

dialogue with other religious traditions would assume an altogether different and beneficial character. From its Biblical origins Judaism adopted a generally tolerant attitude to other religious traditions. What is possible today is for this spirit of tolerance to deepen and serve as a foundation for a common quest with like-minded adherents of other faiths for spiritual insight and religious truth.

- 1 Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, 29th Ed., Freiburg, 1952, no. 714.
- 2 C. Hallencreutz, *Dialogue and Community*, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977, 37.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 4 *Theological Investigation*, Vol 14, 1976, Ch. 17; Vol. 16, 1979, Ch. 13.
- 5 *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, ed. J. Neuner, Burns and Oates, 1967, 52-53.
- 6 *God Has Many Names*, London, The Macmillan Press, 1980, 48-49.
- 7 Deut. 4:19
- 8 Mal. 1:11
- 9 See *Encyclopaedia Talmudit*, Vol. III, 348-362.
- 10 See J. Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961.
- 11 See L. Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, New York, Behrman House, Inc., 1973, 286.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 287.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 See L. Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, 289-291

## Liberation Ethics and Idealism

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Liberation theologies provide a framework for serious reflection about systemic issues. But some liberation theologians, while urging social change, foster a guilt-inducing process which actually prevents both personal and social change. The tendency to moralize individual life is thus simply transposed into moralizing and collective issues. Absolute search for justice can even sometimes become offensive. The content of normative ethics is changed but the same guilt-inducing attitudes remain.

This article is concerned with the construction of a "liberation ethics" which goes beyond the mere transposition of idealistic moral philosophy to a new set of issues. It deals with the meaning of ethical principles and of sin, while constructing an ethics based on historical accounts of liberation. Interestingly, this approach is

consonant with the “different voice” of women in ethics, as it has been analysed by scholars like Carol Gilligan.

### *The Shortcomings of Idealistic Ethics*

The current approach in regard to ethics is usually “idealistic”. That means that certain images, concepts, ideals, and principles are assumed, which are supposed to determine how one is to act. Of course, these ideal principles do not directly dictate what should be done. But, according to idealists, these principles are able to inspire a practice through the mediation of correct reasoning using rational and empirical evidence. Such an approach is exemplified in the moral philosophy of Lawrence Kohlberg. For him, the apex of ethical development consists of letting one’s existence be inspired by general and universal principles such as love, justice, and human dignity. Popular ethics also relies heavily on an idealistic perspective; when someone says: “This is not truly love,” that person refers implicitly to a general and ideal image of love.

A first criticism of idealism stems from philosophy and social sciences. It consists of questioning the origins and conditioning of general principles as well as the biases of rational or empirical analysis. The theory of ideologies emphasizes that ideal images and mental structures are the products of social groups. When someone claims to be directed by a principle of justice, an ideological critique will examine how this idea of justice is connected to a specific social group or class. Far from being universal, any idea of justice can be traced to particular social origins. To be inspired by a principle of justice may amount finally to being guided by a representation which has been culturally produced in a given society and/or social class. We are sometimes reluctant to recognise this type of conditioning when principles related to justice or love are involved. But the theory of ideological conditioning may become clearer if we consider concepts such as what it means to be a man or to be a woman. In our culture it has become obvious that the images of masculinity and femininity are socially produced. To be directed by them will not lead to greater universality, but rather to deeper implication in a particular historical and social conditioning. It is possible to trace the same dynamics of conditioning with general concepts such as justice, love responsibility, commitment, honesty, human dignity, etc.

Analogous reasoning may be applied to concrete analysis and to their empirical support. Many moralists claim that their argument-

ation relies upon a universal rationality and that they speak of “things as they are.” There again the theory of ideologies as well as cognitive psychology challenges the so-called direct approach of “reality”. It can be shown that our analyses never depend upon “things as they are” or upon a universal rationality, but upon a certain interpretation and a certain construction of the world. On that account, it is necessary to recognize that the arguments of moralists (and of any people seeking to justify their attitudes) are relative. They are conditioned by human psycho-biology; by cultural representations shared within a society, a subgroup or a social class, and finally by personal history. This conditioning does not mean that rationality and ethical analyses are not important. It simply emphasizes the incorrectness of giving them a status of pure objectivity or complete universality.

A second objection to the idealistic approach of ethics stems from a specifically Christian and theological point of view. An idealistic approach leads moralists to direct people to behave according to abstract and general principles. Thus, for many, the most important criterion in morality is to ask oneself if what one does corresponds to a particular definition of what is “good“ or “evil”. Similarly, we have seen how, for Kohlberg, the maturity of ethical development consists of being inspired by general principles and of reaching decisions in relation to them. These perspectives, which many assume to be Christian, actually deviate from Christian traditions. As a matter of fact, according to biblical traditions, the ethical meaning of our existence is not determined in relation to general and abstract principles. It is related to a person: God, and for Christians, to God incarnated in Jesus Christ and executed as an outcast. There is a deep difference between deciding about one’s life in relation to ideas or in relation to a personal and historical presence.

The theory of ideologies can shed further light on this difference. This theory suggests that abstract concepts of “good” and “evil” usually function so as to conceal conflicts between persons and groups. For example, the statement: “Adultery is evil” masks another more concrete message, such as, “If you continue to fool around with my wife, you will get my fist in your face.” Abstract ideological reasoning often veils underlying interpersonal or collective conflicts. The biblical perspective, on the contrary, refers to interactions of human beings with one another and with God. The Christian God is even identified with specific people such as the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the

oppressed. God is involved with people, making a covenant with them, sometimes in conflict with them, but always in personal relationship.

*The historical character of ethical concepts*

In order to go beyond idealistic morals, we have to develop a historical moral philosophy and see how rationality functions in its ethical arguments. To situate such a historical ethics in a broader context, we can refer to several philosophies: to Maurice Blondel (especially in his *Action*, 1893); to phenomenologists; to Nietzsche (especially to his treatment of reason and science). Among social scientists I would refer to *The Social Construction of Reality* of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman to the concept of “imaginary institution” of Cornelius Castoriadis, as well as to the current of cognitive psychology. In the Christian traditions, we can draw upon the work of the nominalists of the Middle Ages who reject the notion of an ideal essence of things in order to emphasize how concepts are constructed. In a rather consistent way, the nominalists do not speak of a confrontation with “natural ends or ideals” but with God; concomitantly, they emphasize human commitment.

The historical approach presupposes that our general concepts such as “masculinity,” “femininity,” “friendship,” “responsibility,” “human dignity,” or “justice” are historically constructed. Epistemological, sociological, psychological analyses converge in stating that it is impossible to claim that one speaks “of things as they are.” We always use culturally produced interpretative representations. Concepts receive their meanings from stories which relate to and interpret events according to our culture, as well as to specific individual contexts. For example, the term “to be responsible” refers to a series of cultured stories which speak of the manner in which people or groups have behaved in a “responsible way.” It is the same for “masculinity” or “femininity” or “love” etc. Concepts are like a kind of shorthand used to designate a series of stories. In a non-idealistic approach “eternal ideas” are thus replaced by accounts and stories which form the background of a historically situated culture. Moreover, these stories vary according to the social position of the group which produces them.

The stories connected to concepts help people to situate themselves and thus to tell their own story. When, for example, a girl says that she is in love, that means that, on the one hand, she re-

counts her personal history through the tales of love which are told in her culture, and that these tales (culturally acquired and socially determined) become clearer for her because of her own experience. Thus there is a kind of dialectic relation between the tales present in the culture and people's own stories. (For Christians, such a connection is made between their story and the story of Jesus. The Gospel tells about Jesus' actions and people read their own lives in the light of these stories. This could be the meaning of the traditional concept of living in one's existence the mystery of the life of Jesus.) Stories people hear—whether they be those of Jesus, of Ghandi, of Martin Luther King, of the crossing of the Red Sea, of a revolution, of the workers' movement, of stories of those we approach negatively like those of Hitler, or of Sade—are calls which finally help people to tell their personal and collective tales.

In this construction, ethics is then no longer seen as deduced from eternal concepts. Human decisions are thought through not in an effort to comply with universal reason but rather in a dialogue with particular stories. Ethical reflection thus appears to be a historical production determined by numerous conditions. Ethics no longer claims to be an absolute and universal discourse, rather it refers to a relative objectivity. It cannot distinguish absolutely the good grain from the tare (at least not before the definitive eschatological coming of the Kingdom). However, rational discourse with its relative criteria and its empirical foundation helps people to discern the signs of the times, the stories that speak to us, and the calls that we want to utter or that we want to listen to. Rational discussion then takes place somewhere between scepticism and certitude. This is perhaps our human condition: human beings are unable to say the last word about anything, and nevertheless rational discussion is extremely relevant in order to relate our own story. Perhaps it is by accepting the impossibility of ultimately telling what is "good" and "evil" that morals can escape from a totalitarian or a paternalistic oppression of persons and of collectivity.

Many, to the left, as well as to the right, lean towards idealism and hesitate to recognise that our ethical arguments are social constructs and thus relative. Even many liberation theologians are tempted to claim that they have absolutely determined that Christians must get involved in revolutionary change. By thus refusing nominalistic or phenomenological epistemologies, these ethicists remain idealistic (and there are even idealistic interpretations of

Marx). They prefer to claim that ethics speaks of “things as they are” and is finally able to determine what is “good” and “evil.” This subtly reintroduces a deductive ethics, even if most ethicists recognise—at least in theory—that perceptions and reasonings are socially and psychologically conditioned. Moreover, such idealistic ethics most often reflect the values of the privileged social classes and nations.

To perceive the relative and ideological character of moral reflection by no means implies that one neglects its relevance nor that of reason. Analyses are necessary for clarifying situations, but cannot ultimately determine the mystery of human choices. Practical confrontation with situations, people, groups and structures, can never be reduced to analytical or rational terms. Between our legitimate arguments and our actions there is always a gap. This is the place of the mystical dimension of life which involves trust in self, trust in people and—for believers—trust in God.

Ethicists who hold moral absolute principles often believe they are defending the value of human action. But it could be argued that, in so doing, they neglect some of its dimension. In the idealistic approach when what is “good” has been deduced from principles, people know what they should do. The dimension of personal risk present in human commitment is thus almost obliterated. The human “I” is veiled behind the legitimizing agencies denounced by Nietzsche: morality, science, reason, religion. Yet, every ethical decision has an element of risk. Whatever the sharpness of our analyses, we are never sure of the ultimate meaning of our actions. Trust is thus needed, with its mystical dimension. In theological language, this trust can be related to the doctrine of justification by faith.

Thus when it emphasizes the impossibility of knowing exactly the ethical meaning of our actions, liberation ethics can avoid two stumbling blocks: becoming identified with only one ideology and inducing guilt when we make mistakes. To found such an ethics, however, a prophetic vision of sin, as well as the doctrine of justification by faith, are still necessary.

In a historical approach to ethics, reflection on sin stems from the concrete confrontation with suffering and evil in the history of people. The new awareness begins with hearing the cries of those who experience evil: the widow, the exploited, the oppressed, the raped, the orphan. These cries are a starting point which leads to reflection on human actions and their underlying conflicts. They are then relayed by prophetic voices inviting recognition of the

“new sins” revealed by the suffering, anger and sometimes hatred of the oppressed. Prophetic voices, themselves, are followed by the rational elaboration and analysis of moral theories. These steps lead individuals and groups to confess their sin “before God and people,” and to convert.

The suffering and cries of the oppressed will have then led to a new awareness of sinfulness as well as a new ethical system or a new ethical rationale. This system is provisional because it stems ideologically from specific social groups. Later that ethics, when established, will show its partial origins and lead to some kind of oppression. The ethics of private property, for example, while intended to protect the less privileged from the greed of the powerful, has ended protecting that very greed. And the cycle will repeat itself: cries of the newly oppressed, prophetic voices, and a new ethical system that can be used to discuss rationally where we stand and with whom we are in solidarity.

Such an approach can save ethics from being just another legitimizing ideology of dominant groups. It is not founded on abstract principles but on concrete situations where evil is met. Abstract principles and reason have their place, important but limited; they are necessary means toward the awareness and confession of sin. But they are also ambiguous social constructs conveying the conscience of particular social groups, usually well-educated and economically developed groups. Moral theology then can take its place in the great tale of “salvation history,” that of God laboring among his people against “evil,” toward liberation and the kingdom.

Finally, liberation ethics leads to emphasis on another central element of Christian traditions: justification by faith, that is, by trust. If indeed our own value is founded only on the correct choices we could have made, it would be very threatening not to be able to distinguish clearly “good” from “evil,” the wheat from the tare. It could even be argued that idealistic ethics claim an absolute rational distinction between “good” and “evil” precisely because they implicitly presuppose a justification by work theology. If indeed our reason cannot clearly show us what is to be done, our relying on justification by work becomes unbearable. On the contrary, justification by faith gives people a real freedom that enables them to act. Liberation ethics, when it is so based, opens to mystical commitment based on trust, while at the same time insisting on precise analyses.