

lives with the hope of the gospel and the solidarity of their lives together. Theologians of the Second and Third Worlds have begun to listen to the poor and their reflections. Theological reflection now sees the poor as privileged recipients of the gospel and God's special care. Both the poor and the theologians reject a Christian message that is aloof and distant from the plight of those living in poverty.

### A Spirituality of Poverty

The voice of the poor is the voice of God. The faces of the poor are the faces of God. A spirituality of poverty demands that Christian communities act on behalf of the poor. This action combines three elements.

First, a spirituality of poverty requires an affective option for the poor. This means that Christians do nothing to oppress the poor. It means that Christian communities let the poor touch their hearts. This is reflected in the ways communities pray, the values they embrace, and the virtues they cultivate. A spirituality of poverty requires that Christians examine their lifestyles, their use of material goods, their hiring and salary policies, and their use of the earth's resources. It is reflected in the spirit of justice, welcome, and hospitality that communities show.

Second, a spirituality of poverty requires indirect effective action for the poor. Christian communities can live and act in ways that transform the structures of society. This can become concrete in five areas: economic action, personal study, advocacy, community education, and cross-cultural experience.

1. *Economic action.* Christian communities, when they have money, can keep their monies in banks that do not oppress the poor or that assist the poor through their policies and investments. Communities can support businesses that hire and train the poor, provide day care for single parents, and employ the disabled. Communities can support boycotts of unjust companies. They can develop a spirituality of

poverty by diverting their monies from institutions that promote militarism and that use food as a weapon against poor nations. They can analyze the economic systems of their countries and act to transform those systems.

2. *Personal study.* Christian communities can begin to reflect on the Scriptures from the side of the poor. Members can begin to learn about the causes and experiences of poverty. They can ask themselves: How do the Scriptures teach us about the poor? How do the Scriptures sound when they are heard by the poor?

3. *Advocacy.* Christian communities can act on behalf of the poor by writing their congressional representatives, by joining citizens' action groups that lobby on behalf of the poor, and by contributing to grassroots groups that provide job training, housing, and health care for the poor.

4. *Community education.* Christian communities can learn about poverty and the poor through speakers, videos, and visitors who can inform them about other Christian communities and their struggle for structural transformation.

5. *Cross-cultural experience.* Christian communities can engage in action and in worship with other Christians to promote harmony and unity. This includes clothing drives, opening homes to students from other cultures, and sharing meals and conversation with the poor.

Third, a spirituality of poverty requires direct effective action for the poor. This hands-on involvement can mean community organizing, helping in soup kitchens, volunteering in nursing homes, tutoring poor children, working with the disabled, assisting immigrants, helping the poor obtain health care, and visiting the poor in prison. Christian communities can offer sanctuary and hospitality.

### Conclusion

Poverty is an evil condition affecting millions of people and the economic-political systems in which they live. But

poverty is also a religious value that motivates people to a simplicity of life, dedicated ministry, and a vision of the world based on the gospel. How poverty has shaped the lives of the poor and how it has motivated religious dedication have varied according to historical circumstances, charismatic insight, and practical action.

A spirituality of poverty will challenge the Churches to analyze the causes of poverty in their midst, to reflect and pray with the poor, and to continue indirect and direct effective action for the poor. A spirituality of poverty will enable them to hear the voice of God, to see the face of God, and to fulfill their vocation to fashion the reign of God.

*See also CATHOLIC ACTION, CATHOLIC WORKER, CONFRONTATION AND PROTEST: ENVIRONMENT; FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY; LIBERATION THEOLOGY; INFLUENCE ON SPIRITUALITY; MARGINALIZED; THE POOR; THE; RELIGIOUS LIFE; VOWS; WORLD.*

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### POWER

The most common definitions of power include the notion of agency, the ability to produce a change or to have an effect. These definitions of power link it to the correlative concept of authority, which connects the exercise of power to authorization and legitimization in the social process.

Power is understood by the social sciences to be both personal and social. Per-

sonal power refers to the capacity to influence another, which is an aspect of human personhood and which cannot be alienated. Societies have various ways of agreeing to specific power arrangements. Contemporary social analysis and critiques of power arrangements from the perspective of the poor, the marginalized, or the oppressed reveal that even these groups are capable of exerting "the powers of the weak," which in turn can influence social processes. When exercised, the powers of the weak result in empowerment and liberation.

Because of the long association of power with dominative authority and its ability to corrupt those who exercise it and coerce those it subordinates, new definitions of power are emerging from the experiences of the "weak." Power is being viewed as a process of interaction between persons rather than as a quality possessed by individuals. Power is further viewed in a differentiated way by the ways these interactions both create or threaten human community and enhance or restrict the growth of persons.

One example of an expanded schema of power as a process has been developed by Rollo May. One can employ this schema as an analysis of both personal power and social power and its effects on persons. May distinguishes five forms of the exercise of power:

- 1) Exploitative power depends on force and involves power *over* others.
- 2) Manipulative power relies on psychological means to gain power *over* another. These first two kinds of power involve domination and inequality.
- 3) Competitive power is a contest among equals and involves power *against* another.
- 4) Nutrient power involves temporary or permanent inequality of status in the relationship but is power used *for* the benefit of another in such cases as parenting, healing, and some forms of ministry.

5) Integrative power relies on mutual influence and the cooperative freedom of the parties involved and is power *with others* (*Power and Innocence*, New York: Norton, 1972, pp. 105–121).

These definitions and analyses of power coming from the social sciences and Marxist analysis generally consider power to be a fact of social life and morally neutral, if not positive.

Christianity has offered critiques of exploitative and manipulative power as it operates in the social order, particularly in politics and economics. According to the Bible, all power belongs to God and originates in God (Mt 6:13; 26:64). Human power is participation in God's power and confronts us with the choice of using that power in the service of our neighbor and for the care of the earth or for prideful self-assertion. Abuse of this freedom is so common an experience of personal and social sin that theological and spiritual authors frequently assume that any exercise of power is sinful instead of carefully analyzing the way it is exercised. Although the exercise of power is corrupting, according to Lord Acton, so too is the unwillingness to exercise power.

Through Jesus, God reveals how power is to be exercised within the human community and particularly within the Church. In Jesus the power of love is lived out to the death, evoking a community of mutual service and care; by him the destructive and dehumanizing forms of power are dethroned, if not annihilated. Jesus' own ministry takes place in the power (*exousia* or *dynamis*) of the spirit, a suasive and noncoercive manifestation of divine power proclaiming a message of liberation, forgiveness, and healing, especially to those who are abandoned, sinful, sick, and oppressed. All four Gospels clearly indicate that power in the kingdom of God is to replace existing structures of domination and oppression with the power of service and freedom, the power of love and the gifts of the Spirit, even if that

means suffering and seeming powerlessness or weakness (Mt 20:20–28; Mk 10:35–45; Lk 12:50; 22:24–27; Jn 13:4–5, 13–17).

Within the history of the Catholic spiritual tradition, the exercise of power was considered at best to be ambiguous and at worst a manifestation of sin and incompatible with the gospel qualities of humility, service, weakness, and patient suffering. Up until the last twenty years, the meaning attached to power and its exercise has been that of domination or coercion, a characteristic of "the world" and an indication of ambition, and therefore to be renounced, abdicated, and avoided by true Christians. In absolute necessity power could be exercised as a burden laid upon those charged with the duty of office. Notable exceptions to this attitude toward power were the knightly orders and the crusades as a form of spiritual pilgrimage in the medieval period.

The 4th-century ascetical movement rejected not only the exercise of civil authority but of ecclesiastical power as well. "The beginning of the thought of the love of command is ordination" (Pachomius). The relationship of neophyte to elder was based on the authority of charism and the experience of the elder. Western monasticism provided a structure for its members to renounce power and authority for those who were not officeholders through the monastic vows. However, the office of abbot or abbess conferred total dominative authority over all persons as well as over all temporalities in the monastery. Cistercian documents attest to the ambivalence such power created for those who found themselves invested with such authority, when they preferred to see themselves as spiritual leaders who had left "the world."

While Christians who had embraced some form of the religious life in these early centuries were clear in their rejection of power and avoided positions of authority, the institutional Church embraced the prevailing models of authority and power with enthusiasm, replicating all the gov-

ernmental mechanisms of the empire. The institutional Church attempted to Christianize the social role of the knight by consecrating the warring profession to the service of the gospel. At first this took the form of protecting the widow and the orphan, then protecting pilgrims to the Holy Land, and finally conducting the holy war to free the pilgrimage sites. Eventually the crusade was used by the papacy to combat heresy and to extend papal political control. Thus a pervasive ambivalence about the wielding of power is inherent in Christian tradition. One resolution of this tension emphasized the necessity of authority and restricted the formal exercise of power within the Church to clerical elites, while laypersons were to obey this authority and voluntarily relinquish power whenever possible in imitation of Jesus' teaching and example.

Contemporary social analysis and liberation theology serve the ecclesial community through their critique of abuses of power within the Christian community (L. Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, New York: Crossroad, 1985, pp. 49–56). The exercise of dominative power within the Christian community was largely legitimated through appeals to the household codes, which accepted the current social view of authority. The elaboration of the medieval papacy further consolidated an absolute exercise of power in a central bureaucracy. Hence, virtually all authority and exercise of power were vested in the papacy and its curia by divine right, and the appropriate role of all others in the Church was to submit in obedience, humility, and service. This exalted view of ecclesial authority managed to mystify the actual exercise of power within the Church and maintained within its members an often uncritical acquiescence to this use of power and a flight from the exercise of other forms of power through a spirituality that valued such uncritical obedience and humble service as practically ultimate values in the spiritual life.

Contemporary spirituality, influenced by Vatican II and recent social teachings such as *Justice in the World*, is increasingly embracing a more nuanced view of power. Following the gospel witness, the exercise of power, especially dominative and manipulative power, is subject to critique. Karl Rahner developed a theology of power in which he offered several theses for an understanding of dominative power and the responsibilities of Christians in its exercise. "Power, including physical force . . . is not itself sin but a gift of God, an expression of [God's] power" (Rahner, p. 395). However, our experience of power is often ambiguous. It is affected by concupiscence and therefore is a kind of power that ought never have existed, because it stems from sin and is a form in which guilt manifests itself. Nonsinful power would address itself to the free decision of the other in an appeal to insight and love.

The spiritual task, as Rahner sees it, is that sinful power is "gradually to be overcome, it is something to be fought against by means of spirit, love and grace" (*ibid.*, p. 394). He further sees that power is the condition of possibility of freedom. Power and freedom are mutually and dialectically interdependent. Hence he rejects a principle of absolute renunciation of dominative power. It is permissible and good to exercise even this kind of power in good faith for others in order to achieve a morally justified end. However, this use of power requires great restraint because it is often used to rule rather than serve, to assert oneself at the expense of others, and to deceive oneself as well as others. For Rahner, power "exists either as the embodiment of sin, egoism, and rebellion against God . . . or as the effort of faith which knows that power is always unreliable and unrewarding, but accepted obediently as a task from God as long as he wills" (*ibid.*, p. 409).

As Christian reflection on power progresses, a variety of responses have appeared within the community. Most peo-

ple are comfortable with nutrient power as an expression of service. However, even nutrient power can become oppressive when its exercise keeps another in a position of servitude by not allowing temporary inequality to be overcome. Relationships of domination and subordination can result from the abuse of nutrient power when the dominants presume that the subordinates are permanently incapable of overcoming this inequality, as in the relationship of slaveholders to slaves, clergy to laity, men to women, or one race to another. Hence, among adults "power with" is to be preferred to "power for" or "power over" whenever possible.

Some continue to relinquish dominative power voluntarily through reinterpreting the formal vows of religion (poverty, chastity, and obedience) as a preferential option for the poor, sharing the powerlessness of the oppressed, and contributing to their empowerment. Many lay Christians embrace activities of peacemaking, mission work, and other forms of social action that involve gospel-inspired nonviolent action for social change rather than methods that require force.

A critical relationship to one's exercise of power is, moreover, a spiritual task for all Christians. There are many sources of power: wealth, education, elective or appointive office, reputation, organizational skill, control of information, and personal gifts. Each Christian is responsible for his or her exercise of power on behalf of the human community and the enhancement of the personhood of others within his or her spheres of power. All Christians are called to live their lives in the service of the kingdom of God and the values of the gospel regardless of their particular settings. It is through the critical exercise of power that one inhabits more fully one's humanity, empowers others as well as oneself, responds to the power of Jesus' spirit within the community, and effects change in the world.

*See also AUTHORITY; CHARISM; CHURCH, LIBERATION THEOLOGY, INFLUENCE ON SPIRITUALITY; LOVE, PEACE, SERVICE, WAR, IMPACT ON SPIRITUALITY*

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## PRAXIS

The primacy of the term *praxis* has replaced the importance of the term *existence* or even *experience* in most contemporary theology. Traditionally translated as action or doing, the term *praxis* in recent years has come to signify intentional social activity and the need for emancipatory transformation. The new primacy of the term in theology derives from three sources: first of all, an orientation in much theology to structural and cultural crises such as poverty, the Holocaust, sexism, racism, and psychic destructiveness. Secondly, the primacy of the term *praxis* arises from the influence of various contemporary theories that stress the importance of *praxis* in terms of the social situatedness of reason, the cultural-structural formation of anthropology and history, and historical aims of freedom. Thirdly, *praxis* is important due to renewed attention in Christian theology to faith as not only an existential or inward experience but as the embodied activity of Christian faith and its communal character in transforming situations and experiences of suffering into those of freedom.

*Praxis* is a term with much richness and multiplicity of meaning in contemporary theology and theory. It suggests the horizon of doing or activity, the primacy of understanding intersubjectivity and the structural nature of anthropology and history. Such formal characteristics of *praxis* are, in the present situation, often combined

with a normative claim for freedom in relation to change and transformation both in terms of specific crises in society and the world. The claim for freedom expressing itself through concerns for transformation in terms of social structures, cultural forms, and individual existence forms a structuring horizon of emancipatory transformation in contemporary theology. The formal nature of *praxis* as the historical situatedness of reason and the emphasis on practical activity combines with the material nature of *praxis* as emancipatory transformation to make theology a guide to the ongoing transformation of Christian *praxis*.

Indeed, if there is a current paradigm shift going on in contemporary theology, as much literature indicates, *praxis*, as well as any other term, signifies this new paradigm. In contemporary theology the term *praxis* achieved popularity through the emergence of liberation theologies. Latin American liberation theology calls for theology to be a critical reflection on liberating *praxis*, while German political theology examines the priority of *praxis* over theory, and black theology addresses the embodiment of spirituality and social witness in the civil rights movement. Though the term may have been popularized through liberation theologies, the same concerns and issues appeared in other forms of contemporary theology. The concern for new forms of "practical theology" in the United States and Europe attempts to find new forms of reflection on practice, and various forms of pastoral theology expand the dimensions of pastoral practice to structural relations and concerns for transforming human life.

Revisionist theologies, concerned with correlating contemporary human experience and Christian tradition, have moved both to attend to practical theology and to incorporate a concern for ethics and social transformation in fundamental and systematic theologies. Current phenomenological theologies, such as that represented

by Ed Farley, rely heavily upon social phenomenology to inquire into corporate structures and upon phenomenological hermeneutics to interpret and construct structures of meaning. Postliberal theologies, heavily influenced by the work of George Lindbeck, also include a concern for *praxis* as the understanding of religion in terms of a cultural-linguistic system and interpreting theology as a grammar of faith, thus addressing issues of *praxis* in terms of the activity of language and culture as symbolic structures. In theologies influenced by the American pragmatic tradition, such as represented by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, there is great attention to the reconstructing of Christian tradition as the *praxis* of theology.

Many theologians draw on a variety of these schools of method to construe new ways of doing theology that attend to Christian faith as a liberating *praxis* addressing the crucial concerns of our day, such as sexism, racism, the threat of nuclear war, and psychic destructiveness. For instance, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza draws upon revisionist, liberation, and pragmatic methods of *praxis* to offer a new understanding of the Bible as prototype rather than archetype, a new role for the Bible and tradition in theology through the notion of rhetoric as persuasive action, and a new description of theology as working out of pastoral-hermeneutical concerns while addressing the concrete concerns of sexism in the Christian tradition and Church. Cornel West has relied on pragmatism, hermeneutics, and poststructuralism to criticize the symbolic and political structures of racism and to formulate a prophetic tradition of critical inquiry in North America.

## History of the Term

The concern for *praxis* goes back to Greek philosophy and is related to the question "How do we live a good life?" Aristotle may have been the first Greek philosopher to use the term *praxis* to refer