongside the more strictly theological discussion. So it was that neither the authors nor the Council were able to provide a straightforward answer to the question as to whether there is anything which can prevent the iconicity of the poor being turned into an idolatry. Emmanuel Levinas helped me to argue in response that the poor can be viewed as the other who challenges the liberation theologian. This alterity of the poor is at least one reason, as I mentioned above, for the variety in attempts to define or describe the poor and the poverty to which they are subject. I then briefly turned to Enrique Dussel, one of the major exponents of a Levinasian approach in Latin America. Finally, the clarity and precision offered by Jean-Luc Marion gave me a new way to speak about liberation theology. He helped to show how language and concepts can become themselves idolatrous or, as liberation theology would hope when it talks of the poor, remain or become iconic.

Therefore I now turn to liberation theology itself to see if it can provide any answers to the dilemma it faces: is it possible to focus on the poor as a privileged *locus theologicus*, icons of God, without turning them eventually into an idol? I do this mainly through a reading of the work of Clodovis Boff. My initial and main focus will be on his first major work, his doctoral thesis defended at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve in 1976 and published in Brazil in 1978.\(^7\) My reason for doing this is simple. The

\(^5\) See Chapter 2, section 2.2.3, and also the discussion below.

\(^6\) A partial early exception may be found in VV.AA., *Los pobres: Encuentro y compromiso*, Buenos Aires, La Aurora, 1978, reflecting on the poor whom liberation theology encounters. However, this work perhaps serves more to underline the diversity of understandings of the poor highlighted in my first chapter.

work has been described as “a significant mark in the evolution of method [in liberation theology]”, or even by a Finnish writer on Brazilian liberation theology as “the official liberation theological method”. This latter suggestion may be going somewhat too far, though at least the simplified versions of Clodovis Boff’s methodology coincide so strongly with the “See – Judge – Act” of the pastoral cycle that it is at least a reasonable generalisation. That is to say, to the extent that liberation theologians attend to questions of method, they do so often in terms of the See – Judge – Act methodology, and if they refer to anyone else, it is often to Clodovis Boff. More soberly, and perhaps more accurately, a Brazilian writer argues that “the merit of Cl. Boff was to have given to the theological theory of Liberation its own epistemological status, even if as yet undefined”.

However, I will not discuss only this work, but will look also at how Clodovis Boff has developed in his theology over the past thirty years. Given the controversy that has arisen over an article which he wrote in late 2007, to which I will return later, part of my aim will be to show an underlying consistency in his work since the beginning, whilst also pointing to developments in his thought. As the debate in question focuses on very much the area of my work, it will be important to see just how far Clodovis Boff can still be considered a writer with an interest in liberation theology or whether he has, as his brother Leonardo perhaps suggests in his response to the article mentioned above, abandoned his former positions. However, my main question here is whether or not Boff’s methodology can

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11 Paulo Fernando Carneiro de Andrade, Fé e Eficácia: O Uso da Sociologia na Teologia da Libertação, São Paulo, Loyola, 1991, p.79


allow a way to maintain the iconicity of the poor, or whether it also risks leading to their idolisation.

4.2 The Theological Method of Clodovis Boff

4.2.1 Introduction

Clodovis Boff is just over five years younger than his elder brother, Leonardo. He comes from a family of Italian descent, and was born in 1944 in the southern Brazilian state of Santa Catarina. He entered the Servites (the official title Ordo Fratrum Servorum Beatae Mariae Virginis, OSM, Order of the Friar Servants of Mary, no doubt helps explain his interest in Mariology). He studied in Brazil and in Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium. Since then he has worked and taught in various places in Brazil and Rome, at the same time being heavily engaged in pastoral work, earlier in the north-western state of Acre in the Amazon rainforest region, and then also in a favela in Rio de Janeiro. Since 2000 he has lived in the Servite formation house in Curitiba, where he also teaches at the Catholic University. He has written numerous books and articles (something over 200 articles, and some 20 books). These cover the area of theological method, faith and politics, Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (CEBs – Base Ecclesial Communities), and more recently Mariology.

There have, clearly, been other writers on methodology in liberation theology. A Brazilian Jesuit theologian Francisco Taborda, writing in 1987 and reviewing the first couple of decades of liberation theology, suggests five different methodological approaches. Apart from the method of Clodovis Boff that I am about to consider, he refers to: i) Juan Luis Segundo's insistence on the need for the liberation of theology; ii) a hermeneutics of faith in categories drawn from the social sphere; iii) a systematic and critical reflection on popular theology; iv) Narrative Theology. Another Brazilian author, Paulo Sérgio Lopes Gonçalves, in a doctoral thesis defended at the Gregorian University in Rome, also addresses the topic of methodology. Gonçalves' work is a mostly positive

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14 Leonardo was born on Dec. 14th 1938 and Clodovis on January 23rd 1944. Their older sister Lina is also a theologian, teaching at the PUC in Rio de Janeiro. There were a total of ten brothers and sisters in the family. For a brief biographical comment, see Jutta Nowak, *Theorie der Befreiung: Struktur, Bedingungen und Resultat 'theologischer Produktion' bei Clodovis Boff*, St. Ottilien, EOS Verlag Erzabtei St. Ottilien, 1992, pp. 61-65. See also the interview in Merv Puleo, *The Struggle Is One: Voices and Visions of Liberation*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 144-161.

15 For an overview of these methods, see Peter Phan, “Method in Liberation Theology”, *Theological Studies* 61/1 (2000), pp. 40-63. He argues that, despite the differences in liberation theology, there is a unifying method. See also my Introduction, where I briefly touch on the issue, pp. 10-14 above.


17 Here he cites authors I worked with in Chapter 2, such as Pablo Richard on the idols of death, Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, and Victorio Araya, *The God of the Poor*.

evaluation of how liberation theology fits in with the *regula fidei* and considers methodology in that light.

Finally, a third Brazilian theologian, Pedro Rubens, like Taborda a Jesuit, has considered the question of methodology in a recent work, though, apart from Boff, he also draws on Tillich.\textsuperscript{19} However, these works are primarily overviews of other’s works or, in the case of Pedro Rubens, make use of other theologians to establish a methodology for a new setting. Clodovis Boff’s work was, however, one of the first and probably the most successful attempts by a liberation theologian to try to develop a methodology which would assure liberation theology of a firm epistemological footing.

Before moving on, however, to a more detailed examination of Clodovis Boff’s methodology, a further brief word of explanation is necessary. The fundamental question of my research is whether or not liberation theology can allow the poor to remain iconic. It will become readily apparent that in *Teologia e Prática*, the poor are largely conspicuous by their absence.\textsuperscript{20} They are certainly not presented in a directly iconic form. But, as will also become clear, in a sense this is the whole point of the book. Boff wants to prescind from the pressures of immediate contact and response to the poor to try to construct a method for theologies of the political. His work is then a preliminary to actual engagement. It might be considered as akin to the pilot’s check-list before a flight. Going through the check-list will not in itself get the plane anywhere, but in order for the plane to deliver its passengers safely to their destination, it is an absolutely vital part of the preparation. Although not his words, my argument is that Boff’s method allows us to prepare to be encountered by the poor in a way which will allow them to remain iconic and not be turned into idols.


\textsuperscript{20} It is perhaps this factor that has led Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez in her doctoral dissertation submitted at the Union Theological Seminary in Richmond to claim rather oddly that “Boff… does not consider himself a liberation theologian but a political theologian”. Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez, *Constructing a Liberation Theology of the Political: A Case Study Combining the Epistemologies of Clodovis Boff’s Theology of the Political and the Liberation Theology of Gustavo Gutierrez*, PhD dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, 2006, p.2. She goes on to say that “while Boff believes that the theologian must listen to the voices of the poor, he does not believe that this means that truth is created, or verified by the poor as do liberation theologians”. (Ibid., p.2) To the extent that this is true of liberation theologians, I would argue that this is precisely the problem which I seek to highlight in this work. It will be precisely Boff’s criticism of liberation theology which I consider at the end of this chapter.
4.2.2 Teologia e Prática

Christians have been reflecting on the political, or on their relation to the state, since the early days of the Christian faith. Such reflection could be said to start in the New Testament, if not with Romans, at the latest with the Book of Revelation, and pass through Latin Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Augustine, to the medieval Two Powers doctrine. It was carried forward by Luther and Calvin, and from these theologians and church leaders later forms of understanding the relation between church and state emerged in the Enlightenment. Despite the rejection of liberalism and other perceived novelties by nineteenth-century popes, Roman Catholicism ended that century with the first of the great Papal Social Encyclicals. Nevertheless, despite this long engagement with questions of the political, political theology as such only really started to develop after the wars, 

21 Commonly held to be about the situation of Christians under Domitian, and essentially then demonising the political structures of the time. See, for example, Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling empire: reading Revelation then and now*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1999

22 For several reasons I concentrate on the Latin tradition here. Firstly, it is this tradition to which Boff is heir, and on which he draws. Secondly, though perhaps relatedly, this tradition is the one that has most strongly permitted the critical distance between the religious and the secular, a distinction which would be contested in much Orthodox theology.


27 A recent work dealing with this issue from a historical perspective is Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: religion and politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War*, London, HarperCollins, 2005 and by the same author on the twentieth century, *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Queda*, London, HarperCollins, 2006. As a historian Burleigh is good. However, some of his non-historical opinions on, for example, Islam and the Irish may not meet with universal agreement.

28 The condemnation of liberalism was in the encyclical of Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos*, issued in 1832. In 1864 Pius IX issued an attack on various errors he saw present in the Church, entitled the Syllabus of Errors. The first great social encyclical was issued by Leo XIII in 1891, entitled *Rerum Novarum*.

29 For a recent introduction to political theology, see Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology: A New Introduction*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008, covering the history and the present questions and traditions of the discipline.
culminating in the 1960s and early 1970s. At that point it was arguably the most influential area of theology, in Europe, and more pertinently to this article, in Latin America. However, as it gained influence, some of the underlying tensions were brought to the fore and the exact nature of what was being attempted came into question. It is against this background that Clodovis Boff engaged in his doctoral work. Boff later presented this work in slightly simpler and more accessible ways, but it is to Teologia e Prática that I principally refer here.

4.2.3 The basic principles of Boff’s methodology

His aim in the book is clear enough. Although motivated by the urgency of the situation of Latin America, Boff realises that a concentration on activity will lead to what he terms “immediatism”. Perhaps the best way to understand what Boff is worried about is to refer to the parable of the house builders in Matthew 7:24-27. Immediatism is the problem of the man who builds the house without foundations. It may serve the immediate needs of giving shelter and indeed short-term it may well appear more promising than the other house. But the problem is that when difficulties arise, new challenges are faced, there is nothing to support it and it will collapse. So, the task Boff sets himself is to offer an epistemological base for doing a theology of the political. That the parable is not entirely arbitrarily chosen can be seen from the definition he gives of epistemology: “a study of the principles of [something’s] construction”.

Before going any further, it is worth stressing that Boff insists, as the sub-title of his book makes clear, that he is considering something much wider than just liberation theology. Thus, from the very outset, he thinks of liberation theology as valid but limited. It may indeed be a new way of doing theology, though Boff himself does not precisely use this phrase.

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31 Boff, Teología e Prática (henceforth T e P), p.24 (ET, p.xxiii)

32 I appreciate that this is not exactly the context of these words from the Sermon on the Mount. However, these words are about praxis, and one of the major themes of Matthew’s gospel is precisely this, offering a reflection on what “doing the word of the Father” actually means. How are the deeds and words of God among us to be lived out in the community of believers? See David Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1991, p. 81, on orthopraxis as a key element of Matthew’s gospel.

33 Boff, T e P, p.22 (ET, p.xxii)

34 He begins his introduction by noting that “Liberation theology” intends to be a “new way” of doing theology’ (A “Teología da Libertação” quer ser uma “nova maneira” de fazer teologia), T e P, p.21 (ET, p.xxii) Inverted commas are an important part of Clodovis Boff’s stylistic approach, and usually indicate a
but it is not an entirely new theology. As we will soon see, it is dependent on prior theologies. Moreover, the political is wider than only liberation, even though, again, it may well be true that in the particular circumstances of Latin America this is the primary expression of a theology of the political.

In order to achieve the task, Boff proposes three mediations. He uses the term “mediation” because he understands theology as a critical discourse, and thus one that needs means with which to approach reality, or more properly theories about reality. Before going into more detail about each mediation, it will be helpful to give a summary overview of what he intends to do. The first mediation is the socio-analytical. This involves the use of sciences of the social in order for theology to know what it is that it has to theologise about. The strictly theological moment is the hermeneutic mediation, in which the situation is interpreted in the light of the Scriptures primarily and the Christian faith tradition secondarily, and the third is the dialectical mediation, in which this theological theory is confronted by praxis. There is, as we have already noted, a close link with the “See – Judge – Act” pastoral cycle.

4.2.3.1 The Socio-Analytic Mediation

Although it is only one of three moments for Boff and a pre-theological one at that, this is probably the area which has caused most concern to the critics of a theology of liberation. Therefore it is necessary first of all to be clear what he is trying to do and why. The concrete means he suggests, especially the use of Marxist social analysis, can of course be challenged, without negating the value of the general model.

certain reserve regarding a statement – thus here both the theology of liberation and the new way are held up for questioning.

35 Already at this point it is worth stating with Richard Brosse, “The Infinite Mediation”, in Jacques Haers et al., (eds.), Mediations in Theology: Georges De Schrijver’s Wager and Liberation Theologies, Leuven, Peeters, 2003, pp.99-114, here p.103, “one of the characteristics of mediation will be to allow a differentiated approach to the world.”

36 Boff, T e P, p.26 (ET, p.xxiv)

37 Boff prefers to de-adjectivise both theology and science. So, he tends to refer to a theology of the political, rather than political theology, and to sciences of the social rather than social sciences. The reason is that in talking of a theology of the political, the political is qualified by the theological, whereas if one speaks of political theology, the political qualifies the theological. See on this T e P, p.27 (ET, p.xxv). In general, I follow his usage.

38 See T e P, p.27 (ET, p.xxv), for a schematic rendition of the link between this methodology and Boff’s own proposal. In this context the methodology comes more directly from Ação Católica, which was very influential at a practical level in the Brazilian church in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Apart from the work by Brighenti cited above in note 10, p.208, see also Anne Peterson and Manuel Vasquez, “The New Evangelization in Latin American Perspective”, Cross Currents, 48/3 (1998), pp.311-330

39 For Boff, liberation theology is a particular example of a theology of the political. Hence he takes what he says to have a wider reference, though clearly it is the theology of liberation which is of primary interest to him, and much of European political theology he would reject, because he thinks that it pays insufficient attention to this first mediation. Cf., T e P, pp. 50-51 (ET, pp.9-10)
The need for the socio-analytic mediation comes about because theology is understood as a theoretical activity dialectically related to Christian praxis. As for Gustavo Gutiérrez with his famous definition of theology in *A Theology of Liberation* as “a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word”, so too for Clodovis Boff praxis has the primacy. However, much more explicitly than Gutiérrez, he argues that theory and praxis are bound together in a dialectical relationship which renders impossible any simplistic chronological division between the two. Nevertheless, to the extent that theology seeks to reflect on Christian life, it must almost tautologically have something to reflect on. Praxis is understood as “the combination of practices aiming at the transformation of society or the production of history”, and is thus a political concept. For a theology of the political, then, the results of the findings of political and other social sciences are a necessary starting point.

Time and again, Boff stresses the fact that theology is a theoretical discourse, and that the theological is in that sense necessarily abstract. Thus, he distinguishes between the discourse of faith, or religious language, and theology. It is, of course, possible for other discourses to be proffered on the political, including that of religious language – for example, sermons, religiously inspired art or literature or music. But these are not theological, and theology must deal with the political in the terms which are proper to it. What is proper to theology is something that Boff spends some time spelling out.

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40 Note that Boff himself likes to use abbreviations, and thus usually refers to the socio-analytic mediation as MSA (in Portuguese). However, for the sake of clarity I will use the full version in what follows.
42 At least it does in *Teologia e Prática*. It has been claimed that this changes later on, as we shall see. However, this charge may ignore the dialectical nature of theory and praxis, of faith as assent and faith as action, a tension which some have seen already in the New Testament, between, for example, Paul in Romans and the letter of James.
43 Boff, *T e P*, p.44 (ET, p.6).
44 Boff understands the political as to do with power (*T e P*, p.45 – ET, p.6). The definition with which João Batista Libanio primarily works in his book, *Fé e Política: Autonomias Específicas e Articulaçõe s Mútua*, São Paulo, Loyola, 1985 is somewhat richer. Libanio suggests (p.13) that politics can be viewed as “everything concerned with social relations, the global social reality, with society in general”, and he prefers to work mainly with this more general definition rather than the narrower one chosen by Boff. For an interesting attempt, in many ways parallel to Boff’s, to examine the relationship between philosophy and politics, see Dick Howard, *Defining the Political*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989. Howard does not offer a definition of the political, but rather seeks to “de-fine” it, to set the limits within which the political operates and the way in which philosophical theory and political praxis are dialectically related.
45 It is also true that later, in the preface to the third edition of the book, Boff allowed for a wider interpretation of theology. In his contribution to *Mysterium Liberationis*, Boff, “Epistemología y Método”, he says there are “three forms of liberation theology: professional, pastoral and popular” (see p.91) Although this has the advantage of preventing theology’s relegation simply to the academy, it should not be understood as denying the specificity of theology, what Boff will go on to call its “regionalism”. On that, see *T e P*, pp.102-107 (ET, pp.44-48).
In this regard, we can mention the division which he makes in *Teologia e Prática* between Theology 1 and Theology 2.\(^{46}\) The first he describes as concerned with “religious” matters, the classic themes of systematic theology. Such theology uses as its principle mediation philosophy. For its part, Theology 2 will concentrate on what Boff calls “secular” realities, and is thus equivalent to theologies of the political, of gender, of race, of liberation, of the environment and so on. In a later edition of the book (1993), Boff critiques his own distinction, and prefers to speak of two moments of one theology. However, even given this correction, which stresses the necessary continuity between the two types of theology, the point is an important one for him, and at the heart of much of the later debate.

He argues that, in its relationship with its mediations, theology is both autonomous and dependent.\(^{47}\) This distinction is one which is frequently overlooked or misunderstood by Boff’s critics, who tend to push theology into one camp or another, as will be seen. So it is important to be clear about what he is saying. Internally, he argues, any discipline is autonomous. That is to say, it is responsible for setting the standards and guidelines by which the discipline is to be practised and performed. As autonomous, theology looks inwards, and is, consequently, rescued from being a mere voice of praxis, and hence ideological.\(^{48}\)

In other words, at this level, it is up to the internal rules of theological discourse to decide whether a particular theological statement is valid or not. To borrow a linguistic example, it is meaningless to criticise a grammatical statement in one language using the rules of another language.\(^{49}\) On the other hand, there is also an element of dependency in that all theology is carried out in a particular place and time and under particular conditions, and this has an effect on what is done. Boff admits that it is hard to separate these two regimes on a practical level, even though it is important to realise that there is a real division here. It allows theology its voice, without allowing it to claim any absolute position, wholly extrinsic to the world in which it operates.

It also permits the crucial distinction between the theoretical and real. Theology as a theoretical discourse must not be confused with the reality about which it discourses. As Boff memorably puts it, “the knowledge of

\(^{46}\) *Te P*, pp.32-33 (ET, pp.xxviii-xxix)


\(^{48}\) See *Te P*, pp.98–102 (ET, pp.41–44), and above, Chapter Two, 2.3.1. Boff notes, however, that a theology of the political must acknowledge “its own ideopolitical position”, otherwise it cannot be political (*Te P*, p.107 – ET, p.48). This is important, and I might also add that it could not be theological either if it did not acknowledge its political position.

\(^{49}\) Even if language learners everywhere seem remarkably tempted to do this! But that is precisely why Boff needs to stress this point.
Salvation is as little salvific as the knowledge of sugar is sweet. This distinction is one to which Boff will constantly return, because it is what gives theology its raison d’être and prevents it from turning into ideology. It is the critical space in which theology has to operate, and it is more important still for a theology of the political.

Having put in place these distinctions Boff then goes on to reject some of the existing ways in which theology had sought to relate to the political. The correct relationship between a theology of the political and the sciences of the social is, he suggests, one of constitution. Here what is placed in relationship participates in that in which it is incorporated. If, for example, I become a citizen of a country, I am in relation to the citizens of that country but I also participate in it by voting or paying taxes or whatever it may be.

It may be true that for traditional theology, what Boff in *Teologia e Prática* calls Theology 1, dealing as it does with the fundamental issues of faith, there is no absolute methodological reason for mediations (or at least not for social mediations), but for a theology of the political there is. In that sense, Theology 1 is not only reactive, but already has its loci, its statements and declarations, some of which are held as in some sense constitutive or at least declarative of Christian faith. For a theology of the political, on the other hand, there is always an element of reaction. The only way in which theology can know about the political is through the social sciences, and thus they are constitutive of the theology, even if theology is the governing body in the relationship. The task, then, of a theology of the political is to do what it says. Theology, for Boff, is at some level always a theology of the non-theological, that is,

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50 *T e P*, p. 62 (ET, p. 17)
52 For example, consider the theological statements of the early Councils, presented in summary form in Christian creeds. However, precisely these are also reactions against heresies, or lack of clarity, so the distinction may have more to do with the length of tradition than any real difference.
53 See on this also, Clodovis Boff, *Feet-on-the-Ground Theology: A Brazilian Journey*, (trans. Phillip Berryman), Maryknoll, Orbis, 1987, p. 116
54 See Boff, *T e P*, pp. 82-83 (ET, pp. 30-31). The sciences of the political or social are necessary, rather than the social or political itself, because theology is a theoretical discourse and can thus dialogue only with other theories, at least if they are not already part of the religious regime, as we will see later.
55 It is worth noting that this is an indication of the Latin influence on Boff, hardly surprising, given that he is a Brazilian Roman Catholic. The Orthodox tradition may be less happy to refer to the non-theological. However, Boff’s real point here is to do with the regional nature of theological language. Most of the world is non-theological, not because God cannot be found in it, or discerned in it, but precisely because if God can be found, then there must be distance (cf. Marion) to allow language to be used to describe that presence. The non-theological does not mean the non-divine. Perhaps just as the artist seeks to draw out a “meaning” in the world which we are not otherwise aware of, so the theologian
a reflection (theoretical discourse) on something which is not in itself part
of that discourse. In terms of the political, theology must reflect on politics,
which is strictly speaking always “atheist” – without God – in a way
which enables it not only to see what is wrong (sin – an ethical approach),
but also to see what is right (or graced – a hermeneutical approach).
“Theology”, he argues, “must be able to unveil the properly “Christic”
sense [of politics] precisely where it is ideologically denied”.57
That, however, raises again the question as to whether any theology of the
political will not ultimately, if not automatically, turn into an ideology.58
Much as Aquinas and his followers were initially criticised for adopting
Aristotelian concepts, so theology of the political has been attacked for
having the temerity to choose politics as its theme.59 In order to respond to
this accusation, Boff does what he normally does, namely to specify more
closely the question. First of all, he returns to the crucial distinction
between theory and reality. A theology of the political cannot involve a
reduction of faith, because faith is something that happens on the level of
life experience, and is best understood in terms of orthopraxis, whilst
theology operates on a theoretical level, and thus is to be understood in
terms of orthodoxy. So, any reduction would be on a theoretical level and
not a praxical one.
However, Boff is ready to admit that there are temptations and dangers
which must be avoided. The political can lead to the danger of
immanentism, and so history must be read from a transcendentental
perspective (and here he cites Metz’s concept of the eschatological
reserve).60 Having said all this, though, it is also the case that at times faith
demands a very particular (and in that sense reductive) response, the
example he uses being that of the Good Samaritan. Moreover, he regards
the main danger as being that of transcendentalism, of ignoring the political

56 To repeat the point made in the previous note, this is not to say that God is absent from the practical
political realm. It is, however, to say that, as a science, politics neither works with nor needs to work with
a prior concept of God.
57 Boff, T e P, p.87, (ET, p.33). “Christic” he uses after Teilhard de Chardin to refer to the order of the
real, of salvation.
58 I refer to the distinction between Ideology 1 and Ideology 2 made in Chapter 2. There I argued that
ideology can either be about claiming the partial and therefore illusory to be true, or about justifying the
unjustifiable. The major temptation for liberation theology is probably the first, the claim of the partial to
be complete. Clodovis Boff has constantly battled against this form of ideology in his writings, though the
problem he faces is whether his own method is not a reduction. I return to this point below.
59 Boff, T e P, p.89 (ET, p.35).
60 Ibid, p.94 (ET, p.38), reference is to J. B. Metz, Theology of the World, (New York, Seabury Press,
1969)
on the spurious grounds that theology is interested only in the transcendent and that the transcendent is what is other than the human.\textsuperscript{61} It is this that also leads theology to become absolutist, and for a particular theology to assume that it is the only possible way to do theology. Theology for Boff is, as we have seen, always a regional language, but its temptation is always to assume that because it is talking of the absolute, it is itself in some sense absolute.\textsuperscript{62} But when it does this it becomes an ideology, and for theology of the political the main ideological temptation is to confuse the temporary, or mere opinions, for the permanent, or for objective knowledge.\textsuperscript{63} Hence the danger of sloganeering, which is one of the chief reasons why Boff felt called to write this book.\textsuperscript{64}

Assuming that all this can be avoided, there is still the question of how precisely to relate the sciences of the social and theology of the political. Or, how does one practise the socio-analytic mediation? Here we return to the question of autonomy and dependency. In terms of the internal rules of the sciences of the social, theology has nothing to say, though it can question either the presuppositions of the science in question, or the conclusions drawn from the research.\textsuperscript{65} In terms of the dependency, however, theology is able to offer a critique, especially when the science in question argues that its approach is the only one (i.e., it is ideological). Of course, theology must ensure that its critique is not itself dogmatic, otherwise it is an encounter of ideologies.

\textsuperscript{61} Boff, \textit{T e P}, p.96 (ET, p.39). Georges De Schrijver argues that “Boff is probably the most Rahnerian among the liberation theologians”, although he quotes him directly relatively infrequently. See G. De Schrijver, “The Use of Mediations in Theology” in Jacques Haers SJ et al., (eds.), \textit{Mediations in Theology: Georges De Schrijver’s Wager and Liberation Theologies}, Leuven, Peeters, 2003, pp.1-64. The reference here is to p.54. It should be noted that Clodovis Boff has distanced himself from Rahner. This is because he regards Rahner as being responsible for the turn to the anthropological, and thus abandoning the primacy of reflection on God in theology. Whether this is a fair reading of Rahner himself is another question. I return to this point later on in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{62} See Boff, \textit{T e P}, pp.102 ff. (ET, pp.44 ff.)

\textsuperscript{63} It would be fair to say that in many ways Boff in this book is arguing out of a modern, Enlightenment position, with a strong dose of neo-Thomism. Although he quotes Derrida once or twice, he wrote this book before post-modernism had made much impact on either philosophy or even less theology. Thus, he would have a strong sense of objective knowledge. Here, however, the discussion is about the political as what is to be known (and in that sense the object of knowledge). The argument is that if theology does not know what it is talking about, then it will be unable to say anything of value to the topic in question, here the political.

\textsuperscript{64} Cf. Boff, \textit{T e P}, pp.22-23 (ET, p.xxii)

\textsuperscript{65} Boff, \textit{T e P}, p.113 (ET, pp.51-52) Here is an apt place to comment on an article by Neil Ormerod, “A Dialectic Engagement with the Social Sciences in an Ecclesiological Context”, \textit{Theological Studies} 66/4 (2005), pp.815-840. Ormerod discusses Boff especially on pp.833-836. He claims that Boff is wrong to deny that theology has no competency to tell the sociologist how to do sociology, the reference contained at the beginning of this footnote. But Ormerod seems to ignore the subsequent line. For theology to criticise the internal order of sociology is like criticising a car engine for not being the same as the inside of a clock. They are constructed differently in order to do different things. However, it is legitimate for a clockmaker to suggest ways of improving an engine, or for a mechanic to suggest ways of improving the workings of a clock, by questioning the assumptions on which each has operated so far. It is precisely because they are different that they can do so.
This question of critique is especially true in terms of the use of historical materialism. What Boff calls the philosophical aspect of Marxism, dialectical materialism, cannot be of any use to theology, since it is reductionist and exclusivist. On the other hand, historical materialism, the scientific aspect of Marxism, is valid in so far as it makes things known (scienti – fic). As we saw in Chapter Two, Boff argues repeatedly and strongly for the instrumental use of Marxism. Here he is drawing very much on one of his guides in his work, the French Marxist Louis Althusser, who argued, according to Boff, that Marxism is a science of history, not a theoretical humanism. This allows him to see Marxism as one of the legitimate sciences of the social, which theology can appropriate.

However, having gone through all this theoretical argument, it might seem that Boff rather throws in the towel. For he goes on to say that in practice there are only two real current alternatives, a liberal, functionalist one, more interested in harmony and affirming the status quo, or the Marxist, more concerned with conflict and tension. The criteria for judging which one has to accept are scientific and ethical. The first is complicated, given the debatable scientific status of the social sciences, and the fact that different types are explaining different things. So, there is need for a prior ethical decision as to what one wants to explain. However, this ethical decision is not the same as the theoretical arguments to be drawn from the sciences of the social.

Eventually he comes down on the side of choosing the least bad, and in the particular circumstances in which he is writing, or at least for which he is writing, it would be fair to assume that he plumbs for the Marxist approach, despite many misgivings. But it is also true to say that these misgivings are there, and are a serious challenge to anyone who seeks to posit a too quick equivalence between the methodological approach of the theology of liberation and Marxism, especially where the latter is understood in a totally undifferentiated fashion.

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66 T e P, p.53, note 37, (ET, note 37, p.242 – the English translation has endnotes) where he refers especially to L. Althusser, Pour Marx, pp.225-258. See also on this Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Theology and Social Sciences”. in id., The Truth Shall Make You Free: Confrontations, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1990, pp.53-84, here especially pp.60-72, on his use of Marxism, which would have a lot in common with Clodovis Boff.


68 Raunu, The Mediated Immediacy, p.223 argues that “it is obvious that Clodovis Boff meant scientific Marxism and “Marxist analysis” when he referred to science as the starting point”. This seems to me to be correct, though I would not necessarily share Raunu’s somewhat critical approach to this fact. See T e P, p.121 (ET, pp.56-57). Cf., also, on the dangers of an over-eager acceptance of either Marxism or liberalism, Boff’s comments in Feet-on-the-Ground Theology, p.100.

69 One of the better-known articles by Clodovis Boff on this subject comes from 1984. Clodovis Boff, “O Uso do “Marxismo” em Teologia”, Comunicações do ISER 3/8 (1984), pp.11-16, where he notes several ways in which Marxism is used as a mediation: as “science”, as a scientific method, as a theory of social reality, 'instrumentally' or in a 'utilitarian' fashion, “as a mediation of faith, and thus starting from faith and under its critical guidance” (p.14). See also, Clodovis Boff, Teoria do Método Teológico, pp.385-387.
It is also worth noting at this point the role that “engaged Christian communities” play in the decision regarding the choice of social sciences. The theologian, says Boff, should follow the choices these communities have made in practice. This may suggest that the church has final say in the choice, but it is not quite so straightforward. First, Boff acknowledges that he is arguing from a viewpoint of realism here. This in fact is the choice which has been made, and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. In this sense he has listened to the voice of praxis. This matters, because he is arguing in this book that theology of the political must start by attending to the praxis of committed Christians. Moreover, the group is heavily circumscribed – committed Christians, or, as he puts it a paragraph later, “committed Christians more aware of the problems of the Periphery”. This is the normative praxis which the theologian must reflect.

4.2.3.2 Hermeneutical Mediation

The first part of Boff’s work is, as we have just seen, dedicated to the “political” of the theology of the political. The second part is given over to the “theology”. Or, to put it another way, if the first section of the book looks at the dependency of theology, this section concentrates more on its autonomy, on what is proper to theology. So, an initial question concerns what really makes something theological. He approaches this by using the metaphor of “pertinence”, which he defines as “that which determines the type of a discipline…, its own “language game”, its characteristic perspectives”.

In other words, what is it that allows a particular discourse to call itself ‘theological’?

In order to answer this, Boff first looks at the process of theoretical practice, a phrase he prefers to simply theory or practice, because he sees theology (other theoretical exercises too) as precisely a construction, as a process, knowledge in the making rather than knowledge achieved. To set out the way in which this process works he draws on Althusser and his model of theoretical practice, which involves three moments, called Generalities, since the process of knowledge has, according to him, to do with the universal.

This model, which in essence is fairly simple, is Boff’s key way of showing how the theological works on the political, how what is garnered from the sciences of the social is transformed into some sort of theological theory.

still supportive of the instrumental use of Marxism, for its explanatory powers. It is one of the weaknesses of Alistair Kee’s book, *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*, London, SCM, 1990, that he fails to grasp this point. His treatment of Teologia e Prática (pp.196-198) is far too nuanced.

70 Boff, *T e P*, p.125 (ET, p.59)
71 Boff, *T e P*, p.139 (ET, p.67)
The first Generality, which he terms GI, is perhaps best understood as the raw material of theorising. It should be noted that this raw material is, however, itself already a product, a part of the process of knowledge. The second Generality, GII, is the theoretical instrument or means which is used to work on the first Generality; it is the active component in the model. Finally, there is the third Generality, GIII, which is the result of the transformation of Generality I by means of Generality II. A banal example may help to fix this. I buy something in a flat-pack from a furniture store such as IKEA. This is Generality I, already worked raw material. I follow the instructions (Generality II – it is the practice of the theory that is important here) and the result is, in this particular instance, a new bookcase (Generality III). Essentially, the same happens, according to Althusser and Boff, when we work with ideas.

In terms of what we have seen so far, Generality I is the political theory, and Generality II is the method which theology has for working on it, (akin to, though not simply, Revelation) which is a hermeneutical one. Another way of expressing it may be to think in terms of fides quae. This is important in that Boff wants to stress the primacy of faith, but at the same time to reassert the distinction between the language of faith and the language of theology. Theology deals with ideas, not with facts. At first sight this may sound strange, but Boff’s rigour here has a clear point. If faith and theology are collapsed into one, then all that we want to say about faith will at best run the risk of being ideological, and in practice mostly will be. The critical distance between practice and theory will be lost, and there is then no possibility of giving reason for our hope. Thus theology deals with theory directly, and with practice and the facts only indirectly. This is not to do with the truth or otherwise of any theological statement, but to do with the status of that truth.

For theology to be able to comment on the political (for a Generality II to be able to work on a Generality I), various elements are necessary. The second theological moment (Theology 2) must derive from the first theological moment. Thus, for example, to talk about salvation and liberation, an example which Boff returns to on various occasions, it is necessary to have recourse to what systematic theology has to say about salvation. Moreover, there is an almost inevitable complexity in the application of a means of interpreting to a given situation. So, it is possible to read the situation in Latin America in a number of different ways,

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74 Boff, *Te P*, pp.152-153 (ET, pp.74-75)
75 Cf., Marion’s comments on distance noted above in Chapter 3.5.4. Without distance there will always be idolatry.
76 1 Pet 3.15
77 With his brother he has written a book with that title: Clodovis Boff, Leonardo Boff, *Salvation and Liberation* (trans. Robert Barr), Maryknoll, Orbis, 1984
because one can use a different Generality II and this will lead to a different Generality III.

One of the major confusions in doing theology is misunderstanding where one is operating and on what level. Thus, Boff points out that the key question for a theology of liberation is to address the nature of liberation, since that is its raw material. However, too often liberation has been regarded as the theological tool with which to work on the raw material. That this cannot be the case is to do with the repeated distinction between reality and theory. The concrete liberation of real people from real situations of sin cannot be the task of theology per se. What theology can (for Boff and other liberation theologians, must) do is reflect on liberating praxis theologically, so that the action is based on something firm and can continue to be applied and modified in the dialectical relationship.

This distinction between real and theoretical is at the heart of Boff’s attempts to rethink the theological base for doing a theology of the political, something he does in terms of what he terms fundamental concepts of theological discourse. He relates the various headings above under a dual matrix, based on the distinction between the Real and Consciousness of it, and between Faith and Theology. So, there is the order of salvation, which is the order of the real, and faith is the awareness of it, whilst theology is the “knowledge” of it, knowledge here understood in a scientific sense.

The response to the real of Salvation can be either positive or negative. In positive terms it is always expressed in agape. In agape the theologian finds a way of talking about the soteriological meaning of political praxis. And because sin at a political level is structural, salvation in some sense is also offering a structure of social grace. Finally, because agape can clearly never be left as an abstract concept, it shows how the political needs

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78 *T e P.*, p.171 (ET, pp.86-87). Arguably it has been liberation theology’s problem that it has never adequately dealt with this criticism. Such a critique can be found in a liberation theologian of long standing, José Comblin. In his book *Called for Freedom: The Changing Context of Liberation Theology* (trans. Philip Berryman), Maryknoll, Orbis, 1998, Comblin takes his fellow theologians to task for concentrating on liberation to the exclusion of liberty, which he sees as the theological theme.

79 Boff, *T e P.*, p.175 (ET, p.91). These concepts are Salvation, Revelation, Grace, Agape, Faith, Religion and Theology.

80 Cf., *T e P.*, p.177 (ET, p.93). I follow here Boff’s use of capitals, which tend to indicate that the discussion is on the theoretical, or at least highly general, level.

81 Ibid., pp. 179-188 (ET, pp.93-100)

82 If this sounds unlikely, one need only think of the many martyrs of Latin America who were killed because in faith they proclaimed a message of justice. The proclamation of justice is an agapic act, a performative statement of God’s love for those to whom injustice is done. A particularly clear example of this, some years after Boff wrote this book, would be Mgr Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, who was assassinated on March 24th 1980.

83 *T e P.*, pp. 191-192 (ET, pp.102-103). This communitarian dimension of salvation is found repeatedly in Matthew, in his habit of miracles involving two people rather than one as in Mark.
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theology as much as theology of the political needs the political. For theology can follow the Christian living of *agape* in political practice, and state the pistic value of the political. However, if the political tries to deny to theology its voice, then theology must break with that politics. All of this demonstrates why the new object of theology, the political, demands a new methodology, since method, for Boff, following Aristotle, is determined by its object.

Boff here espouses a high view of the political, one which has perhaps something to do with a time of political optimism. However, it is certainly not a naïve view, and one could question whether theology’s move away from the political towards the cultural is not part of a wider trend which has seen participation in elections fall across most of the western world, and the value of the political constantly debased. What Boff seems to be saying is that the presence of sin in political structures, by which he means such things as corruption or abuse of power, for example, is not in itself an argument against politics but rather an argument for Christian engagement in politics to ensure that these negative values are replaced by agapic values. In principle, this does not mean following one particular party, but it does mean taking the political seriously as a context in which the Christian life must be lived out, and then reflected on.

Boff moves on to speak about the language of theology as introductory to the practice of hermeneutics. What he is trying to do here is demonstrate how to construct the second generality, the heuristic tool which theology will use to work on what it has gained from the socio-analytic mediation. Theology, for Boff, is a grammar, not a lexicon, so that it is not in the particular words that it uses that theology finds its particularity but in the way in which those words are articulated in phrases. These phrases are always both symbolic and analogous, and they seek to offer a response to

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84 A remark from Boff, *Feet-on-the-Ground Theology* is striking in this regard: “Agencies like the CPT (Land Pastoral Commission) express Christian *agape* toward the oppressed. Nevertheless, being satisfied with the practice of *agape* and not moving toward the soul of *agape*, which is faith itself, amounts to once more treating others as an object – the object of our *agape*.” (p.98). The proper practice of politics for the Christian cannot avoid going along the road of faith.

85 Cf., Boff, *Teoria do Método Teológico*, pp.40-41, quoting also Aquinas.


87 He does not specifically address the question of whether or not it is right for there to be parties which affix the title Christian to them, but it might well be argued that such parties run the risk of ideology, at least as far as they claim to be offering a Christian critique of the political without providing themselves with the necessary critical distance to do so. In the 1970s and 1980s Boff would have supported, though never entirely uncritically, a socialist politics, but this is on ethical and pistic rather than strictly theological grounds. See on this Ian Maclean, *Opting for Democracy? Liberation Theology and the Struggle for Democracy in Brazil*, New York, Peter Lang, 1999, especially pp.181-182 and pp.206-219, where he refers to a number of articles by Clodovis Boff on the subject of the church and party politics.

88 Here, of course, Boff fits into the mainstream of contemporary theology, although there is a certain lack of clarity in what he precisely means by these terms. For symbols, he refers to Thomas Aquinas and the
the questions of the day in an intelligible way. In this sense, theological language also has a “positivity”: there are rules which control and construct its discourse, and these must be applied rigorously if theology is to fulfil its task, one that is not the same as the language of faith, or religious discourse.

Against this general background, what are the specificities of the “language game” of a theology of the political? For Theology 2, human History is a symbol (understood explicitly in sacramental terms as an efficacious sign) of divine History. There is an Augustinian sense of human History as in some sense being divine History. However, this is not readable without some key, and that is provided by Revelation, which enables a theology of the political to relate its understanding of the content of faith (fides quae) to the Political. Boff suggests four ways in which this relationship has been understood, (i) as a juxtaposition between two equal and homogeneous “substances”, (ii) as opposition and exclusion, (iii) as identity and (iv) as reciprocity and dialectic.

Although he finds all four unsatisfactory, the fourth is the one he finds most promising. Its danger is one of bilingualism, so that in fact it would slide more into either the first or third method, since it is unable to articulate the mutual interrelation of the terms. The way in which this can be done will, as always, depend on what it is intended that it should be applied to. For Boff, as we have seen, the basic method is that Faith (Generality II) works on the Political (Generality I) to produce an agapic practice (Generality III). The important thing to note is that it is the heuristic tool which commands the operation, not the material on which work is being carried out. Just as a sculptor, a carpenter and a paper-maker would work differently with a piece of wood, so different intellectual practitioners can work in their own particular ways with the same findings. Otherwise, it would not be a theology of the political, but something like the politics of discussion on the senses of scripture. There are also some references to Ricoeur. Analogy may also be related to Thomas Aquinas, though here it is not so obvious to whom Boff is referring. It is interesting to note that David Tracy, whose The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism, New York, Crossroad, 1981 is perhaps the best-known and most comprehensive attempt to address this dimension of theological language, began his scholarly career with work on Bernard Lonergan, to whose transcendental Thomism Boff has some affinity.

Boff is not using this in its Schleiermachian or Hegelian senses, but rather perhaps in a kataphatic sense. Theology as discourse must say something. The apophatic is saved in Boff by the awareness that although theology’s subject may be the absolute, it cannot be an ultimate discourse itself.

Boff often capitalises words when he wants to deal with concepts in their universal or abstract sense, using lower case when he wants to talk about specific instances. In this instance I follow him, even if especially here it seems to me to make him more Hegelian than he might really want to be.


Boff, T e P, p.235 (ET, p.130).
the theological. This of course is an entirely legitimate task to carry out, but it is not theology's task.

The notion of hermeneutics which Boff operates with is deliberately limited. He first of all sees hermeneutics as having three meanings, the first two of which he considers fundamental to the hermeneutic mediation of a theology of the political. The first is a canon of exegetical interpretation, what he names in Aristotelian terms *hermêneutikê tekhnê*, whilst the second is the act of interpretation itself, *hermeneia*. Although it would be possible to include other areas of Christian tradition into this, he restricts himself to the Scriptures as the originating source of every theological process. What is important here is to note that theology is the activity which takes account of the reading of the text and gives theoretical articulation to that reading. In Boff’s terms, at least *hermeneia* is itself an action of producing knowledge, in which the written text is the first generality, the lens through which the reading happens is the second generality and the interpretation thus produced is the third generality.

The need for a hermeneutics for theology of the political is seen in the fact that the hermeneutical circle is always more of a spiral, in Boff’s phrase *norma normans ut normata*. Successive interpretations of the Scriptures in a sense themselves become part of the very text that must be interpreted and re-understood in terms of the questions of the time and place in which those Scriptures are being read. The Bible as the present word of God necessarily demands re-reading in each present, for there is no once and for all meaning of scripture. Any attempt to argue for this is to canonise a historical moment, and not to allow the Scriptures to speak afresh. Thus, it is incumbent on a theology of the political both to read the political in the light of the Bible and to address to the Bible questions raised by the political.

The way in which early liberation theology tried to establish this hermeneutic mediation was by means of what Boff calls the correspondence of terms model, in which, schematically, Scripture in its political context corresponds to a theology of the political in its context. The classic example is to see the Exodus in the context of the enslavement of the Hebrews as corresponding (exactly equivalent) to liberation in the context of the oppression of the poor of Latin America. The problem with

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94 Ibid., p.239 (ET, p.133)
95 Ibid., p.239 (ET, p.133)
96 Ibid., pp.241-248 (ET, pp.134-138)
97 Ibid., pp.250-255 (ET, pp.139-142)
98 This is the argument of Carlos Mesters in *Flor Sem Defesa: Uma Explicação da Bíblia a partir do Povo*, Petrópolis, Vozes, 1991, and one which, if the questioning is carried out dialectically and maintaining the necessary safeguards of autonomy and distancing, Boff would accept.
this is perhaps ultimately one of eisegesis, in which the putting in parallel is done with a view to justifying particular actions, regardless of the historical niceties of the situation in question. Boff illustrates this by referring to the problems of trying to assess the political actions of Jesus. Boff’s alternative suggestion is that we should adopt a model of correspondence of relations, in which a substantive verbal equivalence is replaced by a relational equivalence. In the book he uses an “equals” sign (=) for both, but in fact what he seems to be proposing is a proportional relationship (=: :). So, here we (theology of the political) stand in a relationship to our context which has an (in)exact equivalence to the relationship of the Scriptures to their context(s). (In)exact is my term rather than Boff’s, because his point is that the Scriptures themselves, and here he refers most especially to the New Testament, arise out of the early Christian community’s attempts to use the words and actions of Jesus to respond creatively to the situation in which they found themselves. The equivalence is that we must try to address our situation in a similarly creative way, but the inexactitude comes precisely from the fact that it is our and not their situation. It is this distinction which he argues the correspondence of terms model fails to draw.

It may legitimately be asked just how great the difference between the two methods actually is. After all, it is unlikely that anyone who espouses the correspondence of terms model does so on quite such a naïve level as to assume that there is an exact identity of terms. The poor of Brazil are clearly not the poor of Israel in any literal sense. On the other hand, the correspondence of relations model also requires some degree of similarity, greater than simply positing that God always acts in situations where the gift of life is threatened. However, I think that Boff’s argument is more important than this. For he is precisely trying to establish a means of maintaining distance, and of refusing totality. To adopt the correspondence of terms model is essentially to follow the path of totality, reducing God

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100 Boff, *Te P.*, pp.256-262 (ET, pp.142-146). Perhaps an even clearer example of this can be seen when it comes to debating contentious ethical issues, such as divorce or homosexuality. The correspondence of terms model will see the words “divorce” and “homosexuality” as being identical in meaning now and then, so that whatever was true of them then must be true of them now. The correspondence of relations model will allow us to treat of the relationship between how they were seen in the first century and the reaction of Jesus and Paul to them, and then to look at how that relationship would analogously operate today, given very different socio-cultural contexts and knowledge.


102 See, for example, Hans de Wit, “My God,” she said, “ships make me so crazy.” *Reflections on Empirical Hermeneutics, Interculturality, and Holy Scripture*, Nappanee, Indiana, Evangel Press, 2008, p.95, note 4, referring also to J.A van der Ven, *Entwurf einer empirischen Theologie*, Kampen, Kok, 1994. However, as I go on to comment, this critique, that the correspondence of relations model does not allow enough space for distance, is misplaced.
also to sameness. As God acted then, so God must act now, in detail. The poor are also reduced to sameness – the poor then are the poor now. Boff on the other hand allows relationality to dominate. God responds to the cry of the oppressed, but always anew, because the oppressed cannot be reduced to the status of their oppression. God and the poor are left free in this model in a way which the correspondence of terms model fails to safeguard.

Perhaps not surprisingly in a book on theological method, Boff argues that the Scriptures do not ultimately respond to “what?” questions, but to “how?” ones. In other words, the hermeneutical mediation will provide an orientation rather than concrete answers. What is to be acquired by the theologian is a hermeneutical habitus, an approach which relates the Scriptures to the themes in question, and seeks to produce in the community “the mind of Christ”, Metz’s dangerous memory of Jesus.103 Theology of the political is the working on the results of the socio-analytic mediation through the results of this hermeneutical habitus.104

4.2.3.3 The Dialectic of Theory and Praxis

So far, in terms of theology of the political, we have looked at the political and theology. The final part of the argument concentrates on the “of”, on the relation between the political, the praxic,105 and the theological theory. This is the dialectical mediation, and in a sense is both the most important and the most difficult part of the book, simply because any attempt to describe a dialectical relationship always runs the considerable risk of proscribing. That is to say, the point of the dialectic is to keep open the tension between the two poles, whereas any description will tend to reduce them. Nevertheless, it is important to attempt the description, because this is the real heart of the book, and especially so for my purposes.

Having established the need for, and means of acquiring a socio-analytic mediation, and demonstrated the nature of the hermeneutic mediation, this final part indicates how these two mediations result in a praxic outcome (Generality III), or more accurately, they seek to comment on the exact nature of the relation between theory and praxis, such that both maintain their autonomy whilst acknowledging their mutual interdependence. To achieve this, Boff looks first at three ways in which theory is in fact in relationship with praxis, before turning to two ways in which the nature of that relationship can be understood.

104 Boff, Te P., pp. 270-271 (ET, pp.152-153)
105 In general, Boff uses, as in the title of his book, the adjective práctico (a), which would normally be translated as “practical”. However, as he wants to make a distinction between practice and praxis, where the adjective is used, as it can be, in the sense of “praxis”, I will normally speak, somewhat inelegantly, of the “praxic”.
First, he concentrates on the social engagement or commitment of the theologian. Here he refers to the “topic” dimension of the relationship. This social placing is of paramount importance for the liberation theologian, but always runs the risk of becoming no more than mere parroting of slogans if there is no critical backing for it. Too often it relies on what Boff terms a spontaneous sociology, which leaves it theoretically vulnerable. Moreover, if it is true that all theologians are socially situated, then those theologians with whom the theology of liberation takes issue are also engaged. The problem, then, is with the nature of the engagement, how the theologian responds to the situation rather than whether or not she or he does so. In terms of the discussion in Chapter Two, this “topic” dimension is clearly closely related to the question of utopia, with the strengths and weaknesses we found associated with that idea.

A similar difficulty of ambiguity is found when the social and epistemic places of theology are confused: that is, the dependent and autonomous aspects of theological activity. This is another reason why Boff wants to de-adjectivise theology, because as soon as one starts to talk about, for example, Latin American Theology, one is at the very least in grave danger of confusing two distinct orders. “Latin American” refers to the social, which has its own legitimacy and rules, which, however, are different to those which legitimate the theoretical activity of theology.

Nevertheless, difference does not necessarily imply radical exclusivity, hence the question about the relation between theory and praxis. This arises most urgently because political theologians will claim that political engagement is a prerequisite (an epistemological condition, Boff says) for doing theology. Taking a step back to a more general level, Boff argues that there are two extreme ways in which the relation between theory and...
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praxis are imagined. One is to deny that there can be any such relation, and the other is to posit the relationship in terms of cause (praxis) and effect (theory).\textsuperscript{114}

As an alternative, Boff suggests the notion of permission and interdiction, whereby a political engagement permits or enables a reflective theoretical discourse, whilst simultaneously forbidding certain moves. Here there is a distinction to be made between cause and condition. Causes are restrictive (they have this or these effects) whilst conditions are relatively open-ended, allowing for, but not insisting on this or these responses. As an example, we can return to my furniture flatpack. If I act on it in the correct way, then it will form the bookshelf I hoped it would. I cause this effect to come about by my action. However, when I buy it, before assembly, conditions exist for the construction of a bookshelf, but my purchase will not build it. Moreover, if I were technically skilled, perhaps I could use the bits of wood to construct something else, such as a chair or table. I am not tied yet to producing a bookshelf. The relative nature of the open-endedness of conditions does mean, though, that there is an actual limit, however creative I am, to what I can produce with the flatpack contents, something the medieval alchemists discovered with their attempts to turn base metals into gold.

So, political engagement itself does not change the content of revelation - there is no cause and effect between the two - but it will influence the theoretical discourse on that content - it creates conditions for discourse. There is an epistemological break between the two, occasioned by the entry of the human spirit, but this is a “both-and”, not an “either-or”. In other words, continuity and discontinuity are both present. The example used is that, for example, Augustine, Aquinas or Luther do theology differently, yet they are all still theologians. Their times and the questions to which perforce they respond are different, but their aim – to approach the Word of God – unites them.\textsuperscript{115}

The relation can be expressed in terms of a synthesis which occurs in the interaction between situations and options. There are relationships between

\textsuperscript{114} Although Boff was perhaps too polite to say so, certainly at this early stage of his career, this is at least a danger inherent in Gutiérrez’s definition of theology quoted earlier, where the second order nature of theology can lead to its being seen as a by-product of the praxis. It would be unfair to say that this is exactly what Gutiérrez wished, but it is often the practical result of a concentration on this model in its undialectic form.

\textsuperscript{115} Boff, \textit{T e P}, pp.290-295 (ET, pp.164-168) He develops this point further later on in two articles, where he considers Thomas Aquinas and St Augustine. The first, Clodovis Boff, “Santo Tomás de Aquino e a Teologia da Libertação”, \textit{REB} 41/163 (1981), pp.426-442, suggests four ways in which St. Thomas and liberation theology can be related, using the correspondence of relationships model, though not explicitly referring to it as such. The second, Clodovis Boff, “Santo Agostinho e a Pastoral da Libertação (Carta a Dom José Rodrigues, Bispo de Juazeiro, Bahia)”, \textit{REB} 43/170 (1983), pp.292-318, is inspired by his reading of A.Hamman, \textit{La Vie quotidienne dans l’Afrique du Nord en temps de St. Augustin}, Paris, Hachette, 1979, and addressed to a bishop sympathetic to liberation theology, looking at Augustine’s episcopal activity from the viewpoint of liberation theology.
the given social reality and the personal response to it, between the analysis of that situation and the ethical response to it, between the theologian as social agent and the theologian as theoretician. As so often, this returns us to the distinction between the autonomous and the dependent. As a theologian *strictu sensu*, doing what is proper to theology alone, the theologian is not politically engaged.

This distinction is theoretically necessary but, clearly, practically untenable. What Boff is trying to safeguard at the theoretical level is precisely the autonomy and the limits of theology. It is because theology is not everything that it can claim to be something. But, he is fully aware that as a human being in a given social situation, the theologian is perfectly entitled, arguably even obligated, at least from pistic convictions if not theological ones, to become politically engaged. But ultimately, for the same reason of the autonomy of disciplines, it will be the political which responds to the question of the political engagement of the theologian within a concrete political praxis.\(^\text{116}\) This is because political engagement is, fundamentally, a political question, and thus it is incumbent on politics to decide what a correct or necessary commitment in a given situation is. Theology can then reflect and comment from its own autonomous position on that commitment in the ways outlined above.

Having addressed this issue, Boff moves on to ask about the thematic relevance of theology. What is it that theology has to say to the questions of the day? This is the “kairic” element. First, he restates the primacy of praxis, this time seen from the perspective of history, as the raw material on which theory has to reflect. Theology’s task (or at least the relevant one in this context) is to form a conscience which allows us to problematise history. It is precisely the questioning of history which at a fundamental sense allows it to become history, rather than a sequential series of disconnected occurrences. But theology\(^\text{117}\) itself has no way of saying exactly what is relevant or irrelevant, other than through a historical approach, one that acknowledges that relevancies have differed at various times through history. There is no *a priori* response to this question from the side of Revelation. So, the question to ask must always be expanded, to enquire about relevancy to what situation, for what cause, for which class.\(^\text{118}\)

\(^\text{116}\) Boff, *T e P*, p.301-303 (ET, pp.172-174). This means that it is for the political to ask if the task of a theologian in a given situation is to be actively involved in political praxis, or whether it might be best for them (politically best) to engage in the theoretical discourse proper to theology.

\(^\text{117}\) Here it is worth stating that we are dealing with what Boff calls Theology 2 or the second moment of Theology. It is only through the socio-analytic mediation, judged by the hermeneutic mediation, that this kind of theology can discover what God is saying and doing in a particular situation.

\(^\text{118}\) See Boff, *T e P*, pp.304-320 (ET, pp.175-185). These last questions owe something, clearly, to Marx, especially in his guise of Master of Suspicion. The point is to say that relevance is not a neutral term, and pleas for theology to be relevant always need to be subjected to questioning. In other situations than a
If theology is always in some sense politically engaged, and called on to be of some relevance to the situation in which it finds itself, there remains one final question, namely the political aim or destination of theology. Here we are dealing with the telos. This is to do with what politics the theologian hopes to serve and is perhaps also linked to the question of the addressee\textsuperscript{119} of the theological enterprise. Between the independence or gratuity of theory and its interestedness or bias, there is an important analytic distinction to be made, which once again returns to the difference between the autonomous and dependent aspects of a discipline. It must always be remembered that, as autonomous, theology has no political destination. However, it is also dependent, situated in a given and highly specific social setting, and as such it is engaged. The two are not necessarily at odds, but neither are they to be confused.\textsuperscript{120}

Having made the analytic distinction, however, Boff moves on to show the way in which in fact theology, or at least a theology of the political, is always situated within the practical. Although the immediate end of theology may be knowledge (autonomy), in fact in this instance its mediate and terminal end is Praxis.\textsuperscript{121} This is because the theoretical reflection on agapic Christian praxis (theology) has as its aim the (re-)articulation of a theory which is adequate to that praxis and from which that praxis can draw (the dialectical relationship). In this sense, all theology is necessarily and always partial, and the important thing is to be aware of that fact.\textsuperscript{122} There is no “pure theological reason”. Neither, though, is there an uninterrupted line between theory and praxis, but the dialectical relationship requires a break or a leap in both directions, elements of “the fact of human decision”, Boff calls them.\textsuperscript{123}

These three ways of relating theory and praxis in terms of \textit{topos}, \textit{kairos}, and \textit{telos}, lead Boff to ask about the nature of the relationship between the

\textsuperscript{119} See for liberation theology, Jon Sobrino, “Centralidad del reino de Dios en la teología de la liberación” in Sobrino, Ellacuría, (eds.), \textit{Mysterium Liberationis}, vol.1, pp.467-510, here pp.488-492, and in general David Tracy and his three publics for theology. Note that Boff’s own public in \textit{Teologia e Prática} is very much the academy.

\textsuperscript{120} Boff, \textit{T e P}, pp.321-326 (ET, pp.186-189)

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Ibid.}, p.328 (ET, p.190)

\textsuperscript{122} I am reminded here of Bertolt Brecht’s poem \textit{An die Nachgeborenen}, in which he seeks to voice for those who come after the reasons why those of his generation, the revolutionaries, acted as they did, “where / A conversation about trees is almost a crime”, when it was necessary to take sides. To claim neutrality is to side with the status quo. See Bertolt Brecht, “An die Nachgeborenen”, in Bertolt Brecht, \textit{Die Gedichte von Bertolt Brecht in einem Band}, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1981, pp.722-725

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{T e P.}, p.332 (ET, p.193). The hyphenating of words to make use of their full etymological force is another of Boff’s favourite tools.
two. He begins by noting that in many current political theologies Praxis is used as a criterion for truth. However much this may be understandable in terms of the urgency of the situation, it is inadequate, since for theology Praxis can never be a criterion of theological truth. To make it so would be once more to confuse the different orders of activity. Moreover, there is a need to recall the distinction between theology and faith, in which the first is epistemological and only the second existential. In terms of a coherence model of truth, it is theology’s job to set out an understanding of faith (content) that is coherent to the truth of revelation within the culturally available resources of that time and place. In terms of a verification model of truth, theology can only be judged by the canon of faith, an argument which may appear circular but is true for all sciences, whose results are judged by the accepted verificatory principles of the science in question.

Alongside these theological criteria for truth, there are pistic criteria which are separated but related, and which are connected with praxis. The theological and the pistic are related in the sense that theology will always draw on faith, and will receive the judgement as to its truth and validity in its application or transferral into the arena of Praxis. But at the same time, praxis needs theology in order for its actions to be reflected and given theoretical status, thus avoiding the trap of immediatism and pragmatism.

In the final chapter of the book, Boff tries to draw together what he has said so far to demonstrate in what way(s) the dialectical mediation should occur. Because dialectic can only be thought dialectically, this is not an easy task. However, in his usual fashion, he seeks to set out the limits and terms of the discussion, before going on to show how they are used. Initially, he points out that there is a minor and a major key of dialectics, the minor being played in the interaction between theoretical theory and empirical theory, and the second on the much vaster stage of the relationship between theory and praxis. Furthermore, this relation can only be addressed theoretically, from within one of the poles. There is no neutral position

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124 Again, I follow Boff in his capitalisation to stress the general nature of what is being said here. This is true, for him, for all praxis, not just for particular instances.
125 Thus, the stress on orthopraxis, in the best case in conjunction with orthodoxy, sometimes as an alternative or opposing category to it.
126 \( T e P \), p.341 (ET, p.198).
127 \textit{Ibid.}, pp.342-343 (ET, pp.199-200)
128 \textit{Ibid.}, pp.351-352 (ET, pp.204-205)
129 \textit{Ibid.}, p.355 (ET, note 2, p.328)
130 This point, as much in the book, owes a lot to Bachelard and Althusser. An early reviewer of \textit{Teologia e Prática} notes that for both these thinkers “there exists a primacy of the theoretical over the empirical”, which makes it difficult to use them to argue for the importance of Praxis, except if this is understood in the sense of discourses about or theories of Praxis. See Pedro Demo, review of \textit{Teologia e Prática}, in \textit{Vozes} 72/8 (1978), pp.71-73 (= pp.631-633), here especially p.72
from which to carry out this dialectical enterprise, and in fact to engage with it is automatically to enter into the realm of theory.\textsuperscript{131} Returning to the theme of inclusion and distinction, Boff here makes use of the terms of \textit{perichoresis} and \textit{chorismos}.\textsuperscript{132} First there are points of intersection (\textit{perichoresis}) between theory and praxis. For one thing, all theory is a praxis, in that it does something, working with the world to produce results, and this work itself requires external factors (books to read, paper to write on, etc.). And, on the other hand, Praxis, here defined as “every human action which transforms the world”,\textsuperscript{133} contains its own theory. There is, then, a Theory of Praxis and a Praxis of Theory.\textsuperscript{134} However, having said all that, the \textit{chorismos}, the gap, must be allowed to remain, so that one is not reduced to the other, so that all theory is practice (theoretical practice), or else all is Theory (practised theory).\textsuperscript{135}

The final sections turn to the rules of dialectic movement. Here it should be first noted that dialectic, for Boff, is rule-governed, though these very rules need to be thought dialectically, lest it turn into a system, and thus at most one pole of a dialectic.\textsuperscript{136} There are three senses of dialectic, the dynamic relationship between theory and practice, the conflictual nature of this relationship, and the overcoming of this conflict. It is in this synthesis that unity is to be found, not on either side of the equation.\textsuperscript{137} Within this broader picture, the specific place of a theology of the political is to be located. Theology is not all of theory, and neither is it the only theory so the danger of absolutism must be avoided, while at the same time theology must carry out its task of giving a theory of the absolute, or of the relation of all to the absolute.

Theology of the political, then, relates to the whole field within a four-fold framework, so Boff suggests. He uses A to refer to the element of Praxis in the secular regime and A’ to refer to the level of Christian agapic praxis, and B to refer to the element of theory in the secular regime and B’ to its

\textsuperscript{131} \textit{T e P .}, pp.355–360 (ET, pp.207-209)
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Perichoresis} is, of course, a Trinitarian term developed by St John of Damascus to signify the divine interpenetration of the Persons, whilst \textit{chorismos} is taken from Plato, who uses it to refer to the separation between the physical and metaphysical. As this concept is then taken up by Marx through Kant and Hegel, see Theodor Adorno, \textit{Negative Dialectics,} (trans. E.B. Ashton,), London, Routledge, 1973. Boff uses \textit{perichoresis} to refer to the integrative element of dialectic and \textit{chorismos} to indicate the disruptive element.
\textsuperscript{133} As an aside, it is interesting to note here certain similarities with Marshal McLuhan’s classic work \textit{Understanding Media.} For McLuhan, media are extensions of the human, and so they carry within them a whole set of meanings. Hence the phrase, the medium is the message. Money, a medium for McLuhan, conveys messages about economic and social relationships.
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{T e P .}, pp.361-362 (ET, pp.210-211) \textsuperscript{135} \textit{T e P .}, p.363 (ET, p.211). Cf., also the discussion above on Marion and the importance of “distance”, Chapter 3.5.4. Theory cannot make an idol of praxis, nor vice-versa.
\textsuperscript{136} Boff, \textit{T e P .}, p.369 (ET, p.216) \textsuperscript{137} \textit{Ibid.}, pp.366-367 (ET, p.214)
Christian equivalent, namely a theology of the political. There are three possible relationships here, B’ – A’, B’ – B, and B’ – A. That is to say, theology of the political (B’) can be related to social sciences (A’), theology of the political can be related to Christian Praxis (B), or theology of the political (B’) could be related to social Praxis (A). This latter approach is, however, not actually possible, since theory of one order and practice of another order cannot combine without doing violence to both. However, it is possible to approach that praxis through its theoretical reflection or through the encounter of Christian practice with secular practice (thus, the first is B’ – B – A, which is the socio-analytic mediation, and the second is B’ – A’ – A, which is the hermeneutical mediation). Thus, the dialectic depends on the interaction between the religious and secular regimes, between and among corresponding levels of theory and practice. Having completed his work, Boff perhaps rather exhaustedly admits that the new discourse of Faith (and here he has in mind principally the theology of liberation) depends more on practical engagement than on theoretical efforts, and that anyway it is probably the case that we do not yet have all the elements to carry out a theology of the political.

4.2.4 Some Interim Critical Conclusions

Before moving on to look at Boff’s subsequent writings, it will be useful to note some criticisms of Boff’s book and to draw some initial conclusions. The criticisms have tended to cluster around definitions of and the relationship between the socio-analytic and hermeneutic mediations. In the following paragraphs I will briefly consider each of these areas.

However, before doing so, it is perhaps worth stopping to ask an apparently very straightforward question. What does Clodovis Boff understand by theory? Given that theory is so central to his work, and indeed that later on he would write a book entitled The Theory of Theological Method it would seem reasonable to expect that at least he would give a brief definition of the term. But this is not the case. However, even if we assume that his understanding of theory is in the Althusserian sense which he employs both

\[138\text{ Ibid., pp.371-372 (ET, pp.217-218) Praxis plays the role of the base in Marxist terminology and theory is part of the superstructure. This stresses the primacy of praxis.}

\[139\text{ Because he is interested in the discussion from the standpoint of Christian life and theology, he leaves out the relationship A – A’, which is, however, important for the social sciences.}

\[140\text{ T e P., pp.372-373 (ET, p.218) To Plato’s famous comment that an unreflected life is not worth living, I once heard someone rejoin that an unlived life is not worth reflecting. The dialectic between theory and praxis must be a dialectic both ways and within each realm, otherwise life will be unlived and reflections unreflected.}

\[141\text{ T e P., p.375 (ET, p.220) In Teologia e Prática he has a section, pp.304 – 309 (ET, pp.175-178) on the origins of theory, but this is arguing that theory has its origins in practice. In Teoria do Método Teológico, he has a brief comment on scientific discourse (pp.40-42), on the subject, object and method of a discipline. But he does not enter into a deeper discussion of the nature of theory. See on this Nowak, Theorie der Befreiung, pp.160-161. She notes the relative inattention which Boff gives to the formation of the theory.}

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in *Teologia e Prática* and *Teoria do Método Teológico*, that may not help us greatly. For this is a theoretical model for the construction of theories, but it does not tell us what a theory is, except that it is that with which one works on the raw material.

This seemingly minor point – for we all know what a theory is – may, though, be more important than it first seems. One of the critiques that can be made of liberation theology, and especially of Clodovis Boff, is its fundamentally Aristotelian heritage, which is played out in Boff in his Thomism, in the hints of Hegel, and even more of Marx and his French interpreters such as Althusser. Here there is indeed an emphasis on the construction of theory, on the practical element of the establishment of a theory. But there is another, more Platonic, understanding of theory which was the one employed by the Church Fathers. Here *theoria* is more about gaze and contemplation. Of course, this is still a practice, but it is a much more passive practice. In theology it leads to the encounter with the mystery as mystery. That is, it allows the mystery to remain, in Marion's terms, iconic, for the gaze does not return. Practice is then seen in such features as asceticism, witness, the concrete living out of the Christian life. Thus, here, praxis is a result of theory, and theory is a practice of contemplation.

Such an understanding of theory may prove helpful, inasmuch as the turn to Levinas in liberation theology also indicates a turn to a more Platonic understanding. One of the features of a move from Aristotle to Plato is to force a rethinking of the categorisable. No longer, for example, are the poor to be observed as a problem to be categorised, but now they are encountered as real people marked by transcendence. Contemplation is a mode of encounter, a mode, one might say, of being surprised by God. Thus, theory understood in this way allows for more than an external working on something already constructed in order to build something new. It can build into the very way in which theory is understood a moment of encounter.

I do not think this would be necessarily alien or destructive of Boff’s method as I have outlined it, but it may enrich it. Indeed, Boff’s own way of theologising might seem to indicate that this is actually more how he works. His theological practice, as, for example, recounted in his book *Feet-on-the-Ground Theology* consists in encountering and responding to

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145 In his preface to Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, (trans. Michael B. Smith), New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, Pierre Hayat begins with the following quotation: “Philosophy is Platonic” (Emmanuel Levinas).” (p.ix)

146 Cf., the title of the well-known work on Ignatian spirituality by the Jesuit writer Gerard W. Hughes, *God of Surprises*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984
the voice and questions of the people. Of course, he also presents things to them and puts across his opinion, but this can change when he is questioned.\(^{147}\) Now, however, I return to criticisms of the method as it was presented.

The socio-analytic mediation is supposed to furnish theology with a sound basis for the hermeneutic moment. It aims at telling theology something about the world. However, as Boff himself notes, theology as a theoretical discourse can only deal with theory. Thus, criticisms that say that the socio-analytic mediation allows for an interaction with a theory about reality, but not with reality itself, are, in as far as they go, correct.\(^{148}\) But, as we have already seen, Boff himself argues that theology \textit{qua} theoretical discourse can only have an indirect contact with social reality, by means of the contact between the social sciences and the reality about which they discourse. One might even say that the basic point of his book is to show that theology cannot directly make statements about reality, without securing a proper epistemological base from which to do so.

A major criticism of Boff has had to do with his choice of Marxist analysis.\(^{149}\) To some extent I have already dealt with this in Chapter Two, but here I want briefly to consider John Milbank's reading of Boff in \textit{Theology and Social Theory}.\(^{150}\) Milbank professes himself somewhat dismayed by the realisation that his own criticisms of liberation theology “coincide”, as he puts it, “with those of reactionaries in the Vatican”.\(^{151}\) Given his reading of Marx, perhaps he should not be so surprised. Milbank's problem is with the use of Marx to found a theology, given that for him Marxism, as no more than a modern Christian heresy, cannot

\(^{147}\) As one small example, consider his reflections in \textit{Feet-on-the-Ground Theology}, p.151, in a section entitled “We’re too professorial!”’, where he meditates on the difference between the professor and the sage or prophet.

\(^{148}\) See, for example, Nowak, \textit{Theorie der Befreiung}, pp.150-151.

\(^{149}\) For a rather strange criticism of the early social presuppositions, which nevertheless contains both useful information and some good insights, see Michael Landon, “The Social Presuppositions of Early Liberation Theology”, \textit{Restoration Quarterly} 47/1 (2005), p 13-31. Landon’s chief aim is to criticise early liberation theology (pre-1990) for being too Marxist. He fails to do this convincingly, not least because he uses subsequent developments and events to critique the early liberation theologians. However, the underlying social presuppositions which he sees in liberation theology are a useful and, I would suggest, helpful starting point for analysis.

\(^{150}\) John Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason}, Oxford, Blackwell, 2006. For a thorough, and in my view generally convincing rebuttal of Milbank, see De Schrijver, “The Use of Mediations”, pp.48-62, and on Boff in particular, pp.54-61. Although I appreciate De Schrijver's wager, and agree with his suggestions as to what needs to be saved from 'modern theology' (see p.63), I think he perhaps underestimates the force of Milbank's critique of modernity. There is a slow but definite shift in liberation theology from Hegel to Levinas, from totality to alterity, and that is in part a reaction to the failure of the modern. Modernity is not, as De Schrijver very rightly insists, a total failure, and what can be should be rescued, but, to coin a phrase, ‘\textit{modernitas semper reformanda}’. On Milbank’s critique and its weaknesses, see also Joseph Carry, \textit{Methodological Creativity: The Foundational Contribution of Bernard Lonergan and Clodovis Boff to a Global Theology of Liberation}, PhD Dissertation, Fordham University, New York, 2005, pp.197-202

\(^{151}\) Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, p.208
sustain the social sciences.\textsuperscript{152} In other words, he starts from a position which fundamentally denies the claim of Clodovis Boff that the social sciences are autonomous, and can therefore add anything to theology, or be used by theology. Milbank argues that the problem with liberation theology has been its dependence on Rahner and his version of integralism,\textsuperscript{153} rather than paying attention to the French version, which is best expressed by Henri de Lubac.\textsuperscript{154}

Much of Milbank's criticism of Boff relates to the nature of the hermeneutical mediation,\textsuperscript{155} something I return to shortly. However, the final section of his chapter on the supposed inadequacies of liberation theology gets to the heart of the matter. It is entitled “Does Theology Require Social Science?”\textsuperscript{156} This starts with a somewhat strange assertion, that for liberation theology, “insofar as salvation is 'religious', it is formal, transcendental and private; insofar as it is 'social', it is secular”.\textsuperscript{157} There is, I think, little justification for this assertion in Boff's writings.\textsuperscript{158}

Nevertheless, the critique of a lack of ecclesiology in \textit{Teologia e Prática}\textsuperscript{159} has some weight in terms of this particular book, though not in the overall context of Clodovis Boff's work,\textsuperscript{160} which, like most liberation theologians, is heavily marked by a concern for the church.\textsuperscript{161} Part of Milbank's problem

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., pp.207-208
\textsuperscript{153} By integralism, Milbank means the overcoming of the grace-nature divide in the 1950s, a key factor in the Second Vatican Council and its theology. See \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, p.206
\textsuperscript{154} Most famously, of course, in \textit{Surnaturel: Études Historiques}, first published in 1946, and in \textit{The Mystery of the Supernatural} (ET 1967). See the brief summary of de Lubac's position in Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, pp.220-221. This refers to the general tendency to equate Rahner with a naturalising of the supernatural and de Lubac with a supernaturalising of the natural. The link between these distinctions and ascendant and descendent christologies would also be worth investigating in liberation theology. Note that Boff, despite what Milbank may wish to argue, explicitly declares himself to be dependent on de Lubac's ideas (\textit{T e P.}, p.178, note 13, referring to the two works cited here – ET, note 13, p.276).
\textsuperscript{155} See Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, p.239, for example. However, it is not clear in this passage that Milbank has correctly grasped the nature of the ethical in Boff.
\textsuperscript{156} Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, pp.250-256
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p.250
\textsuperscript{158} See, for example, a comment which Boff made when he was under investigation by the Archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro, whose Archbishop had decided he did not want Clodovis to teach at the Catholic University. A travesty of a proceeding followed, and Clodovis was banned from teaching. In his letter to the Diocesan Doctrinal Commission, he states “for me, Salvation is situated in (está na) history (praxis, struggle for justice, etc.), and it is so situated because of the universal Plan of Salvation; but it is not of (não é da) history, it does not belong to its natural constitution”. Letter of Frei Clodovis Boff OSM in “Documentação sobre a condenação da obra de Clodovis Boff pela Comissão Doutrinal da Arquidiocese do Rio de Janeiro”, \textit{REB} 45/177 (1985), pp.391-395, here p.394. See also on the process of the condemnation “Documentação sobre a cassação da “Missio Canonica” do Prof Fr. Clodovis Boff OSM”, \textit{REB} 44/175 (1984), pp.592-617
\textsuperscript{159} Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Science}, p.250. “... Boff... presents a very minimal ecclesiology”.
\textsuperscript{160} The examples are so many that it is hard to know where to start. However, for a work which was also readily available in English, see Boff, \textit{Feet-on-the-Ground Theology}, pp.70, 76, 78, 87-88, 129-130. Indeed the whole book is a prolonged meditation on the nature of the church in a particular setting.
\textsuperscript{161} Indeed, the French Canadian political scientist, André Corten, has accused liberation theologians of failing the poor by falling prey to what he terms “an erudite heresy”, and being more interested in placating the institutional church than in the poor, which for Corten is one reason why the poor chose
is to read Boff as some kind of European academic intellectual, rather than as a Latin American, for whom the divisions and problems are very different. Though Boff can be criticised for not being more explicit about the ecclesial dimensions, the absence is more easily explained as a presence which is so deep and all-pervading that it is not necessary to explain it. Moreover, the criticism misunderstands the nature of his book, which, as I noted above, is a preliminary to doing a theology of the political, not a theology of the political as such. Again, terms such as private and social, individual and communitarian, cannot simply be transposed seamlessly from one context to another. Milbank is often guilty of precisely that correspondence of terms model which, as we saw, Boff rejects.

Milbank and Boff will, eventually, though, have to disagree, because Milbank is convinced that he has shown that the autonomy of the social sciences is “a conventional construct”, whilst Boff clearly needs that autonomy in order to found his methodology. Milbank is surely fundamentally right in his claim that the social sciences are constructs which do not represent reality but particular versions of what reality should be like to serve different power interests. They are ideological. To use Boff’s language, Milbank would argue that the social sciences can only give to theology a theoretical discourse which, to the extent that it is driven by ideological impulses, is discredited and misleading. The raw material, the GI, is thus seriously flawed.

However, it is precisely for this reason that Boff insists on a dialectic approach, and on the possibility of passing ethical judgement on the social sciences. Even so, Boff is surely also correct when he tries to delimit theology, in a way which is, in some aspects, not so far from Milbank’s own position. For Boff would also give a certain primacy to theology, since theology has the right to judge the social sciences, but to judge them theologically. Moreover, nowhere does Boff claim, as Milbank seems to suggest that “social science presents theology with the social object perfectly described and perfectly explained”. What he does claim is that, if theology wants to engage in a discourse about the political, the social, the economic, it must have something on which to discourse. This something needs to be more substantial than the intuitions and opinions of the individual theologian, or even, to satisfy Milbank, of the church community as such. The fact that social science has not succeeded in establishing itself as independent of social structures and demands, as Milbank claims, does not necessarily mean that it is an eternally futile endeavour, nor does it rule

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162 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p.251

163 Cf., Boff, *T e P*, p.173 (ET, p.89)

164 Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p.253
out the possibility of using several different partial accounts of society to construct a fuller position.\footnote{Note that a criticism related to that of Milbank, though more positively disposed to both liberation theology and the social sciences, is made by Jung Mo Sung, Economía: Tema Ausente en la Teología de la Liberación, p.104. He argues that, to the extent that the social sciences themselves make a value judgement, then there are two judgements in play, that of the social sciences and of theology.}

Having said all this, it does seem to me that the nature of the socio-analytic mediation is a crucial question for Boff. I would rather question it, though, from the position of the hermeneutical mediation, and ask if it is in fact possible to find a social scientific mediation that does not already carry within it the theological presuppositions of the theologian.\footnote{The Argentinian theologian Juan Carlos Scannone argues indeed that Boff should have made precisely this point more clearly. “We should explain, moreover, that these principles and criteria [of faith] should also already operate in the discernment of the analytic mediations which are employed to know reality theologically”, Juan Carlos Scannone, “Situación de la Problemática del Método Teológico en América Latina”, Medellín 78 (1994), pp.255-285, here p.259f. In footnote 10, he criticises the first part of Teologia e Prática for not doing this sufficiently.} The question centres on the way in which the choice of the particular social science is made. For Boff this is essentially an ethical choice.\footnote{Boff, T e P., p.122-126 (ET, pp.57-60)} However, as he himself more or less admits, this ethical choice, not surprisingly, is based on Christian values, which are drawn primarily from the Scriptures and, at least in Boff’s case as a Roman Catholic, Tradition.\footnote{Te P., p.125 (ET, p.59) “... the theologian does not find herself or himself deprived of precise and strong criteria for making the choice of a determined social theory and practice. I refer above all to the Gospel, which, however capable of manipulation it may be, is not so susceptible to manipulation as to make completely risible any attempt to produce a concrete ethical demarcation, even if this demarcation and its corresponding realisation always retain a kairológico character, in the sense of remaining relative to the historical moment.”} But then the reading of reality depends on a reality described by a science which is found to be in agreement with the tools which are used for the reading, or at least which supports what the reading wants to find. This, however, is a form of ideology.

Boff’s defence would be primarily one of contingency and pragmatism. In other words, pragmatically it makes sense for theology to use what is germane to it, and at the same time it must recognise that its choices in this area will always be contingent on historical and social realities which are not under its control.\footnote{Frei Clodovis confirmed this in a conversation I was able to have with him in Curitiba on July 19th 2008, when I asked him about this very question.} He admits that this may seem somewhat precarious, but argues that this is a risk which must be taken.\footnote{Boff, T e P., p.126 (ET, p.60)} In a sense here he also responds to Milbank, by showing that the dependence on social science is much freer than the latter would think. However, the problem does remain. In terms of this research, which social analysis of poverty should we take as the starting point for theology and for the work of the liberation of the
poor? And, even more pertinently, how are the poor themselves allowed to speak in this encounter?

It is in this line, though again perhaps more from the side of the hermeneutic mediation, that the critique of Jung Mo Sung is to be understood. He asks, following a discussion on liberation theology's attempts to separate the scientific and philosophical dimensions of Marxism:

But if Marxism has a range of values and a vision of the meaning of history – according to some, even an eschatology – what is the role of theology, or more specifically, of the hermeneutic mediation after the reading of reality by means of the socio-analytic mediation?\(^{171}\)

He responds by a reading of the discussion on a theology of the land contained in the small but influential book by Clodovis and his brother Leonardo on how to do liberation theology.\(^{172}\) That discussion goes through the three steps of the pastoral cycle, “See – Judge – Act”. Sung argues that a close reading of this text shows that the hermeneutic mediation does not, as it should do, actually interpret the reality read in the socio-analytic mediation.\(^{173}\) He thinks that the Bible adds little to our understanding of the present agrarian reality, given the vastly different contexts. Here, however, he may overstate his case, since what he appears to do is treat the hermeneutic mediation as correspondence of terms rather than of relations, as Boff argues. Nevertheless, the question he raises is a good one:

So, if there is already a struggle for agrarian reform, if an analysis is made which describes and interprets the reality with a view to overcoming the current system of ownership, what is the historical relevance of the hermeneutic mediation and of theology itself?\(^{174}\)

In other words, what does the hermeneutic mediation actually add? In part, Sung suggests, the hermeneutic mediation arises out of the need for theology to safeguard its own particular territory against the inroads of other sciences.\(^{175}\) This stems from theology's entry into the world of modernity, be that entry voluntary or forced. There can be little doubt that this is one of liberation theology's enduring difficulties, for it was forged primarily within the patterns of modernity, at precisely a moment when modernity was being called into question. Thus, liberation theologians wanted to dialogue with the sciences of the social precisely because in so

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171 Sung, *Economía: Tema Ausente*, p.111. See on this also Ivan Petrella, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, pp.26-35. Petrella, however, disagrees with both Boff and Sung, and suggests that liberation theology needs to have the construction of historical projects at the centre of its methodology. In doing so, he argues, liberation theology's theological positions will become clearer (p.37).

172 Clodovis Boff, Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, pp.41-42

173 Sung, *Economía: Tema Ausente...*, p.112

174 Ibid., p.113

175 Ibid., p.116
doing they could legitimately claim a particular role for theology itself.\footnote{It should also be noted that the turn to the social sciences in Boff is a way of justifying and grounding liberation theology’s claims about the social. In terms of the See – Judge – Act pastoral cycle, the social sciences allowed theologians to affirm that what they saw was actually there to see. This is the positivist dimension of modernity.} To recognise the autonomy of another discipline is implicitly to claim the same rights for oneself in one’s own intellectual labours.

In terms of the hermeneutic mediation, Boff would argue that it is qualitatively different. For him, the socio-analytic mediation cannot bring or offer a reading of reality from the perspective of faith, at least not in terms of the social science itself. Of course, it may happen that the social scientist is a person of faith, but that is accidental to the practice of the theoretical discourse. The problem here, though, was noted by Pedro Demo, whose early review of \textit{Teologia e Prática} I have already referred to. Demo notes that Boff would really need to show that theological and scientific “decisions” are qualitatively different. This he fails to do, yet the author continues to defend the idea of qualitative difference. Thus there arises a “non-discussible” within a framework of a methodological position which starts out from the ‘discussibility’ of everything. I consider this a normal phenomenon...

that projects its own position, but it is necessary that one says that this is ‘ideology’.\footnote{Pedro Demo, Review of \textit{Teologia e Prática}, p.72}

In other words, on what grounds can Boff claim that the hermeneutic mediation is qualitatively different to the socio-analytic mediation? In part, Boff can respond that the difference is to be found in the praxis, that in doing theology one comes to discover the particularities – the autonomy – of theology, just as in doing social science one comes to discover its own autonomy. Part of what it is to do theology is to grasp this difference. To some extent, this is true, but it does seem to leave the hermeneutic mediation on the same somewhat precarious ground on which we saw the socio-analytic mediation rested.

However, it may be that this very precariousness is important in order to prevent Boff’s methodology from becoming idolatrous, in the sense which we saw in Chapter 3. For, as Libanio pointed out in a perceptive review of \textit{Teologia e Prática}, “an extreme valorisation of epistemology can produce a double negative effect on theology: a productive inhibition and a weapon for conservatives and reactionaries to destroy a whole discourse, because the rules were not followed”.\footnote{João Batista Libanio, Review of \textit{Teologia e Prática}, \textit{REB} 38/151 (1978), pp.544-549, here p.549. This comment is made within the context of a largely favourable review of the book.} Perhaps against his own intentions and desires, then, Boff has succeeded in finding a way to prevent his work becoming too foundationalist. It can only be effective in praxis, or to put it apparently tautologically, the method only works when it works.
The final area which needs a brief consideration is the dialectical mediation, the encounter between theory and praxis. This part of the work has probably drawn least attention and least interest, which may mean that people agree with what he says, or that the criticisms of the first two parts have made redundant any critique of the third part. However, the third part is crucial and deserves closer appraisal. Jutta Nowak, in her work on Clodovis Boff, notes that Boff fails to work through sufficiently the relationship between theory and praxis in his writings. One of the results of this for her is that he fails to deal with the particularity of theology.\(^{179}\) Who are the partners in the dialectic mediation? On a purely formal level, Boff’s model\(^{180}\) is clear. The dialectic is played out between theories or between practices or between (if necessary, mediated) practices and theories. Thus, theology can be in dialectic encounter with pistic practice (Christian life), or with the social sciences (and only through them with the practices of daily life which they study and report on). However, in *Teologia e Prática* this dialectic appears still too formal. Clodovis Boff himself has suggested that this is one of the weaknesses of his work – whilst it claims to be about the primacy of praxis, it pays relatively little attention to the topic.\(^{181}\)

A more positive judgement is passed by David Cunningham in his analysis of Boff’s work in an article in *Modern Theology*.\(^{182}\) He refers to certain key areas of dialectic where he thinks Boff makes a real contribution. The first is one to which we have alluded several times, the relationship between autonomy and dependence, where he suggests that “Boff seems to recognize that the simultaneous autonomy and dependence of theology will force us to maintain — in Tracy’s terms — both the intelligibility and the appropriateness of every theological issue we face”.\(^{183}\) In other words, theology, and here specifically liberation theology, can never be satisfied with simply producing sound theory (a necessary but insufficient condition), but must also make sure that the theory is capable of responding to the situation and being lived out. This is to say, then, that liberation is primarily a practice, but one that, as all practices, needs a theory. At one level, however, this may still seem to leave the dialectic on a very abstract level. Cunningham suggests, however, that there is more to it than that:

Rather, it is the attempt to hold two seemingly contradictory notions in tension with one another. This is the same understanding articulated by Gadamer in his phenomenology of the concept of ‘play’: ‘a constant coming and going, back and

\(^{179}\) Nowak, *Theorie der Befreiung*, p.196
\(^{180}\) See Boff, *Te P.*, p.371 (ET, p.217)
\(^{181}\) Remarks made by Frei Clodovis in a conversation, Curitiba, July 19\(^{th}\) 2008.
\(^{183}\) See *ibid.*, pp.147-148. The other two examples he uses are the dialectics between immanence and transcendence, and between the natural and supernatural.
forth, a movement that is not tied down to any goal. Clearly what characterizes this movement back and forth is that neither pole of the movement represents the goal in which it would come to rest'.

Whether or not, however, this is enough to rescue Boff's account of the dialectic between theory and praxis seems to me questionable. Especially problematic is his insistence on a dialectic which needs to issue in synthesis. For synthesis, although not destroying the tension between the poles, has the tendency of creating a totality. The dynamism of the relationship is to some extent lost. The question still remains as to where and perhaps how liberation theology is to encounter the poor through whom it claims that God reveals himself and can be encountered in a privileged way. I will return to this question later, but now I wish to turn my attention to some of Boff's subsequent works, in which he develops the ideas contained in *Teologia e Prática*.

### 4.3 Some Works of Clodovis Boff in the 1980s and 1990s

It is not my intention in this section to give a detailed analysis of all of Clodovis Boff's subsequent work. Apart from the sheer impracticality of such a task, it would not be relevant to my undertaking. Rather, what I want to do is look at how some of the key points in his doctoral thesis have been developed and enriched, both by his pastoral engagement and his ongoing theological reflection. For, clearly, if there is any substance to the dialectical method he proposes, one might expect to find that he himself at least will try to employ it. Underlying this examination are a number of questions. What is the status, for Boff, of liberation theology? How does he view the place of the poor in this theology and does he offer any clues as to how the poor may be allowed to remain iconic?

#### 4.3.1 The status of liberation theology and its relation to theology

I start this consideration of Boff's later works somewhat perversely by returning to an earlier article. Boff's first presentation of the results of his doctoral work to a Brazilian audience came in the form of an article published in the Franciscan journal, *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira*. In this he notes that the problem he is confronting is that “the theoretical transformation of the real is taking the place of real transformation”.

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185 This is particularly noticeable, perhaps, in his book *Feet-on-the-Ground Theology*. This is an account of one of the trips he carried out to the state of Acre, in the north-west Amazonian region of Brazil. It is a mixture of a diary of the trip, and his theological reflections on it. For a decade or so, Boff spent roughly half of his year in pastoral work in Acre, and the other half teaching.

186 Clodovis Boff, “Teologia e Prática”, *REB* 36/144 (1976), pp.789-810
itself”. To the extent that this is true, one might reasonably ask how far Boff managed to overcome the problem.

Certainly for him liberation theology is fundamentally a pastoral theology, in as far as its chief impulse comes from the encounter with the poor. So, for example, in an article which reflects on a theology course held for community leaders he notes that the “place of the theologian is in the heart of the Community. His or her role is not to think for or by means of the Community, but to lead the Community to think, to help it to reflect its faith and to extend its Christian practice”. Elsewhere, he quotes his brother Leonardo, who, he says, has defined liberation theology as “the cry of the people elaborated into discourse”. The faith on which the theologian reflects is always communal and lived.

The practical role of the theologian may be one reason why, in the 1976 article, Boff is adamant that “the Theology of the Political must be understood as one case of a specific type of theology”. For him, liberation theology (which, it should be remembered, he anyway considers only one form of the theology of the political) was never something that was to be taken as a completely new theology. Such an idea he suggests would make it nothing more than an ideology. If this were to happen, false divisions would be created. For example, as he notes elsewhere, “it would be unacceptable to affirm that the Church today should privilege the question of social justice in place of the question of justification by faith”. On the other hand, he goes on immediately to note, dialectically, that one cannot falsely divide faith and politics. One of the dangers with readings of Clodovis Boff is that they tend to reduce him to one of the elements of the tensions which, as Cunningham noted, he is trying to keep together. Generally speaking, he is much more subtle than that, and endeavours to keep the dialectic in play.

Thus, again, in another early article that presents part of his doctoral work he affirms the relevance and particularity of theology and its task. Theology's task is to work with the material found in the social sciences.

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187 Ibid., p.790
188 Clodovis Boff, “A Igreja, o Poder e o Povo”, REB 40/157 (1980), pp.11-47. The quotation is from p.11.
189 Boff, Feet-on-the-Ground Theology, p.159
190 Boff, “Teologia e Prática”, p.808
191 Ibid., p.810
This is clearly a reference to his treatment of Althusser in *Teologia e Prática*. For my argument here, though, what is more important is that the centrality of the hermeneutic mediation, i.e., of the role of theological reflection, is stressed. Although it has been the socio-analytic mediation which has drawn most comment, it should always be remembered that this is the pre-theological. It is the necessary preparation before the work of theology can be done, just as the ground must be cleared and prepared before a house can be built. But it is precisely this fact that maintains the dialectic, for theology cannot be done, at least a theology of the political cannot be done, without this preparation, without listening to the challenges which the social makes to theology.

However, there is one fundamental point about which he will not make concessions: as he put it in the article cited above about the theology course in Acre, “[the political dimension of faith is principal in Latin America] but it is not the only one. Faith itself is not exhausted in any single dimension”. At this stage, he still sees the political dimension as principal, something which will change as time goes on. There is a dialectic here, too, though. For, in another article from around this time, on the “theological” dimension of politics, he notes that the problem is when politics and salvation are placed in opposition: “to understand that in principle, God and humanity are opposed to each other, or that the Kingdom and Society cannot proceed together is to have a fetish idea of God and of his Kingdom – a degraded, secularised (mundanizada) idea”.

Nevertheless, the underlying conviction that Faith, which he uses normally in the sense of ”fides quae”, positive or dogmatic faith, is the base of all theology is there from the beginning and, if anything, becomes stronger, or at least more explicitly expressed as he sees what he regards as its disappearance from liberation theological practice.

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194 For an almost contemporary treatment of Althusser’s epistemology, see Tommaso Cavazzati, “A Epistemologia de Louis Althusser”, *Vozes* 71/5 (1977), pp.43-53 (= pp.403-413), which suggests that the interest in Althusser was not limited at the time to Boff alone.


196 An almost identical point is made in a book written around this time, Clodovis Boff, *Comunidade Eclesial, Comunidade Política: Ensaios de Eclesiologia Política*, Petrópolis, *Vozes*, 1978, pp.13-14, where he notes that “the political instrumentalisation [of faith] is inevitable and even necessary. It must be always be stated, however, that the meaning of Faith is not entirely consumed by and in political activity. It transcends this activity, as it does any other dimension”. The title of this book, (in English: “Ecclesial Community, Political Community: Essays in Political Ecclesiology) published in the same year as *Teologia e Prática*, further weakens Milbank’s assertion that Boff has no interest in the church.

197 Clodovis Boff, “A Dimensão Teológica da Política: Da Fé e daquilo que lhe pertence”, *REB* 38/150 (1978), pp.244-268, quotation from p.245


199 In his article on methodology in *Mysterium Liberationis*, he begins with five theses, setting out what he saw as the then epistemological status of liberation theology. At least four of these relate liberation theology to other theologies, as the fifth thesis says, “not [in] a relationship of opposition nor of
He returned to the question of the nature of liberation theology in a fairly brief article written in 1986, looking back over 15 years of liberation theology (since the publication of Gutiérrez’s *A Theology of Liberation*). He raises a number of questions (thirteen in all), to which he gives short answers. The first question asks if liberation theology is a particular theology or a global theology of faith. His answer is that it is both, without contradiction, a particular expression of all theology. This answer is unpacked somewhat in the second question, which asks if liberation theology “imposes itself on all, or is merely one (legitimate) theology among many others.” Here the answer is perhaps clearer – he insists that it is not the only possible theology, though he also says that it is not merely one other theology among many. Its particularity, which is something which all theology needs to take into account, is the viewpoint of the poor. This, however, is a secondary viewpoint, or perspective, as he goes on to explain in his fourth and fifth questions.

The fourth question asks

> Is not the perspective or pertinence of theology faith? How is it claimed that liberation theology adopts the perspective of the poor? Undoubtedly, the primary and originary perspective of all theology is faith... in liberation theology the specific perspective or the second or derived perspective is truly the oppressed... setting out from the poor, setting out from Christ.

Here perhaps for the first time we have a clear statement of what will become an increasingly frequent reminder from Boff, that the originary perspective of theology is faith, its *arché* as he will come to call it in his address to SOTER, the Brazilian association of lecturers in theology and religious studies. However, it is again important to be clear that this does not mean that he is abandoning the perspective of the poor. In the order of actual praxis and of day-to-day life, the derived and secondary nature of the liberation perspective is not to be considered either less important or less pressing.

In the final question, he asks whether it is conceivable that there would be a theology not concerned with politics. In a sense, he had already answered this question in his thesis, with the division into Theology 0,
The fact that theology can be divided into these different categories – or, as Boff would later prefer to put it, different moments – means that it is not only possible but necessary for there to be theologies which are not directly concerned with politics. In the article under discussion, however, he responds in very similar words to those quoted above in his article on “A Igreja, o Poder e o Povo” (The Church, Power and the People), where he argued that faith is not exhausted in any single dimension. Perhaps the difference in this article is that, instead of claiming priority for the political dimension, he rather seems to relativise its importance, when he suggests the reason why theology can deal with other things than politics “is that the greatness of faith is not exhausted in the social and political dimension”.

This, however, needs to be read remembering the distinction which Boff makes between Faith and Theology, which sometimes seem to get confused even in his own works. Part of the reason for this is that he perceives the relationship as being very close: “internal and organic and not merely exterior and mechanical”, he says. Essentially, for Boff, theology is faith as rational discourse. As such, it is formally susceptible to change and diversity – theological plurality is not in itself a negative sign. But Boff’s Thomist and Aristotelian leanings mean that, though he is prepared to admit the possibility of change in the formal aspect (for theology is a form of faith), the material aspect remains unchangeable and unchanged. So, theology changes but faith does not.

Clearly, there is a problem here for those who do not want to accept uncritically Boff’s starting point, something which is the case for many of his critics. However, to engage with him beyond the critique of the starting point, it is at least important to understand what he is talking about, and to realise that for him the raison d’être of theology is to give rational form to faith in particular times and places. This explains why he is so insistent that theology is to be theological. So, for example, in an essay on Christian faith and democracy, he writes that “theology cannot be at the service of any particular system, as if it were an ideology. It can only be at the service of

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206 On Theology 1 (“dogmatic theology”) and Theology 2, (for example, “theology of the political”) see for introductory remarks, T e P, pp.31-33, (ET, pp.xxviii-xxix) and on T0, “natural theology”, see T e P, p.160 (ET, p.80)

207 Of course, it is also true that “all theological elaboration is in fact particular and, in one way or other, political”, as Boff notes in T e P, p.97 (ET, p.40) Nevertheless, not all theology is directly about politics. Moreover, see the critique of the Marxist argument about theology as part of the superstructure in T e P, pp.143-144, footnote 11 (ET, footnote 9, pp.266-267 – the difference in numbering is because the ET puts footnotes 5-7 in one note)

208 Boff, “Retrato de 15 anos...”, p.270


210 Ibid., p.30
the Word. It is precisely to this extent that it is at the service of the world”.

The way in which liberation theology tries to serve the world is a question which Boff addresses in what may be the earliest “end of the century” article on record, written in 1991. He begins by suggesting three features of liberation theology – it is prophetic, it is a utopian theology and it is a theology laden with pathos. The first is, it seems to me, a constant for Boff, and for other liberation theologians too. The second is perhaps less evident in Boff than in other theologians, at least in terms of his interest in method. The third is in some ways more particular to Clodovis Boff and key to understanding his relationship with the theology of liberation. A simpler description would be to repeat that liberation theology, before being something of or for the academy, is a pastoral theology.

It is a theology that speaks faith out of the situation of “ethical indignation” caused by the encounter with those who are made poor, with the victims of injustice. As he puts it in his contribution to a book he wrote with his brother, “Behind liberation theology there are people, there is struggle, there is life”. A rather moving expression of what this means is offered by Leonardo Boff in his reflections on a trip he made to spend time with Clodovis in Acre. Most of the article is simply a diary of the trip, but at the end he offers some afterthoughts. He notes:

The theologian commonly lives studying and teaching. There is the risk that this theoretical practice introduces deformations, principally a certain dose of dehumanisation, owing to the fact of living... a long way from the life-giving roots; another, no less lamentable deformation is the change of perspective: it is no longer the concrete journey of history and of the Church, but the concepts and theologumena that become the reference point: so the real becomes ideal and the ideal real.

213 Note, however, the comment in Boff, Feet-on-the-Ground Theology, p.110 on the kingdom as utopia, similar to Sobrino’s claim noted above in Chapter 2.
214 This was Frei Clodovis’ comment to me during a conversation I had with him in Curitiba on July 19th 2008. Of course, he did not rule out the academic dimension either – the two are not mutually exclusive (one hopes!).
216 Leonardo Boff, “Teologia à escuta do povo”, REB 41/161 (1981), pp.55-118. The title of the article in English is “Theology listening to the people”. The trip was for a month from 22nd Nov. to 22nd Dec 1980. Near the beginning of the article, Leonardo reflects on the problems he had been having with the Vatican. He had been invited to spend some time in reflection in Rome “at the tomb of the apostle”, in order to deepen his Catholic faith. He says that he replied to the Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith that he would much rather go to the Amazon. He added in the letter to the Secretary that “perhaps a few months in the Amazon would even make a Catholic of you”. This may not have helped his cause!
217 Leonardo Boff, “Teologia à escuta do povo”, p.113
The element of pathos, which may be taken also to include martyrdom, means that liberation theology is constantly, for both the brothers, being called back to the encounter with the poor, and reminded of the need to listen. In *Teologia e Prática* Clodovis wants to find a way to give an epistemological status to this listening, in a way that makes it valid and valuable as a rational discourse. But the motivation remains clear.

Perhaps the clearest expression of that motivation in Clodovis Boff’s work comes in a small episode in his book *Feet-on-the-Ground Theology*. With some others, he has just been to visit a group of settlers from the south who have been promised land in the north of Brazil by the government land resettlement agency. On the way back they are talking in the truck:

> The people had been asking to have their children baptised and young people married in the church. The CPT [Pastoral Land Commission] had been speaking to them of community, meetings, group discussions, etc. I turned around and let loose. “Hey, folks, for the love of God, let’s not put a heavier load on the burden of these poor people than what they’ve already got. Go out there some Sunday, celebrate the Eucharist, with a procession out to the fields. Then baptise and marry everyone who comes forward. After all, if the church isn’t with them, who will be? The sacraments are for the people, as it’s always been taught in good theology. Later on, of course, you can start talking about community and gospel. But let’s not start out making new demands on top of those that they’ve already got. More than anything else, we’ve got to show them that God is on their side – and ours too. Everything else can come later”.

**4.3.2 The place of the poor**

Apart from his specific theological work at various universities, Clodovis Boff was for a long time heavily involved in acting as a theological assessor with CEBs. I do not want to enter here into an analysis of the status of the CEBs, their historical development and their current position. It is not directly relevant to what I want to say here, except to note that it would still be reasonable to speak of the CEBs as representing, in the grand majority of their participants, the poorer segments of Brazilian society.

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218 Boff, *Feet-on-the-Ground Theology*, pp.82-83
219 *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*, Base Ecclesial Communities. For an account of the role of CEBs in the Amazon region, see Madeleine Adriance, *Promised Land: Base Christian Communities and the Struggle for the Amazon*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1995. She was in a similar region to Boff, and notes that she spoke to him in preparation for her work (p.xvii)
220 The Brazilian sociologist Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira, who has done a lot of work on CEBs, carried out a survey of participants of the 10th Intereclesial (the national meetings of base communities, normally held every three years) which took place in Bahia in July 2000. See Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira, “Perfil social e político das lideranças de CEBs no Brasil”, *REB* 62/245 (2002), pp.172-184. In this he found that 58% of participants earned less than three minimum salaries, the level at which he draws the poverty line. Using admittedly slightly different criteria, though probably ending up with a similar estimate, Sonia Rocha, *Pobreza no Brasil. Afinal, de que se trata?*, Rio de Janeiro, FGV, 2005, p.240, gives a figure of 35% for Brazil as a whole. Even given that with de Oliveira’s measurements, that percentage may be higher, the CEBs members are poor. Indeed, de Oliveira argues that the figures at the Intereclesial are skewed in favour of the wealthier, since there was a need for richer people to help subsidise the costs of coach hire for the poorer participants. To cite just one relatively recent author on the topic of CEBs, see
Rather, I wish to look at how Boff has sought to incorporate insights gained from the CEBs into his theology. In other words, how has he listened to and been challenged by the voice of the poor as encountered in base communities and elsewhere? In an article from 1980 he reflects on the varying roles of pastoral agents – which would include people in leadership roles, including but not only priests and religious – and the people. He understands “‘people' in the class sense and not in the classic sense... ‘intellectual' or 'agent' in the Gramscian sense of all who have a function of education and articulation alongside the popular classes”. He considers that in general the relationship between the two has been characterised by three models or metaphors: the agent as full and the people as empty, the agent as right, the people as wrong, or the agent as the ‘after' and the people as the 'before'. Echoes of Paulo Freire, conscious or not, will be noted here. For Boff, though, there is a mutuality, a dialectic encounter through which both the agent and the people grow. By focusing, as he does, on the role of the intellectual, it is clear that he is thinking especially in terms of the theologian. He begins by suggesting what contributions the intellectual can make to the people. These contributions are reactive, and dependent on the people. Thus, the intellectual can help to make more explicit the problems the people face by putting them into questions; he or she can also “systematise, which is to say, bring together in a logical form, the lived experiences and practices of the people to the extent that these have been transmitted, elaborated and systematised by the people themselves, in their own way”.

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221 It is worth remembering some of the claims we saw from the anthropological discussion in Chapter 1, arguing that the members of the CEBs are not the poorest of the poor, not least because they make a basic assumption of literacy. This is borne out by the findings of Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira, who notes that there is almost no illiteracy among participants in the 10th Interesecial, though of course the figure may be higher, since the illiterate would have found it hard to fill in the questionnaire. However, being better off than others does not mean one is not poor, and this debate does not seem terribly productive. Boff, at least earlier on in his writings, is very clear anyway that the question of poverty is a question of structural injustice. In his article, “A Igreja, o Poder e o Povo”, he writes, p.37: “The poor are not like “natural” things, but like artificial products... The poor are made poor... In the light of faith, the poor are those to whom injustice is done (“os injustiçados”).”


223 Boff, “Agente de Pastoral e Povo”, pp.223-226

224 Ibid, p.224

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two articles by Tereza Mari Pompéia Cavalcanti, “Por onde andam as Comunidades Eclesiais de Base I” and “Por onde andam as Comunidades Eclesiais de Base II”, in respectively Atualidade Teológica 7/14 (2003), pp.216-232, and 8/17 (2004), pp.213-227. The first article focuses on challenges to the CEBs, whilst the second considers some of the ways they have sought to respond.
important to note. For the theologian, or at least for the liberation theologian qua pastorally engaged theologian, the task is always a responsive one. Of course, the responses, the way in which the questions are formed, the manner in which the systematisation takes place, all these will or at least certainly can, have a profound effect on people. But, here, theology is a second step, in Gutiérrez's words.\footnote{Gustavo Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, p.9}

For their part, the people have something to give to the intellectual. Boff neglects to note that what he says in the first part actually already presumes a giving by the people. Instead, he starts by noting what the relationship is not. The people will not make an intellectual or theoretical contribution.\footnote{Boff, “Agente de Pastoral e Povo”, p.226}

In a sense, what we have here is the division between autonomy and dependence. As theologian, the pastoral agent is autonomous, but his or her autonomy is dependent on the people, and, for Boff, perhaps most fundamentally, on their “historic praxis”.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p.226} This is expressed in their lives: “The people 'speak' through the prose of their concrete existence, through the rough language of their practice”.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p.229} The task of the theologian is to let these lives speak, and specifically to let them speak theologically, which means to let them speak faith.\footnote{To give just one example, see Boff, \textit{Feet-on-the-Ground Theology}, pp.25-26. Note however here the danger of confusing theology and faith, which Boff usually tries to avoid.}

One of the ways in which the people can do this, at least the people as encountered in the CEBs, is by providing the social analysis necessary for doing theology.\footnote{Clodovis Boff, “CEBs e Práticas Libertadoras”, \textit{REB} 40/160 (1980), pp.595-625. I am referring here to pp.596-597} Boff is aware that he is being somewhat contradictory here, since in his methodology, social sciences are the correct tool for the socio-analytic mediation. So, he writes:

\begin{quote} 
It might be objected that the analysis of social reality does not fall to the CEBs, since they are precisely a religious or ecclesial organisation and not an appropriate instrument for social understanding and transformation. This objection is true in \textit{abstrato}. In reality, the CEBs are socially and historically situated entities.\footnote{Ibid., p.229}
\end{quote}

In other words, because they are fully involved in society, the CEBs are able to take part in social analysis. It will be noted that this involves a not uncommon move by Boff. He admits that something is true in theory, but then goes on to use 'reality' as a counter-argument. To turn the tables, one might say that this works in theory, but in practice it is more problematic. If the epistemological base is sufficiently strong, then why the need to appeal to something outside it to explain apparent anomalies? If it is not sufficiently strong, then perhaps it needs changing. Nevertheless, what he is
claiming here is still important, and perhaps it needs to be moved more to the level of the praxic mediation, though still there it is unclear if the theologian can engage directly with the findings of the CEBs in terms of social analysis, especially to the extent that this is part of their socio-historical praxis rather than any theoretical discourse they construct. However, to the extent that the theologian can listen and learn from the people, she or he is enabled to remain open. Much of Boff’s writing can be categorised in this way. He visits a place, and on his return he reflects theologically on what he has heard and experienced. This is the practice of dialectic, allowing himself to be changed and challenged by what he encounters. He does not, though, go to these encounters with an empty mind, however open it may be. In the 1980s he wrote three essays, for example, following trips to respectively Cuba, the Soviet Union and China. Although he becomes more and more critical with each visit (Cuba is treated fairly positively, the Soviet Union in part, and China less so), there is a clear sense of someone encountering something that has many positive aspects, especially in terms of social equality. His general summary of the Soviet Union may perhaps serve as indicative of what he thinks of all three Communist countries: “If it were necessary to give a complex summary judgement about the Soviet Union, perhaps it could be said: as to the economic infrastructure, OK; not, however, as to the political and ideological superstructure”. Compared to 1980s Brazil, with poverty on the increase, it is not surprising that what he saw of countries like Cuba and the Soviet Union especially (less so in China at that time), impressed him. In fact, the ascetic in him liked the fact that people had enough but not more than enough. On the other hand, he was deeply sensitive to the ideological nature of much of what was going on, again something which comes out of his methodology, claiming here is still important, and perhaps it needs to be moved more to the level of the praxic mediation, though still there it is unclear if the theologian can engage directly with the findings of the CEBs in terms of social analysis, especially to the extent that this is part of their socio-historical praxis rather than any theoretical discourse they construct. However, to the extent that the theologian can listen and learn from the people, she or he is enabled to remain open. Much of Boff’s writing can be categorised in this way. He visits a place, and on his return he reflects theologically on what he has heard and experienced. This is the practice of dialectic, allowing himself to be changed and challenged by what he encounters. He does not, though, go to these encounters with an empty mind, however open it may be. 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which opens a space for the detection of ideology and the nature of that ideology.

For Boff, then, it is fundamentally true that contact with the people converts the theologian. Conversion here is not spelt out, but it may be understood in a Lonerganian sense, as an ongoing process of total transformation which enables the theological task to take place. For a theology which wants to talk about the place and impact of faith in the lives of particular poor people, such a conversion is absolutely essential. This is not the only sort of theology, but it is one particular theology which, precisely as such, has its contribution to make to theology in general. And in this theology, “everything has to come from the bottom up.”

It is this factor that impressed him often about the CEBs, the way in which, above all in the Interecclesial meetings, the Bishops (at least those who supported the CEBs) came face to face with the people. So, reporting on the 5th Interecclesial, which took place in the north-eastern state of Ceará in July 1983, he notes “the people speak. And they speak before the bishops. And the latter listen.” The imagery here is important. The poor form a “new face of the church’ – you can see this even in their eyes”.

4.4 Clodovis Boff’s work in recent years

As I have already noted on several occasions, it has been claimed that Clodovis Boff has changed significantly over the last decade, since roughly the turn of the millennium. This, it seems to me, is both true and false, and it is to this period that I now turn. Boff has written less in this time, or at least fewer articles. In this section, I want to consider very briefly his treatise on theological method, and then concentrate on the debate with Clodovis Boff, “E uma pedrinha soltou-se”, p.669


240 See Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972, p.270. See on this in much more detail Joseph Carry, Methodological Creativity. The comparison between Lonergan and Boff which Carry offers is insightful, as is his reading (pp.95-97) of Boff’s own journey in terms of the different levels of conversion noted by Lonergan (the moral, intellectual and religious).

241 Although I think this would be a reasonable reflection of Clodovis Boff's current position, I am not entirely convinced that he would have articulated it this way in the late 1970s and early 1980s. On the other hand, I believe it is possible to find in that time indications of such a position and therefore of consistency in his thought.

242 Boff, “E uma pedrinha soltou-se”, p.669


244 Ibid., p.471

245 He has written two major books, as well as a number of smaller ones. The two major works are Teoria do Método Teológico, and most recently Clodovis Boff, Mariologia Social: O Significado da Virgem para a Sociedade, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2006, a massive introduction to a discipline which Boff has more or less invented, ably supported by his brother, Leonardo, and especially his sister, Lina.

246 Ongoing at the time of writing.
his brother and others occasioned by an article written in late 2007. This article highlights very clearly both Clodovis' own position and the nature of the problematic which I am addressing in this work, namely whether liberation theologians have not effectively ended up making idols of the poor by failing to allow them to be icons of God.

4.4.1 Teoria do Método Teológico
This book was written by Boff as an introduction to theology, or more precisely, as an introduction on how to do theology. In that sense, it is clearly much broader in scope than his doctorate, though the fundamental methodological bases remain similar – especially the Thomist and Aristotelian approach. Such an approach has its advantages, especially for an introductory tome, since it is very clear and easy to follow. Moreover, Boff writes as what he is, a Roman Catholic Christian theologian, working within the great traditions of his church. In doing so, he performs the important task of binding Latin American theology to the rest of the Roman Catholic Church in its theologising, as well as in its practices. On the other hand, it does mean either ignoring or undervaluing other possible Catholic, let alone Christian approaches, which is often to the detriment of the richness of the theology and the possibilities inherent in it. At best, Boff can rather uneasily try to squeeze some of the round pegs of contemporary theology into the square holes of his Aristotelian and Thomist methodology.

Rather than try to summarise the entire work (containing as it does over 700 pages), I want to look here only at what he says about practice and its relation to faith and theology. Boff is still clear in this work that he operates from “the perspective of liberation”. But this is not to say that he is simply recycling a methodology for liberation theology. Rather, in order “to study theological method with a special sensitivity for the questions which the world of the poor make of Christian faith... we will add to theological methodology the new epistemological questions which the theology of liberation has raised”. To do this, he divides faith into three components, dogmatic faith, or what he prefers to call “Faith-Word” (Fé-Palavra), experiential faith (Fé-Experiência) and praxic faith (Fé-Prática).

Of these, the first is the foundational, for, Boff says, it is the Word or Revelation which is “the determining source” of theology. Revealed faith is the base point for all theology: “Without this protôn, the Theology of Liberation may still be “of liberation”, but it will not be theology”. This idea of revealed faith, the fides quae, as being the formative principle for

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247 Boff, Teoria do Método Teológico (hereafter, TMT), p.17
248 Ibid., pp.17-18
249 Ibid., p.111
250 Ibid., p.115
theology is not new, as we have seen, but it is something that is stressed more and more by Boff.\(^{251}\) The reasons for this will become clearer shortly, but for now it is important to see it in terms of his desire to safeguard the autonomy of theology.

In part he wants to do this precisely so that theology is in a position to say something about the world with which it is confronted. So, the whole world is, in principle, what he calls “theologisable” (teologizável),\(^{252}\) or, as he also puts it, it is the theologizandum. Going back to the Althusserian division into three generalities,\(^{253}\) we could say that anything can offer itself (at least to the extent that it is or can be theoretically expressed) as Generality I, as the “raw material” on which theology will work. So, “liberation and the poor can perfectly well be the subject matter of theology, precisely to the extent that they are considered according to God, within the project of the Kingdom. And the God of theology is a liberating God”.\(^{254}\) Here Boff is carrying forward and making clearer what he began earlier. There he already moved from liberation to the political in broadening the scope of what was to be reflected on theologically, and here he extends it even further.

But we cannot stop there. Because for Boff, as mentioned above, praxic faith is one of the three sources of theological knowledge, and, as such, he devotes a chapter to it. Here he says that he uses “‘practice' in the sense of general Christian engagement”.\(^{255}\) Apart from practice as theologizandum, he suggests there are three further ways in which practice can enter into theology. It can be an object of faith, it can be the place, source and origin of theology and it can be a cognitive principle.\(^{256}\)

The first point he deals with later on in the book when he asks about the finality of theology.\(^{257}\) His first summary answer to the question posed in the title “Theology: for what?” makes it clear where practice comes in. He writes: “We may say using a general formula that theology is done for life: it is a service to the life of faith.”\(^{258}\) In this context, he adopts once more the terminology of praxis. He defines it as an action that has a subjective intention (it is done consciously, we could say), it has an objective external effect (something happens), it is collective and not just individual and it is

\(^{251}\) Perhaps the best developed statement of this is in his article, already cited, in Susin (ed.), Sarça Ardente, on precisely the return to the source (or arché as he says) of faith.

\(^{252}\) See, for example, Boff, TMT, p.47

\(^{253}\) Summarised in TMT, pp.56-57

\(^{254}\) Boff, TMT, p.47

\(^{255}\) Ibid., p.157. It will be noted that he is talking here about ‘practice’, rather than ‘praxis’. However, in the terms in which he spoke in T e P, we might say that, as soon as it becomes or is used as a source of theology, practice is praxis, engagement reflected and systematised in the light of faith.

\(^{256}\) Boff, TMT, p.157

\(^{257}\) Boff, TMT, Chapter 13: Theology: For what?”, pp.390 ff.

\(^{258}\) Boff, TMT, p.390
The time spent with CEBs has presumably impacted on Boff significantly here, since it is precisely this collective and intentional transformative activity that marks the self-understanding of the base communities. But it is perhaps also in the contact with ordinary people that Boff sees the limits of a purely activist approach.

Thus, he stresses that praxis cannot be limited to pastoral practice. Instead, praxis, for him, should be above all, “spiritual practice, listening to the Word, conversion, faith, adoration.” This definition needs a little explanation, for it seems to be far removed from the normal understandings of praxis in liberation theology. At one level, Boff is taking praxis back to what he sees as the foundational aspect of faith, the Faith-Word. To that extent, he is encouraging the theoría discussed above, the contemplative gaze on the Mystery. Yet this gaze is not an end in itself, but one which leads to the Transcendent. Boff’s dialectics mean that this encounter with the Transcendent will result in other practices, which follow and build on this first practice. Thus, the first practice is necessary to ground the other practices in a non-idolatrous way, but if the first practice is all there is, it too will be idolatrous, in the sense of Idolatry 1 as we saw above, for it will worship the part as a whole.

Having defined in this way what he means by praxis, Boff goes on to consider again the dialectic between theory and practice in theology. He reiterates the point, already present in some form in Teologia e Prática, that theology is immediately theoretical, and mediately praxic:

We want to know in order to love and to practice. And this is the second and terminal object of theology. And it is also its principal and decisive end. Although this is not the first object of the action of doing theology, it can and should be the first objective in the intention of theology.

So, in terms of the theoretical immediacy, he argues again that theology is a science, a form of knowledge. Theology itself “does not aim at loving God or doing his will. For, for this, strictly speaking, it is not necessary to do theology.” This is really to state the obvious. It is not necessary to do theology to be a follower of Jesus Christ. However, Boff also wants to say with this that the task of theology is to focus on God, and not on human

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259 Ibid., p.392
260 Ibid., p.393. He notes that praxis is expressed in diverse practices, of which the pastoral is only one.
261 Boff, TMT, p.393
262 This is the danger of any theology which puts too much emphasis on the liturgy to the total exclusion of everything else. Then, in practice, the liturgy becomes an idol, an end in itself beyond which it is impossible to go to encounter the God whom the liturgy claims to worship.
263 Boff, TMT, p.397. Cf. T e P., p.328 (ET, p.190)
264 Boff, TMT, p.397
265 As a theologian, I might add, though, that it can help!
practice. Theology in the first place talks about God, or as he also puts it, the praxis of God. There are three reasons why he considers it important to stress the theoretical character of theology, over against an emphasis on practice. The first is to maintain a theocentrism over against anthropocentrism – God must be at the heart of theology. The second reason is that, for him, theology, as any serious discourse, is about searching for the truth. He argues that “only after really knowing the truth can one ask how to do the truth.” It is interesting to see his justification for this claim, and worth quoting at some length:

Putting praxis at the beginning is a mania of Promethean modernity, a cultural fixation: fixation on the idea of “knowledge-power”, which expresses itself in cheap activism, technical pragmatism or historical praxism... The reason of doing “forgot being”; the reason of power turned its back on the question of truth, substituting it with the question of economic production, political efficiency and merely cultural meaning.

In other words, we could say that the stress on praxis, on doing the truth over knowing the truth, is, for Boff, a sign of idolatry, of the worship of the economic and its values. It will be seen below that he does also recognise that this is not necessarily always the case, an important recognition given that the stress on doing the truth, apart from being Biblical, is also often precisely against the foundationalism of modernity. The use of emotive terms like “mania” indicates, though, that this is something he regards as seriously damaging to the enterprise of theology. This is emphasised further by the third reason he gives for maintaining the primacy of the theoretical nature of theology – to avoid pragmatism. The point here is that whatever we do needs to be done in a clear and rational way, otherwise “there is the risk of loving some idol or other in place of the living and true God and of practising a pseudo-liberation in place of...”

266 Boff, TMT, p.398
267 Ibid., p.398. The obvious rejoinder here is that the division is not in fact so clear-cut. How does God reveal himself? First and foremost, in a human being, in Jesus Christ, his Son, who became human like us in all but sin (Heb 4:15). But this is not what Boff is arguing against here. As we shall see below, his real argument is with what might be termed activism, the rejection of any reflection as a waste of time and a consequent “idolisation” of action. See on this also the conclusion to Carry, Methodological Creativity, for example, p.288. Carry uses the phrase “ironic elitism” to say something similar to what I have been calling idolatry. He says that the risk of this is run when “certain standards of traditional scholarship are excluded from the debate by the overwhelming force and authority of the previously unheard voice [of the poor]”. If the poor are made into idols, then there is nothing else to see, and no appeal can be made to anything outside the poor, not even ultimately to the God who is meant to liberate them.
268 Boff, TMT, p.398
269 Ibid., p.399
270 See, for example, John 3:21, “the one doing the truth”. On this, see Johan Konings, “‘A verdade vos tornará livres’ (João 8,32)”, in VV.AA., A Esperança dos Pobres Vive: Coletânea em homenagem aos 80 anos de José Comblin, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2003, pp.167-173, especially p.171.
271 See on this Ivana Dolejšová, Accounts of Hope, especially pp 271-276.
liberation according to the gospel”. Ultimately, perhaps what Boff is arguing against most strongly here is the utilitarian approach to knowledge in general, and theology in particular.

The significance of the refusal to accept utilitarianism should not be ignored. For a utilitarian epistemology categorises people and things according to their functional value, and as such, is incapable of being challenged by the encounter with the other, since the other does not exist except in terms of their utility. Boff’s rejection of this approach leaves a path open for the other not to be subsumed under the totality of the ‘I’.

But as always there is a dialectic here, and so Boff turns to the mediated relation, the praxic nature of theology. The primary reason for making this claim is that “the God of theology is not only Truth, but is also (and even more for us) Life”. Moreover, and here the real dialectic enters, he says that “it is only by doing that anything can be known well”. Although this may seem to be pushing dialectic to its limits, it is in fact a good example of what Boff has in mind when he speaks of dialectic. For it is precisely in maintaining the tension of the contradiction that the most fertile theology can take place. Theory cannot be at the expense of practice, but practice cannot be done without theory, or at least praxis cannot be done without theory. Given that his argument, though unstated, is really with unreflected activism, and that he is writing a book about the theory of theological method, it is not surprising that he seems to value the theoretical more. But that does not mean that the other side of the dialectic can be or is ignored.

The second point that he made about the role of practice in theology concerns its foundational nature, the way in which it is “ortus, fons et origo of theology”. He does not devote much space to this, but it is consistent with what he says elsewhere about faith as the source (arché) of theology. Although he tends to stress the fides quae, it is true that even the positivity of faith is only realised in its living out (practice). As he puts it, “for a theologian, the concrete practice of faith comes before, as Act I, and only then, as Act II, theology”.

Thirdly, he notes that practice is a cognitive principle. It is, he wants to argue, “a subordinate principle, dependent on the principal and determining principle, the Faith-Word...” At heart, here, there is a desire to safeguard

\[272\] Boff, TMT, p.399
\[273\] See Boff, TMT, p.400 “The reason of theology is not immediately a “useful reason”, functional or productive”.
\[274\] Boff, TMT, p.400. Cf., my discussion above in Chapter 2 on the God of Life in liberation theology.
\[275\] Ibid., p.401
\[276\] This I take to be the point of the quotation Boff gives from St. Francis Xavier, TMT, p.402, where the Jesuit missionary complains about the theologians of his alma mater, Paris, who should be out saving souls instead of looking at books.
\[277\] Boff, TMT, p.157
\[278\] Ibid., p.157
\[279\] Ibid., p.158
the utter gratuity of faith as gift. Thus it is the revelation of God the Father in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit that is fundamental for faith, but as the Letter to James reminds us, a faith which has no practical expression is not a living faith.\textsuperscript{280} So it is that practice can, for example, “help to unveil the revealed God, his truth and his project in history”.\textsuperscript{281} The practice of faith is the verifying principle for theology.\textsuperscript{282} Here it may be worth recalling the discussion above about what would happen if the more patristic understanding of \textit{theoria} was used. The active practice of the passive contemplation of waiting for the encounter with the Lord who comes is both a practice and also at the heart of \textit{theoria}, of being helped to see and to gaze in a non-idolatrous way.

We can end this discussion by looking at what he has to say about the primacy of practice. Here he makes an important distinction, which is perhaps lacking in such clarity in \textit{Teologia e Prática}. He writes:

Let us distinguish the two levels of the question [concerning the primacy of practice]: the practical level, relative to the \textit{fecundity} of faith; and the theoretical level, relative to the \textit{truth} of faith. The first has to do with human beings, the second with God. The confusion between these two levels has destroyed the whole theological debate on this question, producing more confusion still.\textsuperscript{283}

At the first level, there is a primacy of praxis or practice. “The evangelical practice of the Community should be, for theology, a much more important reference (and there is the priority) than merely abstract theory, one which is sterile and has its back turned to the people and their problems”.\textsuperscript{284} However, although Boff is arguing that this is about theology, here the distinction between the theologian, as Christian, and what she or he does is apparent. For, most of what he says is related to the person of the theologian, who should not place theory above practice, as the examples he gives indicate.\textsuperscript{285} In that sense, what he appears to be arguing is that for the theologian, as human being, as Christian, praxis has primacy, but for theology, and perhaps for the theologian \textit{qua} theologian, it is the truth of faith which has primacy.

His reason for saying this is to avoid human practice being used as a criterion to judge the truth of faith.\textsuperscript{286} The point here is that the reality of salvation in Jesus cannot be dependent on what people do. It is the action of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{280} Cf. James 2:17.26
\item \textsuperscript{281} Boff, \textit{TMT}, p.159
\item \textsuperscript{282} \textit{Ibid.}, p.159
\item \textsuperscript{283} \textit{Ibid.}, p.168. He himself refers here to \textit{T e P}, pp.335-353 (ET, pp.195-205). See, for example, \textit{T e P}, p.341 (ET, p.198), where he notes that “(political) Praxis is not nor ever can be the criterion of (theological) truth.” But can theological praxis be a criterion of theological truth? This is less clear in \textit{T e P}.
\item \textsuperscript{284} Boff, \textit{TMT}, p.169
\item \textsuperscript{285} \textit{Ibid.}, pp.169-170
\item \textsuperscript{286} \textit{Ibid.}, p.171.
\end{itemize}
God that makes it real. It may be better if Boff had a clearer view of what he means by the truth of faith, since at least as \textit{fides quae} it is, even if based on divine revelation, a human reality. We cannot say that it is what God believes of himself, but only that it is what we believe God to have revealed of himself. Again, perhaps \textit{theoria} as contemplation, which is necessarily relational, would help him. He may also benefit from a good theology of the Holy Spirit, the active force in the divine-human relationship. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that what he is trying to do here is to maintain the central value of a committed Christian life (which for him means a life committed to the liberation of the poor, including, but not limited to, their actual socio-economic liberation), but to recognise that that commitment depends on God and on the revelation of God to which we respond in faith.

4.4.2 Back to base for liberation theology – Clodovis and Leonardo Boff in debate

In the October 2007 issue of the Brazilian theological journal \textit{Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira}, Clodovis Boff published an article entitled “Teologia da Libertação e volta ao fundamento” (“Liberation Theology and the return to the foundation”). This article has seen several major responses, including one by Clodovis' brother, Leonardo, and one by two theologians from the south of Brazil, Luiz Carlos Susin and Érico João Hammes. Because these articles get to the heart of what I have been talking about in this work, to the danger inherent in liberation theology of treating the poor as idols rather than icons, I want to examine them now in some detail.

I start with Clodovis' article. In order to understand what is really driving him, however, it will help to refer to an earlier article on a completely different theme, the formation of young religious in Brazil. Although he says at the end of this article that he hopes he has spoken not \textit{ex passione}

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288 At the time of writing in 2009. The debate seems likely to continue for a while yet, though presumably with no firm conclusion.


290 Luiz Carlos Susin, Érico João Hammes, “A Teologia da Libertação e a Questão de Seus Fundamentos: Em Debate”, \textit{REB} 68/270 (2008), pp.277-299. Susin is a Brazilian Capuchin, long-time president of SOTER, the Brazilian Society of Theology and Religious Studies. Hammes comes originally from Germany, but has taught for some years in Brazil.

291 To distinguish simply between the two brothers, I will use only their first names in this section.

292 Clodovis Boff, “Considerações Indignadas sobre a Formação Religiosa Hoje”, \textit{Convergência} 319 (1999), pp.37-47. The title in English would be “Indignant Considerations on the formation of Religious today”.
but *cum passione*, it can really only be described as a sustained rant.

Normally Clodovis is very careful in how he formulates things, but here he is not, which makes criticisms of the article both easy and justified. The article was occasioned by the departure of a young Servite friar just one month after taking his final vows. This and similar cases led him, he says, to vent his opinion on the question of religious formation today.

His argument is with the foundations of formation for religious life as he sees them in Brazil today, and much of the problem is the focus – almost exclusive, he feels – on the importance of the option for the poor. So, he says,

That 'service to the poor' and the 'option for the poor' are integral parts of consecrated life (I would say even of Christianity) is undoubtedly the case. And in this respect we still do far too little. But to argue that they constitute a basis of religious life is an error.

He recalls a meeting on religious life in Latin America where he argued against the affirmation that the poor constitute the base and the centre of religious life and the church in general. “The poor are not liberated by inflated and inconsistent discourses, as the tragedy of 'real socialism' demonstrated. Some people even seem to “need” the poor to justify their life and their consecration”. When the poor are forced to be the basis and justification for religious life, then both the poor and the religious are damaged – the poor because of the burden which is placed on them, and the religious because the centre of their life is essentially, in the terms I am using in this work, an idol.

For Clodovis, the reason why people leave religious life is fundamentally because their lives are not founded on a life of prayer and of placing God at the centre of their lives. This experience of having spent a lot of time (not to mention money) on educating and supporting young members of his order, only to see them walk away as soon as anything better turns up, is certainly one of the main reasons why he writes as he does in the more recent article to which we now turn.

It must be admitted from the outset that “Volta ao fundamento” is not Clodovis' best piece of work, which is unfortunate, since it has allowed his

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293 Clodovis Boff, “Considerações Indignadas”, p.47
294 A highly critical response to the article appeared in the same issue of *Convergência*, which is the journal of the Brazilian Conference of Religious. Frei Prudente Nery OFMCap, “Comentário às Considerações Indignadas de Frei Clodovis Boff”, *Convergência* 319 (1999), pp.47-64
295 Clodovis Boff, “Considerações Indignadas”, pp.37-39
296 Ibid., p.42
297 Ibid., p.43
298 Although it is not Clodovis' point, we might note that in this case, in Levinasian terms, the religious forces the poor to respond to him or her. The religious is other to the poor, which is opposite to what is being claimed, or apparently desired.
299 This serves as a very good example of what he meant when he claimed in *Teoria do Método Teológico* that praxis is first of all spiritual.
critics to ignore a lot of what he is really trying to say, and to attack some of the side-remarks he makes. It is less of a rant than 'Considerações Indignadas’, but more in the sense that a tropical storm is less powerful than a hurricane – both are fairly spectacular outbursts. There is much which is regrettable, in the tone if not always in the content. However, even there, his (admittedly limited and particular) support for the notification condemning Jon Sobrino is really almost unforgivable, especially since he makes much the same mistake in his reading of Sobrino as does the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF). Moreover, his attack on Rahner seems rather to miss the point. Rahner, after all, is much closer to him than he appears to recognise. What he really attacks is the way Rahner has been assumed in liberation theology, which is not quite the same thing. These critical remarks should not, however, prevent the serious point which Clodovis is making from being heard.

It will come as no surprise after reading this chapter that the core of his argument is that liberation theology has abandoned God as its centre and replaced God with the poor or with the option for the poor at least. What he wants to do in the article is not ‘to disqualify liberation theology, but, rather, to define it more clearly and refound it on its originary bases’. He is speaking of actual liberation theology, not the ‘ideal’ version of the founding fathers. He begins by questioning the option for the poor, not as a biblically grounded theme, but as “an epistemological principle”.

Clodovis’ basic form of argument in this article is one of imputation. He claims that, although liberation theology would happily admit to the primacy of God and not the poor, actually it is marked by a radical epistemological indecision. “But without epistemological consistency, how can a theology be theoretically consistent? And without a consistent theology, how can the pastoral practice based on it be consistent?” Clodovis believes that “in the context of epistemological hesitation between God and the poor, the poor have the advantage”.

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300 See “Volta ao fundamento”, 1. TdL e sua funesta ambigüidade. A questão: ambigüidade epistemológica acerca do fundamento. The problem is more in the silence than in what is actually said. He merely states that in one aspect the notification has seen, pertinently, that faith (again Clodovis anyway is talking about fides quae) receives its basic direction from “the apostolic faith transmitted by the church”. It is his failure to condemn the irrational aspects of the document which has grated most.

301 I refer back to the suggestion above from Georges De Schrijver that Clodovis is one of the most Rahnerian of the liberation theologians. Georges De Schrijver, “The Use of Mediations”, p.54

302 At least, what he ought to be attacking. It is unclear to what extent he regards Rahner as responsible for what liberation theologians have done with him.

303 “Volta ao fundamento”, introduction.


305 Ibid.

306 Ibid.
Notification against Jon Sobrino. In other words, even if people say one thing, they mean another. A more positive reading, which may still allow room for some of Clodovis' criticism, would be that the foundational nature of faith is both a given and even a *sine qua non* of liberation theology, so that the focus is from that perspective on the poor. However, the criticism is valid to the extent that, to use terms taken from our discussion of *Teoria do Método Teológico*, the mediated nature of praxis becomes unmediated, immediate. Then the poor are, in the practice of theology, favoured before God, because they are taken to reveal God in a special and privileged way. The problem with this for Clodovis is that “when the poor acquire the status of epistemological *primum*... [there] occurs an instrumentalisation of faith in function of the poor”. We have already seen why Clodovis is so strongly opposed to this instrumentalisation, not least because of what it does to the poor themselves. For him, “the poor' can be 'a starting point' as a 'beginning' (beginning of the conversation), but not as 'principle' (determining criterion). Again, this is nothing that we have not seen already. The poor can only be a secondary principle, just as the theology of liberation can only be a second level theology, something which has been a clear and consistent part of Clodovis' theology since *Teologia e Prática*. It is perhaps worth emphasising at this point that the fundamental argument is a methodological one, something which again his critics have not altogether appreciated. He is not arguing about the validity of liberation

307 The instances are almost too many to quote, but as an example, consider the following from II.4 of the *Notification on the works of Father Jon Sobrino SJ: Jesucristo liberador. Lectura histórico-teológica de Jesús de Nazaret* (Madrid, 1991) and *La fe en Jesucristo. Ensayo desde las víctimas* (San Salvador, 1999): “Father Sobrino does not deny the divinity of Jesus when he proposes that it is found in the New Testament only “in seed” and was formulated dogmatically only after many years of believing reflection. Nevertheless he fails to affirm Jesus’ divinity with sufficient clarity. This reticence gives credence to the suspicion that the historical development of dogma, which Sobrino describes as ambiguous, has arrived at the formulation of Jesus’ divinity without a clear continuity with the New Testament.” Apart from this, “Volta ao fundamento”, 1. TdL e sua funesta ambigüidade. A inversão e a conseqüente instrumentalização

308 “Volta ao fundamento”, 1. TdL e sua funesta ambigüidade. Gravidade da questão e gravidade dos equívocos. See on this too a brief comment in Clodovis Boff, *Mariologia Social*, p.31: “In theology, the perspective of the poor is neither the only one nor the principal one. The real principal is only the perspective of faith, because this is the perspective of God. Having said this, the principle remains valid that to adopt the viewpoint of the poor is to place oneself in a privileged angle to understand the reality both of society and of faith.” He does not consider the potential problems of making claims about God's perspective, though I think the stronger claim here is really for the utter gratuity of God's self-giving to which faith is a response.

309 “Volta ao fundamento”, 1. TdL e sua funesta ambigüidade. Gravidade da questão e gravidade dos equívocos. This stress has long been part of Gustavo Gutiérrez's theology. See, for example, Gutiérrez, “Theology and the Social Sciences”, p.55, where, however, he also emphasises the mystery of God. “Every theology is a discourse about God; in the final analysis, God is really the only theme of a theology... God is more truly an object of hope (which respects mystery) than of knowledge”. Perhaps Clodovis would have done well to bear this in mind more in his article.
theology as such, but pointing to some of the dangers which arise from a faulty methodology. In his own terms, we might say that the problem he is pointing to is what amounts to an omission of the hermeneutic mediation, so that there is a move directly from the socio-analytic mediation to the dialectic mediation, without passing God. As I have been arguing in this work, when that happens, there is idolatry, and the poor will become idols.

The reasons why liberation theology has developed in this way are understandable, even for Clodovis. He names especially the fact of the encounter with the poor in Latin America as fundamental.311 But the problem has been the yielding to the temptation of “urgency”, of what he calls an “epistemological whateverism”: “anything goes in theology as long as the poor gain an advantage from it”.312 The aim of liberation theology becomes “omnia ad maiorem pauperis gloriam, etiam Deus”.313

The second part of the article goes on to consider the recent 5th General Assembly of CELAM, the Council of Latin American Bishops, held in Aparecida, Brazil in May 2007, and suggests that its methodology is far more suitable.314 This need not detain us here, except to say that Aparecida seems to be contrary to Clodovis' own methodology.315 In conclusion, Clodovis does, however, suggest some ways in which theology of liberation can escape from the trap into which he considers it has fallen. He notes first that liberation theology has become an integral part of theology in general, a tributary to a main river, as he puts it.316 As such, liberation theology has its role, “to remind all theology of its duty to integrate ever more the socio-liberative dimension of faith, of which the poor are protagonists”.317 The danger it must avoid is of seeing itself as a theology apart.318 This is because “the poor will not be able to bear on their backs for long the building of a theology that has chosen them as base; they will give

311 “Volta ao fundamento”, 1. TdL e sua funesta ambigüidade, Por que a inversão de base da TdL: o choque do contato com a pobreza. This is what elsewhere we have termed “ethical indignation”.
312 Clodovis Boff, “Volta ao fundamento”, 1. TdL e sua funesta ambigüidade, Por que a inversão de base da TdL: o choque do contato com a pobreza.
313 “Everything to the greater glory of the poor, even God”, “Volta ao fundamento”, 1. TdL e sua funesta ambigüidade. Cedimento ao espírito da Modernidade. One might feel that a critique of modernity from one whose theological method is so deeply enmeshed in modernity is rather questionable.
314 For a different, and in my opinion, much more nuanced and critical reading of Aparecida, see João Batista Libanio, Conferências Gerais do Episcopado Latino-Americano do Rio de Janeiro a Aparecida, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2007. Libanio discusses Aparecida between pp.41-125, with a final balance, pp.127-137. For him, a major problem with the document is precisely what Clodovis seems to praise – its starting point. To start with the hermeneutic mediation and then go to the reading of reality means, for Libanio, that the reality can never be really encountered, only a version of it that suits the judge.
315 See the preceding note for the reference to Libanio’s comments on Aparecida. The socio-analytic mediation here clearly follows the hermeneutic mediation, one of the problems with Clodovis’ work we mentioned above.
316 Clodovis Boff, “Volta ao fundamento”, final section, Saída.
317 Ibid. See also Clodovis Boff, “Retorno à arche...”, p.182
318 As Clodovis puts it rather nicely in “Retorno à arche...”, p.180, “Liberation Theology needs to be seen not as a theology apart, but as a part of theology.”
up before being crushed by it, as history does not tire of showing.”

This warning is, it seems to me, crucial. Even if one disagrees with Clodovis that what he describes is actually happening, at least the risk must be acknowledged.

The first response to Clodovis' article that I will consider is that from his brother, Leonardo. Stylistically, this article moves somewhat uneasily between an academic response and a slightly exasperated older brother sorting out his younger sibling. Moreover, it does not always entirely address the points which lie behind the Clodovis' rhetoric. In this his very title is interesting: “For the poor against the narrowness of method.” The first implication here is that, if Leonardo is “for the poor” Clodovis is somehow against them, at least as a possible source for theology. This is, to put it mildly, somewhat unworthy and nothing in either article offers evidence that this is true. On the other hand, though, the title does point to the real point of disagreement. Just how much does method matter?

Leonardo begins by briefly criticising Clodovis' treatment of modernity and his a-critical reading of Aparecida. He then goes on to develop five points. The first asks who will benefit from the criticisms. The accusation here is that Clodovis' article will be read by the opponents of liberation theology as supporting their cause, and a sign that one of the key figures in that theology has abandoned it, which will give them added impetus in their desire to destroy liberation theology and its insights. This may well be true, but is of course largely irrelevant. The fact that other people use his work for their own ends would not in itself render Clodovis' argument wrong.

Perhaps more tellingly here, Leonardo criticises his brother's own methodology, arguing that he tends towards “a pagan-Aristotelian and neo-scholastic theology, methodologically rigorous, but at heart formalist, incapable of taking account of the challenge that the poor represent for Christian thought and practice.” At this level, there is a serious methodological disagreement.

Leonardo bases his response on what he sees as three “absences” in Clodovis' thought. The first of these is the absence of a proper theology of

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319 Clodovis Boff, “Volta ao fundamento”, final section, Saída.
320 Certainly on the level of pastoral engagement and the sort of theology which is used there, I would suggest that he has a reasonable point, as Susin and Hammes will note. Remembering what he had to say about the problems of religious life, it is best to see the threat he feels on that level and not on the level of 'professional' theologians whom it seems to me his article rather misrepresents. I do not find the problems he alludes to in my readings of them, although, as I have frequently mentioned, the danger is undoubtedly present.
321 It is worth recalling here Libanio's criticism of Teologia e Prática, in REB 38/151 (1978), pp.544-549, where he draws attention to the potential dangers of an over-emphasis on epistemology. Leonardo's critique is similar, “Pelos pobres...” 1. Cui podest? A quem interessam as críticas.
323 However, it is worth noting that both Clodovis and his opponents operate from a very similar starting point, and both fail to take into account the possibilities offered by a relational and contemplative understanding of theoria.
Chapter Four  Clodovis Boff – Keeping The Dialectical Tension

324 The basic argument here is that Clodovis does not recognise that God became human as a poor man, Jesus of Nazareth. I think that Leonardo is wrong here, and that he has failed to understand Clodovis' point properly. Against Clodovis, who argues that “the Christ-principle always includes the poor, whilst the poor-principle does not necessarily include Christ”, 325 Leonardo responds that “whoever encounters the poor, infallibly encounters Christ.” 326 The response to this, of course, can only be, as the Master of the Sentences would have had it, *Sic et Non*, yes and no. The two are not talking about the same thing.

Interestingly, it is Leonardo whose argument here is based on a presumption of faith. For the person of faith, for the Christian, and therefore the theologian, the encounter with Christ is an encounter with the poor. But Clodovis would have no disagreement with that at all – indeed it is perhaps precisely his point. 327 Only with a starting point in faith is it possible to encounter the poor as, to use my term in this work, an 'icon' of Christ. Clodovis is making, however, what is perhaps a more banal, though still true point. It is an observable fact that one can be deeply committed to the poor without having any Christian faith. Thus, as a matter of simple fact, one can encounter the poor without in any direct and conscious way encountering Christ. In this sense, Clodovis is perhaps more faithful to the principles of liberation theology, for he is arguing that starting from a position of faith in Jesus Christ, one must necessarily encounter this same Jesus in and through the poor, and thus the poor are of fundamental importance to theology, precisely because they can be iconic in this way.

Leonardo perhaps relies on a form of Rahner's anonymous Christianity. 328

The second absence which Leonardo notes is that of the meaning of the poor in liberation theology. Here he accuses Clodovis of ignoring 'the transparency' of the poor, as indeed we might say “icons” of the Incarnated and Crucified one. 329 He thinks that in this article Clodovis is returning to a merely economic understanding of poverty. In general this seems to me unsustainable from the text, and as I pointed out in my analysis of Clodovis' article, part of his point is to safeguard the poor from the burdens

324 Leonardo Boff, “Pelos pobres...”, 2. Ausência de uma teologia da encarnação
325 Clodovis Boff, “Volta ao fundamento”, II Aparecida: a Limpidez do princípio, Instrutivo confronto entre Aparecida e TdL.
326 Leonardo Boff, “Pelos pobres...”, 2. Ausência de uma teologia da encarnação
327 Cf. Clodovis Boff, *Teologia e Prática*, p.305 “The 'poor person' reveals himself or herself as being the sacrament of Christ' only for those who attend to such a manifestation. And that is called 'Faith'.


329 Leonardo Boff, “Pelos pobres...”, 3. Ausência do sentido de pobre na Teologia da Libertação
of liberation theologians, and to recognise the poor as human beings marked by many features, good and bad. His aim is to avoid the idolisation of the poor, something which it is not always clear Leonardo succeeds in doing so well, though clearly he wishes to do so.

The third criticism which Leonardo makes is that Clodovis lacks a theology of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{330} Though his suggestion that Clodovis' emphasis is on what he calls the 'sarcic' Christ seems both untrue and unhelpful to his cause (since it is the fleshly Christ who is precisely the poor Christ), the general point seems to me to be true. Clodovis' theology is fundamentally Christomonic, which weakens its ability to deal with the encounter with the other. Here Leonardo is right, for a good theology of the Spirit would certainly be of assistance to Clodovis. In this he is undoubtedly an heir, and thus to some extent a victim of the neo-Thomist position he espouses.\textsuperscript{331} Leonardo's final verdict on Clodovis is somewhat damning. He writes

\begin{quote}
Clodovis' methodological articulation is excessively rational, following a Cartesian methodology in the line of the 'geometrical mode'. It may be adequate for an “Aristotelian type” of theology or an “Althusserian type”, but not for a Christian theology that, because of the incarnation is never allowed to separate God and humanity and Jesus, from the poor.\textsuperscript{332}
\end{quote}

This is rather unjust, not to mention self-contradictory, since neither an Aristotelian nor an Althusserian theology, if they exist in pure forms, would make the kind of separation which Leonardo seems to imply they do. Indeed, Clodovis is generally careful to stress that when he does separate out, it is for methodological and theoretical purposes in order to reunite, and that in practice the distinctions he makes are hard to sustain. He certainly does not separate God from the poor in the sense of saying the two have nothing to do with each other, but he properly separates them in the sense precisely that the poor are not God. This is where the core of the disagreement must be located. Leonardo obviously does not want to say this either, but what in his method will permit him to avoid doing so? This is the question which remains unanswered.

The final article I wish to consider, that of Susin and Hammes, is much more temperate than either of the preceding ones, and is marked by a genuine attempt at dialogue, even if also critical. They note that Clodovis'
article needs to be read with care, but that it is hard to follow its developments, as it contains “affirmations ex abrupto, without any back-up”. This is a fair point. They further note that even if what he says is true for those in pastoral leadership roles, this is not the case for theology done “in the spirit and method of liberation theology”.

However, in general their desire is to deal with the fundamental theological or methodological issues at stake, or, as they put it, “the manner in which faith expresses its rationality in a context of structural poverty and injustice present in the greater part of today's world”. Perhaps the major critique they have to make of Clodovis is what they see as the linearity of his method, which is thus also a critique of his hermeneutics, or lack of it, as they see it.

They argue that Clodovis starts from a desire to find “the one foundation” which will ensure that theology is Christian. This may be pushing things a bit far, as it seems to me that Clodovis does want a foundation, but not necessarily a single one (except, of course, in the rather obvious sense that a catch-all term like “faith” can be seen as a foundation – but faith is already a plural concept). Nevertheless, there is some truth in what they say. Clodovis' desire to establish, for example, theology of the political on a firm base, to avoid it becoming empty sloganeering, means that he is susceptible to over-emphasising those elements of a theological method which act against this, to the detriment of others. In doing so, though, he does run the risk of his foundation being non-relational, and thus static, something he wants to avoid.

Thus, although he stresses dialectics, it is true, as they note, that he has precious little room for the hermeneutic circle, which, unlike the pastoral cycle, allows one to start anywhere. They also turn to Clodovis' statement about Christ and the poor, which I quoted above in the treatment of Leonardo's article. They argue, correctly I think, that, with a hermeneutical approach, “one can set out from Christ to arrive at the poor, but one can also set out from the poor to arrive at Christ”. They disagree with Clodovis, because, they say, a misunderstanding of Christ will not lead one to the poor, whilst “a real understanding of the poor in a practical perspective means the encounter with Christ, even if theoretically still not

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333 Susin and Hammes, “Questão de Fundamentos”, p.278
334 As is their criticism of Clodovis' treatment of Rahner and Sobrino, p.279. It is good that they make this critique, since, as was noted above, the intemperate outbursts against Rahner and Sobrino do nothing to further Clodovis' case, but rather weaken it.
335 Susin and Hammes, “Questão de Fundamentos”, p.281. In all these points it would be hard to find anything to disagree with.
336 Ibid., p.280
337 Ibid., p.284
338 Ibid., p.286
339 Ibid., p.286
known”. Clearly, this is not actually an argument against Clodovis at all, since there is nothing here he would disagree with. One cannot place misunderstandings and correct understandings on the same level – that is simply bad hermeneutics. The encounter with Christ in the poor, as we saw above, can only happen if one has a hermeneutical key which allows one to read that encounter in such a way. Christian theologians who wish to be faithful to the Scriptures and the long tradition of the churches must read it this way, but that is not Clodovis' point.

But this particular example may not render their attack on the linearity of Clodovis' method irrelevant or wrong. One of the key points they make is that he seems to ignore the ideological presuppositions already present in what he originally called Theology 1 or later the first moment of theology. Thus, while they would agree that liberation theology is a particular theology, they note that “any Theology is always a theology and never the Theology”. This is indeed a problem with Clodovis. His method does not compel him to assume that there is a given theology which is the universal theology to which all other particular theologies contribute, but there are times when it appears that this is the case, not least in the article under discussion. He would probably want to argue that theology is the rational articulation of the depositum fidei, of faith as it has been passed on through the Church. To insist on him specifying the precise content of that would be unnecessary and unreasonable, since he is not trying to exclude but include. The question which Susin and Hammes pose is whether, though, his method does not lead more to exclusion, by ruling out as legitimate theology anything which does not follow the method he lays out. Again, Clodovis' theology runs the risk of being non-relational, and to that extent, unable to enter into an encounter with the poor or with God.

One way in which they think he does this is in his neglect of context, of loci theologici. For them, because contexts (of those who produce and read the text) are so vital, “the apostolic faith transmitted by the Church' cannot be placed over against the 'Church of the Poor' who look to the Scriptures and find Christ; there is a continuity of the sensus fidei and of recognition”. This is the problem of the dialectical method, which seeks contradiction and tension where there is unity and essential agreement. Clodovis needs to say that what we might call the “Magisterial Church” (ecclesia docens) is, dialectically, in agreement and conflict with the Church of the poor. Susin and Hammes, for their part, want to emphasise

340 Ibid., p.286  
341 See also Susin and Hammes, “Questão de Fundamentos”, p.287  
342 Ibid., p.287  
343 Ibid., p.289  
344 Ibid., p.292. Cf., Juan Luis Scannone, “Situación de la Problemática del Método”, pp.263-264, who argues that the poor cannot be treated as a locus theologicus in the traditional sense, but that it would be better to speak of them as a “hermeneutical locus”.
the continuity between the two. These are clearly fundamentally different methodological starting points.

Susin and Hammes are clear that the place where God continues to reveal himself today “is the place of the poor, flesh and blood, a place of an alterity that is simultaneously incontestable and irreducible, where the reserve of transcendence and mystery is maintained”. Moreover, in order for a theology “to be a 'Christian' theology and not sophistry or idolatry, this recognition of and conversion to the privileged place of the poor without favour and even merit is *articulum stantis vel cadentis*”. What Susin and Hammes do very well is present the fundamental point of conflict between two different ways of looking at the theological task. It could be summed up as a meeting between the hermeneutical circle and the pastoral cycle. The first emphasises the mutuality of the encounter between 'reader' and 'text', so that there is no privileged starting point. The second is necessarily more linear – judgement can only be passed on what is seen, and action can only effectively arise from a correct judgement. The real question for my purposes is not which is the better method for doing theology in general, or liberation theology in particular. Rather, it is which of these two approaches will better allow a transformative encounter between the theologian and the poor, the other who will challenge and command, to use Levinas' terms.

The debate has continued with a reply from Clodovis. He responds to the two articles cited here by Leonardo and Susin and Hammes and a third, by Francisco de Aquino Júnior. However, although this reply certainly clarifies some points, it offers nothing new, since Clodovis’ point is precisely to re-iterate, even more strongly, his critique of current trends in liberation theology which he sees as placing the poor above Christ. Because the critique has been read as *ad hominem* (or perhaps more generally *ad homines*), the responses have been largely in kind.

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345 *Ibid.*, p.293 The language of alterity is not accidental. Susin is one of the Brazilian theologians who has most worked with Levinas. In an early article, Luiz Carlos Susin, “O Esquecimento do “Outro” na História do Ocidente”, *REB* 47/188 (1987), pp.820-838, he says: “Levinas has been arousing interest through the possibilities of a conflictive interpretation both in terms of a critical denunciation of Hegelian totality, of totalitarian egology and ontology, and in terms of the announcing of another anthropology and another significance for ontology and for subjectivity starting from alterity.” (p.821)

346 Susin and Hammes, “Questão de Fundamentos”, p.295

347 Clodovis Boff, “Volta ao Fundamento: Réplica”, published in *REB* 68/272. I was sent an electronic version of this article by Sr Lina Boff. This version is available via a link at www.geocities.com/nythamar/liberation.html (accessed 8/1/09)

348 Francisco de Aquino Júnior, “Clodovis Boff e o método da Teologia da Libertacao: uma aproximação crítica”, *REB* 68/271, pp.597-613

Boff continues to claim that in fact many liberation theologians have left aside the centrality of Christ and placed the poor in their place. He asserts that “I have not broken with, I do not want to nor can I break with the cause at the heart of the theology of liberation.” However, he then goes on to rebut the charges made against him in as far as they actually concern methodology. He notes the danger which I have constantly had in mind throughout this work that “the social agent, deprived of an explicit faith, functioning as a critical and stimulating moment for his or her action, ends up distancing himself or herself from the poor themselves, or manipulating them in function of their own ideology or personal interests”.

The article does not seem likely to advance the debate very far, since the positions are clear. Boff is convinced that only if liberation theology learns to return to the source of its being in a more direct and effective way and only if it learns humility will it continue to be able to play a role. He sees this role as being one of insisting on the liberative dimension of all theology, but recognising that this is a dimension, and a posterior one to the Christic dimension which is primary and foundational. On the other hand, his critics want to argue that this is what liberation theology does and that it is precisely through listening and attending to the poor that this is done. It seems clear to me that the critics have not really listened to the heart of Clodovis’ warning, but that it has been made easy for them not to by the rather belligerent and accusatory tone in which much of is couched. However, if they do not heed what he says, it seems to me that his negative appraisal of liberation theology’s future will probably be proved correct.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined in some detail the theological method of Clodovis Boff. My purpose was to see if this method allowed for an encounter between the poor and the theologian, so that the poor could remain the other who calls and demands. In other words, is the poor person subsumed within the method to such an extent that they will cease to be other and become instead part of the totality of theological method, an idol for the theologian? To the extent that the theologian invests him or herself in that method, are the poor then brought into the totality of the theologian? Or, alternatively, does the method itself allow for the in-breaking of what is outside it in a significant way? Is there a way to keep the window open,

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350 Boff, “Réplica”, third introductory paragraph.
351 Ibid., section in first part headed O pobre inclui Cristo, mas Este, antes ainda, inclui o pobre
352 Ibid., section in third part entitled A atual TdL corre o risco de ficar superada. However, it should also be noted that in the following section, Refundar a TdL sobre o Cristo da fé, fundamento perene de toda teologia, he insists “Today we need more liberation theology and not less”. Clodovis remains, as he says at the beginning of the article, deeply committed to the poor, and it would be a travesty to deny this.
353 By significant, I mean that it is not only theoretically possible that such a challenge takes place, but that in practice it actually happens.
to allow the poor to be iconic, revelatory of God? To put it in Clodovis Boff's own phrase, is the “hermeneutic” privilege of the poor maintained?\(^354\)

My reading of Clodovis Boff suggests that to some extent the latter is the case, and that the poor are enabled to irrupt into the world of the theologian. In each of the three mediations, there is room for this encounter to take place, although at least in *Teologia e Prática*, this may only be in a mediated way. The socio-analytic mediation allows for the other to enter into the debate and to command by presenting, or perhaps more accurately, re-presenting reality. As I say, this is mediated: the voice of the other is heard through the voice of a third, who is however still other. So, against Milbank, I would argue that the social sciences, for all the problems which he rightly sees in them, can still perform the task of alterity for theology, allowing the voice of the 'poor, widow and orphan' to be heard precisely in terms of their social status as poor, widow and orphan.\(^355\) Thus, iconicity is retained, at least to the extent that it is the other who is allowed to make known what it is to be poor, widow or orphan.

The hermeneutical mediation will allow for the Other, God as Absolute Other and the poor as other privileged and preferentially chosen and loved by God, to address the reality. This demands a particular reading of the Word, which can be justified as rational and reasonable. If that reading is accepted, the Word of God as understood in terms of God's otherness and God's predilection for the poor can pass judgement on the reality, both on the causes of poverty and as a means of responding to the cry of the poor.

Finally, the dialectic between theory and praxis, more than simply permitting this encounter with the other, seems to demand it. In many of the articles I looked at, it is clear that this is what was actually happening, that Boff's encounter with the poor was leading him to questions and to reactions. The challenge of the other in their otherness changed him, we might say.

Nevertheless, problems remain. What I have just stated is true in principle, and I would argue that in the best examples of liberation theology in practice too. But clearly, it depends on assumptions being made and approaches taken which are actually outside the method itself, especially in terms of the hermeneutic mediation. The dialectic mediation can enable an encounter with the poor. To the extent that Boff is happy to remain in the dialectic in the precariousness of the encounter, without any synthesis, his method may have real value. However, for a theological (and thus in his terms theoretical) method, there is, for example, the lack of a good concept

\(^{354}\) Clodovis Boff, *TMT*, pp.178-180

\(^{355}\) This therefore also points to the limits of the social sciences, since the poor are not reducible to their social status. Thus there is always a “more” which is needed.
of theory, especially in terms of the Patristic *theoria*, which would give more solid grounding to the relational nature of his methodology. Especially later on, Boff constantly emphasises the governing or dominant pole of the dialectics, which is, for him, faith. Although methodologically this makes sense, for as long as he remains with faith in its positive sense as *fides quae*, and in as far as the poor and their situation are the other part of the dialectic, they remain subject to the positivity of faith. This would be acceptable, were it not for the fact, as Susin and Hammes noted, that all expressions of this positivity are ideologically marked. This was something that was seen, for example, in the discussion of the Second Council of Nicaea. Here perhaps Milbank's Nietzschean critique may have some bearing. Is the actual expression and understanding of faith really free from the “will to power”? In order to support and strengthen Boff’s method in this aspect, I return in the final concluding chapter to Levinas and Marion to see if they can bring any additional safeguards.

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356 See the discussion on this point above, p.235
357 See, for example, Clodovis Boff, “Retorno à arche”, p.156, p.172, p.185
358 Boff seems to recognise that there are problems with his commitment to faith as *fides quae* in Boff, “Réplica”, section entitled “O “retorno dialético” da ótica do pobre sobre a fé”, acknowledging the critique of Aquino Junior.
359 Susin and Hammes, “Questão de Fundamentos”, p.287
360 This was recognised all too well by Juan Luis Segundo. See, for example, his *The Liberation of Dogma*, (trans. Philip Berryman), Maryknoll, Orbis, 1992 (orig. Spanish, 1989)