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Teaching religious studies to undergraduates who are not majors — something I do some of the time — would be unimaginable without the use of social theory. Studying religion as a social force or a cultural movement is all but impossible without some organized critical purchase on what has shaped and is shaping our society and our world. In the end, religious studies is more or less a social science, and naive realism in the social sciences is or should be disappearing over the intellectual horizon. Social theory in my religious studies classroom of twenty-five or so traditional-age and overwhelmingly Catholic students is not an issue. It's part of any social science discipline.

But theology, with which I spend the other half of my classroom time, is a different animal, maybe even a whole zoo! What can social theory possibly have to do with this presumably intrareligious “discipline,” if that’s the word, that lives and breathes the heady air of divine revelation? Here lies the initially remedial work of theological education. The undergraduate beginner may know full well that philosophy or astrophysics is a discipline about which s/he knows nothing. The difference with beginning theology is that most everyone thinks s/he knows what religion is, and knows that theology is “thinking about religion.” Dispelling these illusions is propaedeutic to theology. In fact, “theology” itself, that which is to be taught, is the skill of reflecting on the life and act of faith. In itself, this does not require any in–depth knowledge of the history or the taxonomy of the academic study of religion. The life of faith and the act of faith, however broadly construed, are the focus of the undergraduate theology classroom. The performance of a life of faith is a mysterious and humbling process to observe, and a challenging and even troubling posture to attempt. It is not in the end clarified either as a social phenomenon or as a personal commitment through knowing the history of theology or being able to read Greek or Hebrew. On the other hand, its curiously “productive non-contemporaneity” (a phrase of J. B. Metz) is put into much sharper relief to the degree that we and our students have exercised the utmost sophistication in the analysis and critique of the society in which we or the object of our inquiry actually live. And here is where a sound grasp of critical social theory is revealed as the postmodern handmaid of theology.

One cannot, of course, just launch into “doing theology.” The required obliqueness of good theological reflection in the undergraduate classroom arises from the fact that most if not all the students have no background skills in philosophy and social theory when they come to the study for the first time. In terms of technique this usually means that the instructor must somehow back into the narrowly theological topics. Certainly, this is what I try to do myself, beginning — as they say — where the students are and moving on from there. Nature and grace, justification, predestination, salvation by faith and/or works, all such topics are just a latter–day Slough of Despond when approached directly with the average 19–year old. Inviting them to talk about themselves, their peers, and their world, however, is a far easier task and one that leads directly into social analysis. From this point it is not far to a genuine social theory.

The critical social theories I mostly employ myself are those of Hegel and Marx, with a good dose of the Frankfurt School (especially the later, liberated Habermas), perhaps because much if not all of my teaching is a reflection of my preference for liberation theologies. Even if I were not a fellow–traveler with real liberation theologians, I hope I would have the sense to see that the “hermeneutical circle” approach first employed in the work of the Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo is a perfect tool for making the link between life, social theory, and theological reflection, particularly when tempered by Gustavo Gutierrez’s classic put–down, “theology comes after.” For Segundo, the starting point (always merely epistemological in any circular process, of course) is daily life in its unexamined complexity, but nothing of moment happens without the immediate introduction of “critical reflection on praxis” (again, Gutierrez’s definition of theology) that requires the adoption of critical social theory. In the base Christian

community, this social theory is surely mostly unthematized as the faithful but often unschooled people uncover the depth structures of Marxist theory in a Freirean awareness of their structural oppression. In other words, though this would certainly be unacceptable to the Vatican and Cardinal Ratzinger in 1984, liberation theology didn't so much teach Marxism as it simply confirmed the truth of Marxist analysis.

The implicit critical social theories of the base Christian communities have to become conscious objects of exploration in the theology classroom. This is obviously easier to do where the subject can uncover oppressive social structures in his or her own community. Affluent young Catholics in the Northeast cannot immediately do this in ways that poor social theory is sometimes employed strategically in order to, in more obvious contexts, raise awareness of the shape and strength of alienating social forces. The hope is, of course, that this knowledge is then transferable to the subject's own much-more subtly constructed social relations. When we study structural oppression among obviously and cruelly disadvantaged groups, women in general, racial minorities, and gays and lesbians in our classroom mostly get the point. So do those with some environmental concerns, and which young person doesn't at least have some anxieties about the future of our world? Straight white males on a fast career track are the hardest sell, but metanoia is expressly on the table. The laughter is always tinged with just a little nervousness when I tell them that if they don't make the preferential option for the poor, they are all going to Hell. The reference to Hell is just a joke, of course. But the nervousness is critically important as a catalyst for looking at the world with fresh eyes.

To try to make all this a little more concrete, let me say that teaching theology is teaching the art of reflecting theologically, not teaching about theology. At least this is true for the undergraduate, and the less likely it is that the student will go further in theological studies, the more important it is to do theological reflection than to learn about its history or to explore the *quaestiones disputatae*

. Once again, liberation methodology lights the way. Theological reflection is a process of thinking about the relationships between faithful conviction, the substantive claims that the texts of the tradition make upon one, and the action that must follow if human flourishing in the world we call our home is to be maintained and enriched. It is all these things because the human person in human society within a world that is a place we share with other created beings is the first object I suppose I can be both forgiven and pigeon-holed for insisting on the theological priority of the doctrines of creation and incarnation). In the end, because this world is where we begin and end, critical social theory is an indispensable moment in the process of theological reflection. For Segundo and Gutierrez, it is the immediate partner to unthematized awareness of our lives and our world, at least epistemologically preliminary to hearing the word of God and reflecting on praxis. Scripture, after all, is only really freed to speak in the voice of God when the world in all its complexity, rather than some simplistic version of it, is the place in which we hear it. Good preaching depends upon this truth.

Working with undergraduates, I use far more works of fiction than I do theological writings, even those books on religion I have penned myself. I do this in the conviction that good teaching needs to unlock the capacity to think differently about the world in which our students will have to live, and the literary imagination is a fine way to help this to happen. But by the same token, critical awareness of society is equally indispensable, and employing sophisticated social theory is the way towards it. In my own school we like to talk about the two fundamental aims of undergraduate education as leading the student into the most critically sophisticated possible understanding of the complex world in which s/he lives, and bringing the student to the point where s/he will consciously choose their own most productive place in that world. So long as we live in a sinful world, it is appropriate to talk of “education for social transformation.” Theology as a word about God is destined to know that it does not know, which is fine and dandy. But theology as a word about faithful belonging in the world needs all the social theory and all the critical reflection that it can muster.