

I like reversible jackets, have no objection to God's having built reversible processes into chemistry and physics, and just love the arrangement of a church I preached in: it had reversible pews; and the people, after the "We Face the Altar" half of the worship, flipped the pewbacks and sat in the opposite direction for "We Face the World," the second half of the worship. But beyond those exceptions, I'm suspicious of the notion of reversibility: in language and the logic of economics and politics, its effects are, in the main, pernicious. This thinksheet, as its title indicates, worries about this in *liberation theology*.

1. Translating is not like going from one room into another: it's like moving through an osmotic membrane, the meaning on the sending language "pushing" (Greek, "osmos") into the receiving language to equalize significance on both sides. Good translating (to return to the rooms analogy) is being in both rooms at once; it's being aware of the first room when you've entered the second, and it's returning occasionally to the first room to refresh your memory--as, in worship, reading the Bible in the original (as Jews do, and almost no Christians) before "targuming" it in the congregation's language. Current dialog with Jews must include Christians' admitting that early Christian thinking was doubly corrupted and distorted by inability to read "the Bible," i.e., "the OT": for the first few centuries, the Greek and Latin Fathers not only could not think in Hebrew, they couldn't even read it--which (1) confined them in the second room, viz., the Greek language, and (2) hindered intelligent dialog with Jews. The NT itself is almost entirely dependent on this second-hand access to "the Bible." The illusion can be put this way: The LXX (Greek OT) is the Word of God because what it means, the Hebrew means: the meaning is reversible. No viciousness intended: it was an ineludable cultural ignorance of the times, Hellenistic Jews (e.g., Philo) being caught almost as badly in the same illusion. In American Protestant fundamentalism, it's this: "If the Saint James Bible was good enough for Paul and Silas, it's good enough for me."

2. The reification of metaphor is a further language instance of the fallacious use of reversibility. Since Jesus says "I am the door," every door is Jesus; Jesus is Savior, so every door is a gate of new life, salvation, liberation, so scratch Jesus. Right, nobody "thinks" that; but many "think" they "have" "salvation" through the "atonement" (reified through eight metaphors which, in the NT and unlike much Christian theology, do not forget they are metaphoric clues, pointers).

3. As to what's now being called "quality of life," inclusive of both character and situation, Deuteronomism is a biblical and postbiblical instance of the misapplication of the principle of reversible propositions: (1) God blesses the pious-good with material abundance, (2) I'm rich, so (3) God has blessed me; and, since you're poor, (4) God has not blessed you, so (5) you must be impious-bad. God is punishing you with poverty--as he punished the Jews with their historic disasters, including the Holocaust (think how wicked they must have been to deserve that!). Here is perversity become obscenity; but the internal logic is impeccable and requires, for its correction, strenuous application of the logical principle of propositional irreversibility.

4. Ernesto Cardenal teaches his peasants that "Yahweh is liberation" (p.6, P.&S. Scharper edd., THE GOSPEL IN ART BY THE PEASANTS OF SOL-ENTINAME, Orbis/84), and it gets simple-mindedly reversed into "Liberation is Yahweh": the mystery and energy of the biblical God pass

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over into revolutionary mysticism. Not that I object to teaching peasants to beat their ploughs into swords; I got fired for suggesting (1967, NEW YORK TIMES) that American blacks do exactly that as a necessary, and hopefully sufficient, threat to the white-power psyche. What I do object to, with all my heart and mind, is the logical error, moral corruption, and political disaster of imagining that one can, without essential remainder, transpose from the religious paradigmatic experience to the political paradigmatic experience. Illusion: Since "Liberation is Yahweh," nothing essential is lost (i.e., there is no essential remainder) if one forgets Yahweh and is faithful to "Liberation" (which, thus, has become a holophrase for God).

5. Love is the root of this holophrastic tragedy. You can't identify with the poor unless (1) you are with them, (2) you listen to them, (3) you use their language, (4) you translate the gospel, as best you can, into a cross between their language and the biblical-historical Christian language, and (5) you preach to them in this hybrid tongue. I've no problem with any of that; in fact, it applies to all preaching, teaching, counseling. The problem comes when you forget that this hybrid tongue is pragmatic, utilitarian, contextual; and this amnesia seduces you into (1) loss of the sense of the provisional character of your theology, (2) teaching the hybrid as the gospel itself, and thus (3) exposing your hearers and even yourself into being coopted by those who correlate "Liberation" with nothing (viz., most of the followers of Christian liberationists) or with Marx (viz., communist ideologues, for whom "God" long ago--indeed, in Marx himself--passed, without remainder, over into "History" in the marxian version of German Idealism's "World-Spirit" evolving freedom).

6. To fight off going to Nicaragua (as so many of my friends have), I've been exposing myself to current liberationist N. Christian writings; and paragraph #5 (above) is one result. No need for massive documentation of my point. Here's an instance of what concerns me as Christian and as theologian: A Christian "base community" so far slipped over into worshipping the god "Liberation" as to experience, as illogical and inauthentic, grace at meals--so gave up this practice. Since it had come to understand that liberation was the Bible's message--now that it "got the message," it seemed illogical and inauthentic to continue daily Bible study; so it began to alternate, one day the Bible and the next day readings from Marx, Lenin, Castro. Then, finding the latter more exciting than the former, the community gave up Bible-reading. Note the process: Literature, viz., the Bible, had passed over (in one aspect of its message) into Life, the life of the base community understood contextually; then it was discovered that other Literature, viz., Marx-Lenin-Castro, was discovered to speak more directly to the context (their Sitz-im-Leben); then this Literature #2 became the community's Literature #1, its sacred text--as it is always and everywhere under Communism (though the third element, Castro, is different beyond Latin Am. influence). Life is now shaped primarily by Literature #2, and Christianity disappears into Communism--exactly what the Pope fears and denounces. (Sandinista literature claims Christian/Marxist sharing but exhibits, in its locutions, the Communist philosophical-ideological take-over. This subtle process is laid out over and over again in the writings of Lenin and Trotsky.) A N. official (p.194): "My (Christian) faith was transformed into something else, into political consciousness, the revolutionary experience, Sandinismo."