

THE ROLE OF CHRIST IN JON SOBRINO'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY: ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR BLACK THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA

By: Dr. Moeahabo P. Moila

Christology is a historical problem. The problem is as old as the Christian faith itself. Both New Testament and church history present to us a variety of interpretations of Jesus as saviour. Thus the history of christological controversies is long and complex. In other words there is no one normative christology but various christologies.

The source of this problem is twofold: Whereas all these christologies want to defend the truth of Christ, they differ radically in their interpretations of Jesus as saviour and in their perception of the human predicament or lostness. For instance the notion of Jesus as saviour means the word of judgement and forgiveness for Barth, Thielicke and Frei; the end of history for Pannenberg; a New Being who overcomes estrangement for Tillich and Gilkey; a new creation in whom all creatures are restored for Cobb, Knitter, Wingren; liberator of the oppressed for Sobrino, Schüssler, Fiorenza, Ruether, and Metz; and God's way of ruling in the world: king for Schillebeeckx

Further, theologians differ in their interpretation of the human predicament. It means unbelief, separation from transcendence for Barth, Thielicke and Frei; hopelessness, loss of historical faith for Pannenberg; alienation, estrangement, rebellion for Tillich and Gilkey; chaos, disorder, ecological distress for Cobb, Knitter and Wingren; oppression, inequality, bondage for Sobrino, Schüssler, Fiorenza, Ruether, Metz; isolation, the non-person, social breakdown for Schillebeeckx.

This article focuses on a christology which interprets Jesus as the liberator of the oppressed and on the view which perceives the human predicament as oppression, inequality and bondage. This kind of christology is more appropriate for our situation in South Africa and has enormous implications for Black Theology.

SOBRINO'S PERCEPTION OF THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

Sobrino explains the human predicament in terms of the political problems of freedom and equality. In his view political oppression, social dislocation, systematic injustice and economic alienation underline the human predicament. All these factors, he says, constitute sin. Thus he writes:

Justice concerns itself not only with separation but also with the relationship that arises among human beings as they divide into ruler and ruled, oppressor and oppressed. This type of relationship is formally sin, indeed sin par excellence, since it means the usurpation by a human being of that which is the prerogative of God alone. The consequences of this sin ...

unlike sins that are found in other types of human groupings ... is very clearly death. Injustice kills human beings, albeit slowly and through structures. Injustice reveals the full extent of the evil that is sin, for it repeats in the children of God what was done to the Son of God who was slain by injustice. (1984:77)

In his view, therefore, at stake is the death and life of human beings. He maintains that the poor are made in the image and likeness of God and that it is sin to dim or defile this likeness. God loves the poor and will defend them independently of their moral or personal condition. Hence he argues that "any ecclesial solidarity in the faith must of necessity pass through solidarity with the poor". (1985:37-38)

Sobrino's perception of the human predicament calls for the identification of theology with revolutionary action, albeit critically. For him orthopraxy takes precedence over orthodoxy, and theology is an effort to articulate the action of faith. In other words he does not perceive theology as primarily an effort to give a correct understanding of God's attributes or actions.

By calling for solidarity in faith and solidarity with the poor, Sobrino articulates his concern about the task of the church in the world. He believes that political involvement and specific commitments to working for the transformation of society are inescapable for all serious Christians. Thus he insists that Christians must hold to their faith in participating in the struggle for justice. In this way he equates the cause of Jesus Christ with the cause of social and political revolution. Human response to Christ for him is realized in the concrete arena of history with its economic, political and ideological options. He, therefore, perceives faith as a dynamic and a motivating invitation.

Christian faith for him should always relate to the context in which it lives by using the thought-forms of that particular culture.

SOBRINO'S CHRISTOLOGICAL METHOD

Sobrino's christological method can be understood only as it is studied in relations to his basic theological thinking. In other words it can be shown only by its congruity with his total outlook. His theological method is purely historical in that it reflects on the reality and faith of the church, the historical Jesus, and Jesus in relation to the father and his kingdom. Sobrino thus writes:

... theological thinking about the church must take as its objective starting point the present reality of the church insofar

as it is Christian, that is, insofar as it is a present manifestation of God. ... on the subjective side reflection must take as its starting point the ecclesial faith as it is practiced, or in other words, the concrete response given to the God who continually manifests itself. (1985:1-2).

In his view, "God's manifestation, at least in Latin America, is his scandalous and partisan love for the poor and his intention that these poor should receive life and thus inaugurate his kingdom". Thus he regards "the proper way of being conformed to God" as "to be concerned actively with the justice of the kingdom of God and with making the poor the basis of this concern". He regards this as "the great 'sign of the times', a sign which is a fact." (1985:2).

With this starting point Sobrino then tries to integrate everything that tradition has rightly developed concerning the church (e.g. christological statements made by the church). For him this starting point is essential both from historical and theological standpoints. The fact that we accept that the Spirit of God continually acts in history and in the church is for him the reason why we should "search continually for the manifestation of God in our times" and why the manifestation will take on new forms during new times. He perceives the history of the church as part of the being of the church which must play a part in theological reflection on the church. Thus he writes:

The history of the church is intrinsic to reflection on the nature of the church. The essence of the church does not exist unless it take historical form. This means that if the historical dimension is neglected ecclesiological thinking will not only be idealistic and triumphalistic on the one hand, and run a serious risk of irrelevance on the other, but it will also not even be theological. A church that lacks a history cannot be the object of a Christian ecclesiology. Consequently, whatever happens in the church ... predictably or unpredictably ... can and must a priori be a source of theological understanding". (1985:3),

It is, therefore, his contention that it is "fidelity to the signs of the times" which "has produced in the church a mission of evangelization that is directed to and centred on the poor". In turn this produced "cruel and systematic persecution, engendered hope against hope, courage in persecution, and faith in God, the father of Jesus, as the ultimate unshakable rock". (1985:4). This novelty, Sobrino argues has brought a recovery by the church of the memory of Jesus; it has made the church like Jesus. (1985:4). Hence he maintains that the source of the novelty is in the Spirit of Jesus. (1985). He perceives this

as “the ultimate justification for taking the reality of the church as the starting point for reflection on the church”. As he writes: *In this church God is continually manifesting himself, not only doctrinally, not only on the basis of his word in the past, but here and now through the word that is now being spoken*. (1985):

For this reason Sobrino believes that theology must be responsible in that it responds to the real world; be practical “because its motivating concern is not pure thought nor even pure truth but rather the building of the kingdom of God and of the church that will be at the service of this kingdom”, and be “done with pleasure in the Good News and with joy that there is salvation for the poor”. (1985:5). In short he defines theology as “a response of ‘gratitude’ because its starting point is the primordial christian experience that ‘something has been given to us’, viz. the mystery of God present in Jesus and in a church that is poor and is of the poor. (1985).

Given all this we can then say that in Sobrino’s basic theological thinking Jesus functions as both the source of the church’s power of renewal and as the one in whom the mystery of God is present in both Jesus who suffered and in a church that is poor and is of the poor. This point brings out very clearly Sobrino’s christological method in line with his total theological outlook. So, for him, christology is central to Christian faith in Jesus as saviour. In conformity with his basic theological thinking, the method of his christology is historical because Jesus is historical.

He articulates what he means by the historical Jesus by reflecting critically on the praxis of Jesus rather than on Jesus’s teachings or on the New Testament theologies of Jesus’ praxis. The traits of Jesus on which he reflects are the coming of God’s kingdom, Jesus’ faith, prayer, cross and resurrection. He regards all these as the characteristic features and events of Jesus’ life. His christology follows their chronological order in order to evaluate them “properly as historical realities.” (1978:354)

He thus defines the historical Jesus as the one who lived in the concrete context of history preaching the coming kingdom, denouncing injustice, realizing that kingdom in real life (i.e. the combat of a sinful world, conflict-ridden situation, a society divided into classes, and the cries of the oppressed.) He compares this situation of the historical Jesus with the present-day situation and this is the core of his christological methodology. Jesus for him is the way to liberation and because of this he says liberation theology is concentrated

in christology. In his view christology begins “from below rather than from above”. (1978:104)

On the other hand, however, he insists that christology must also be considered from the standpoint of dogma. (1978:311) He argues that it is essential to show that his christology purports to have an ecclesial significance, to point out the pastoral use of dogma and to show that dogmatic formulations are a historical necessity for a church composed of human beings. (1978:309) However, he maintains that the most urgent task of christology is not to re-interpret christological dogma directly, but to reposition the path and course of believers so that their lives can be a continuing, advancing discipleship, a following of Jesus, and a process of concrete filiation. (1978:342)

Sobrino’s christological methodology places much emphasis on the partiality of Jesus for the poor. The method starts from the lowly and aims at turning people into the children of God. As such for him the praxis of Jesus saves, and discipleship always means following Jesus. Jesus for him sides with the poor and the oppressed. For him, therefore, following on the historical Jesus is the precondition for reaching Jesus. Sobrino suggests a Christian lifestyle which commits itself to historical tasks, social militancy, the “praxis” of liberation, in the sense of integral, evangelical liberation that implies an overthrow of social, economic and political subservience.

SOBRINO’S INTERPRETATION OF JESUS AS SAVIOUR (SOTERIOLOGY)

Though Sobrino acknowledges that soteriology is a decisive factor for christology, he rejects the idea of using it as a starting point for christology. Thus the concept soteriology is not central in his christology. Instead he grounds soteriology in the two poles of the historical Jesus and the concrete historical context of the christian disciple (follower of Jesus). For him christology implies the soteriology of Jesus as active, praxis reality then and there in the life of Jesus and here and now in the life of the christian (the follower of Jesus). Jesus’s path is normative for the present-day praxis of His followers. As Sobrino writes:

Faith is always directed to the absolute of God and his kingdom. Faith in Jesus means accepting the fact that in him has been revealed the Son ... which is to say, the way to God. That can be done in orthodox confessions and cultic acclamations. But faith in Jesus attains its maximum radicality when we accept his path as a normative and traverse it. The most radical and most orthodox affirmation of faith in Jesus is

affirming that the faith of Jesus is the correct way to draw nearer to God and realize his kingdom, and then acting accordingly. (1978:108)

In Sobrino, therefore, ethical action is itself soteriological living today, and the only way one can have access to the saving value of Jesus Christ. Thus he writes:

So now we see that the fundamental moral value for the follower of Jesus is bringing about the kingdom of God, which means doing the work of re-creative justice and achieving brotherhood. It is through this effort that the follower of Jesus simultaneously becomes a just person and a child of God. (1989:173)

Sobrino's christology defines the nature of the quandary from which we need to be saved (sin, justice, oppression, and death) and the nature of God (love). The role of the Jews in Sobrino's christology is, therefore very important. They provided a social context for Jesus's praxis. Jesus preached the kingdom of God in this context which according to Sobrino was a sinful world which wanted nothing to do with the kingdom of God as Jesus proclaimed it. For Sobrino the Jews were a society divided into classes in conflict with one another. It was a conflict-ridden situation, that is, a historical situation riddled with conflict. Hence Sobrino perceives sin as the unwillingness to offer one's security to God, as that which manifests itself in using one's power for injustice, oppression, and putting others to death. In other words, for him, the Jews provided a situation in which Jesus had to fight injustice. As he writes:

To take an example from the life of Jesus that is pertinent here, we can certainly say that his "love" for people was universal in intent. But that love was translated into different concrete forms when he sought to make it a reality in the context of a historical situation riddled with conflict. In Jesus' case, his universal love was translated into a decision to be "with" the oppressed and to be "against" the oppressors, precisely so that his love could be "for" all of them. (1978:125)

Sobrino perceives faith as following Jesus and proclaiming of the kingdom of God. For him faith and service are inseparable just as personal sin does not exist without the social dimension. Thus he argues: "our filiation vis-à-vis God is necessarily mediated through brotherhood between human beings. Without the brotherhood, the filiation is wholly and purely idealistic." (1978:357)

The cross of Jesus is for Sobrino the solution to the problem of theodicy. Jesus' cross is also the cross of God. In it God suffered and died in solidarity with the oppressed which most christologies bypass. He insists that in order for christology

and soteriology to be radically historical and concrete, the cross of Jesus must not be bypassed.

He, therefore, argues that "it is in the praxis of love for neighbour that we experience the transcendence of the Christian God". (1978:173) "Without the praxis of love people cannot experience the God of Jesus, and hence they cannot pray to the God of Jesus". In short, for Sobrino Jesus' praxis has soteriological significance. For him "life according to the spirit of Jesus is the authentic Christian way of acting that makes us sons and daughters in and through the Son". (1978:XXV)

It is Sobrino's contention that the resurrection is the event that reveals God. (1978:240) Hence for him, "knowing the resurrection of Jesus is not something that is given once and for all. We keep creating our horizon of understanding, and we must keep alive our hope and praxis of love at every moment". (1978:257)

In short Sobrino's christology demands that faith be more concrete and effective and that it must transmit its efficacy to the oppressed. As he writes:

To know the truth is to do the truth, to know Jesus is to follow Jesus, to know sin is to take on the burden of sin, to know suffering is to free the world from suffering, to know God is to go to God in justice". (Hennelly 1979:35)

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOBRINO'S CHRISTOLOGY FOR BLACK THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Sobrino deals with a situation where people are divided into the powerful who live in luxury, and the suffering and oppressed. This is the fundamental problem with which Black theology in South Africa is trying to wrestle. In accordance with Sobrino's christology Black theology can deal with this problem effectively by reflecting on the praxis of the church in the historical situation of South Africa from a biblical perspective and by choosing to side with those who are suffering and oppressed in this country.

Sobrino's christology is by nature militant. It calls for the identification of theology with revolutionary action, albeit critically. Theology in this sense could be perceived as an effort to articulate the action of faith. This is what Black theology in South Africa is trying to do. In Black Theology orthopraxy should take precedence over orthodoxy. Here theology is not primarily an effort to give a correct understanding of God's attributes or actions.

Sobrino's christology is concerned with the task of the church in the world. It calls for solidarity in faith and solidarity with the poor in fighting misery, oppression and injustice. This affirms Black Theology's position which calls for both Black solidarity and the solidarity of the churches.

Sobrino's christology maintains that political involvement and specific commitments to working for the transformation of society are inescapable for all serious Christians. It insists that Christians must hold to their faith in participating in the struggle for justice. It equates the cause of Jesus Christ with the cause of social and political revolution. For it's human response to Christ is realized in the concrete arena of history with its economic, political and ideological options. It perceives faith as a dynamic power which is in dialogue or conflict with all unjust peoples or social structures. Thus Black Theology is a theology which protests against the oppression of blacks in South Africa.

Like Sobrino's christological methodology, Black Theology places much emphasis on the partiality of Jesus, it starts from the lowly and aims at turning people into God's children. In other words according to Black Theology the praxis of Jesus saves, and discipleship always means following Jesus through the struggle for justice in South Africa. It is of utmost importance for Black Theology to understand the oppressed and to fight for the transformation of South African society.

Sobrino's christology is significant for Black Theology in that it demands that faith be more concrete and effective and that it must transmit its efficacy to the oppressed. This means that the task of Black Theology is to make Christians conscious of their Christian responsibility in our South African society. South African black Christians need a spiritual and political exodus out of the situation of oppression toward a situation of liberation. (Boesak:137)

Following Christ means willingness to exploit the power of the gospel of liberation. This means willingness to challenge one's own oppressors, i.e. South African whites. Political involvement and specific commitments to working for the transformation of South African society are inescapable for all serious black Christians.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Jon Sobrino, S.J., *The True Church and the Poor*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1984)
Jon Sobrino, S.J. and Juan Hernandez Pico. *Theology of Christian Solidarity*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1985)
Jon Sobrino, S.J., *Christology at the Crossroads*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1978)
Hennelly, *At Theologies in Conflict* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979)
Cf.A. Boesak, *Liberation Theology in South Africa*, in *African Theology en Route*, ed. K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books)