The Three Turns in Modern Theology:
Transcendental, Political and Liberation Theologies

Gerard Hall SM

Introduction

The following essay presents the three major turns in modern theology. The anthropocentric turn, represented in transcendental theology, resituates the way theology is done by focussing attention first and foremost on the human person. There is a close relationship between theology and anthropology.
The political turn, represented in political theology, while remaining focused on the human person, pays more attention to the social realities that inscribe human lives. Political theology is first and foremost a theology of social critique. There is a close relationship between theology and sociology.

The liberation turn in theology represents a more radical shift from theory to praxis. It has more in common with political theology through its attention to social injustice, but it also highlights a closer relationship between salvation and liberation. There is a close relationship between theology, economics and human rights. Many feminist and ecological theologies may be situated within a political and/or liberationist framework.

Although beyond the scope of this paper, my hope is that readers will appreciate the different but complementary ways in which transcendental, political and liberation theologies engage with their subject matter. In one sense, they all represent the new starting point for theology in human experience rather than the pre-modern conception which begins with God. Divine revelation never occurs in a vacuum.

Hence, it is right and proper that theology deals with theoretical and practical aspects of the human condition as a pre-condition for understanding Christian revelation. That being said, there are certainly significant differences between these three modes of theologizing. This, I trust, the following paper will outline.

1. Transcendental Theologies

The Anthropocentric Turn: The "turn to the subject" as the foundation of knowledge represented a significant challenge to religious self-understanding. It also challenged the way theology is done. The starting point is no longer God but the human person. This represents the most significant transformation of theology in what is termed the "modern era". Although we can date this turn to the eighteenth century Enlightenment (Kant and Descartes), its influence on the way theology is done took
another two centuries. For Catholic theology, the landmark is the Second Vatican Council in the early 1060s. Protestant theology and some Catholic theologians had already embarked on this approach in the earlier decades of the twentieth century.

**The Transcendental Response:**

Earlier paradigms for doing theology were no longer considered operative within such a changed worldview or horizon of understanding. Neither the neo-Platonism of Augustine, the Aristotelianism of Aquinas, nor the Cartesian rationalism of neo-Scholasticism were capable of carrying the burden of a genuine human starting-point for the consideration of the 'truths' of Christian faith. Indeed, according to the modern paradigm, Christian faith can be 'true' only if it responds to questions of human existence and authenticity. Such questions deal with the basic structures of human existence included in which is the human search for love, justice, freedom and transcendence.

**Rahner's Transcendental Phenomenology:** German Catholic theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984) works out his theology of human existence on the basis of Heidegger's existentialist phenomenology. He begins, therefore, with an approach that highlights these transcendental qualities of human experience. We are first and foremost a question to ourselves. We live within mystery as fish live within the sea. All our human longing and knowing does not dint this deepest human transcendental questioning: Who are we? Why do we exist rather than not exist? What is
it that we are called to be? Who or what does this calling to human beings in the world?

**A Searching Theology:** Karl Rahner's theology is first and foremost a searching theology – or, a theology that begins with the searching questions that underlie human experience. The Christian is not one who "has the answers" to these deepest, transcendental questions, but one who "hears a message" and responds with one’s life. In this situation, the clear distinction between philosophy and theology is blurred. This is deliberate on Rahner's part. He wants to underline the fundamental unity of our human and Christian lives. If the Christian Gospel has anything to say to human beings, it has it to say to all humans of whatever life-situation. Christians are searching hearers of the Word addressed to them through Jesus Christ. Others are potential hearers of the Word addressed to them through their own life-situations and religious traditions.

**The Human Person:** The Christian message is addressed to the totality of the human person – what Rahner calls the "experience of subjectivity" or the "original experience" of being human. This is the experience of mystery and radical self-questioning through which we transcend the limitations of the self and confront the whole. This radical self-questioning is what makes us who we are: we ask if death is final, if there is a purpose to life, if there is ultimate meaning to our existence? The searching human person experiences him/herself as "self-transcending being": one's self is revealed as 'more' than one's self. There is this fundamental relationship to mystery, God, Being or Holy Truth. To be human is to be called to be something 'other' than what we know ourselves to be at any moment of our earthly, human lives.
Transcendence and Knowledge: Moreover, this sense of some transcendent reality is present to us in and through our ordinary experience. The infinite horizon is there as we seek to understand within finite horizons of understanding. Such an unlimited horizon of knowing is there whether or not we choose to acknowledge it. This transcendent openness towards the unlimited expanse of reality is, for Rahner, an unthematic knowledge of God (or "thrust towards the infinite"). All our "clear islands of knowledge" are grounded in the "darkness of God"; such "small islands of knowledge" occur with "the sea of infinite mystery".

Evidently, transcendence and knowledge are not two separable categories: they co-exist in every authentically human act. Knowledge of transcendence is the final horizon in which all other knowledge occurs. Such transcendental knowledge is not able to be 'objectified' because it is not an object of our mental reflections; it is co-present in all our acts of knowledge and freedom. In fact, it is the transcendent horizon or mystery that provides the ground for all our knowing and freedom.

This means that at the deepest level of human subjectivity and experience there is already a pre-apprehension of Holy Mystery that forms the horizon of our lives as free and knowing subjects. We are truly persons insofar as we live in response to this infinite transcendent call (of Holy Mystery, God or Holy Being) even as we live within this finite world of limited beings. This is the fundamental paradox of being human within the world: we are at once spirit and matter.
This experience of transcendence is not a particular experience we have alongside other more normal experiences. It is co-present in all other experiences as the very ground of those experiences. It is not simply a concept of transcendence (the fruit of a mental act). The closest we may come to a fully pure transcendental experience in our human lives is either in a mystical experience (for some) or at the moment of death (for all). It is nonetheless the most fundamental human experience we have – and it is this "tacit knowledge" or "horizon of mystery" that constitutes us as persons.

**Freedom and Responsibility:**
Rahner insists that the real human experience of freedom is also transcendental, that is, it is co-present within the whole range of one's limited acts of human responsiveness to life. Although ambiguous, this exercise of transcendent freedom is not entirely hidden from us. Freedom and responsibility, like self-awareness and personhood, are realities of subjective experience: we know them in our subjective experiences of ourselves as subjects. Again, we are speaking here of tacit or “implicit knowledge” which only occasionally becomes thematic and conscious.

Freedom then is not something one has as an object. It is what one is – or who one is as one creates oneself in time and relationships. Freedom is present and being formed in all the dimensions of a person's life. Transcendental freedom is not the ability to do this or that kind of thing; it is the fundamental power to decide about and actualize ourselves. It is expressed in categorical acts of freedom as the will to love (or hate), to hope (or despair), to act courageously (or cowardly). Yet, it is not just an act of the will; it is an activity of the whole human person.
**Salvation – Transcendental and Historical:** Rahner's anthropology leads us to see that salvation (or damnation) is not something that 'happens' to us merely as a 'future' event. Salvation is our ultimate and radical self-determination, self-understanding and self-realisation as we stand before God. It is the process of our realisation of ourselves as transcendent beings, that is, called to be other than ourselves.

This dynamic process of self-transcendence occurs in the world, in time and through history. This means that our 'historicity' also constitutes our salvation. We are born finite creatures (in history) with a call to transcendent value that can only be achieved insofar as we accept our historical (biological, sociological, etc.) circumstances as the ground of our transcendence. All historical-temporal-spatial events are, of course, ambiguous. We can never definitively say whether a particular historical act (by ourselves or others) is an "event of salvation". Nor can we assume that salvation is not co-present in the lives and decisions of any human persons.

**Dependent Personhood:** As persons in the world, we experience ourselves as largely dependent upon others (and in this sense determined) but also called to a more radical self-determination that is somehow 'within' us and somehow 'beyond' us. It is this transcendence and freedom of the human spirit that is the most profound reality of the human being. In order to be 'true' to ourselves, we know we must 'transcend' ourselves, our worlds, our personal and social histories. Our human lives will tend to be a series of compromises between the assumed possibilities on the one hand and our own consciousness and freedom on the other. Moreover, what we do make of ourselves is never entirely open to our introspective awareness. We remain a mystery to ourselves in this ultimate subjectivity of our human lives. To the extent we do approach the truth of ourselves – become
authentic – to that extent we become aware that we are dependent on another power or reality. The question of God arises from our human experience insofar as we hear the call of our 'selves' to 'transcend' ourselves.

**Hearers of the Word:** Every human person is a potential hearer of the Word. For Rahner, this means that the Word, or divine revelation, is that for which the human spirit searches in history to hear. That Word, when properly heard, is not experienced as an external word (or law) imposed from without. The Word comes precisely in answer to the question that the human person is. The Word is the fulfillment of the transcendental longings of every human person. This Word does not take away the freedom, dignity and authenticity of the human person, but is that which is the very source and foundation of all human freedom, dignity and authenticity.

Because the human person is fundamentally a unity that which is 'heard' must then be acted upon. The 'hearer' of the Word, if authentic, will become a 'doer' of the Word. This is not a matter of clear knowledge, but authentic living. It involves both a mystical and a political component. This is the basis of human life and salvation. It also suggests a notion of divine revelation which comes as "non-violent appeal" (*Paul Ricoeur*) because it answers the question that we are to ourselves. Clearly, Rahner's theology (understanding of God) is grounded in an anthropology (understanding of human personhood) which sees the human subject as oriented towards and called by a power of transcendent love.

---

**2. Contemporary Theologies and Praxis**

Theologies of Critical Praxis (derived from the post-World War II Frankfurt School of Critical Theory) approach God and revelation from the perspective...
of suffering and evil. Their fundamental stance is captured by German theologian Johan Baptist Metz who asks if it is even possible to do theology after Auschwitz. The basic question is not one of meaning (the existential crisis of transcendental theology) but one of hope (exemplified in the historical, political and economic crises of our world). This is sometimes called the "political turn" insofar as the emphasis is not just on human persons but on the societies that entrap them. Political theologies state that is not adequate to explain the world according to Christian categories (e.g. Rahner's masterful work). Christians above all are those called upon to transform the world in "this hour of darkness" which is also "the hour of Christ".

Praxis theologies are political and liberation theologies or, sometimes called, theologies of hope. They ask the question of God at the point at which God appears to have abandoned the world. But they do not rehearse the old "theodicy problem" (how can God and evil be reconciled?); they are more concerned to develop strategies by which the Christian Churches can engage with the world and suffering humanity in a practical-political way. These theologies seek to confront society with the radical call of the Gospels and the "dangerous memory" of Jesus Christ.

**Metz's Critique of Rahner:** Metz says that Rahner's theology is too idealised and privatised. It assumes the well-fed bourgeois subject with his/her liberal-humanist belief in the evolutionary history of progress. Such evolutionary optimism is considered naïve in the postmodern world. Moreover, in assuming that "grace is everywhere" (Rahner), it fails to engage with the reality of suffering and negativity that form so much of human life and society. In essence, Metz believes that Rahner is so accepting of the Enlightenment subject, that he flattens out the prophetic call of the Gospel with its apocalyptic symbols of danger and rescue.
According to Metz, Rahner fails to take account of the radicality of sin, guilt and evil that "threaten us everywhere”.

**Metz's Practical-Political Theology of the Subject:** Metz grounds his theology in the three-fold challenge of: Marxism (end of cognitive innocence); Auschwitz (end of idealist systems); Third-world (end of Eurocentrism). He calls on theology to dialogue not only with philosophy and anthropology (Rahner) but especially with the social sciences. His theology is always done under the “eschatological proviso” that recognizes the great distance between the world as it is and the world as God calls it to be in the name of Jesus Christ.

For Metz, theology is not about elaborate systems of meaning, but methods of critique and liberation. His theology is sometimes called dialectical because it stresses both identity and non-identity between God and the world, the present and the future, liberation and salvation. Metz believes less in theory than in the power of story, symbol and metaphor to "break open" the present unsatisfactory nature of reality and to reclaim it in the promise of God and the call to Christian discipleship.

**Metz's Church of Critical Freedom:** Like all theologies of praxis, Metz understands the Church as the prophetic voice of Christian freedom – the Church as Servant. Its task is to stand up for human subjects against the technocratic megamachine of society. Its critical function must be self-directed as well as directed to society at large. Theology then is called on to critique the present "Church of dependants" so as to transform it into a "Church of subjects". Theology's task is also to develop a "new language" to enable the Church to enter into dialogue with the world of our time (though, for Metz, dialogue does not mean capitulation). Among other things that theology must confront is the current failure of Christian praxis to transform the world.

**Schillebeeckx's Theology of Suffering:** Belgian Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx also begins with the recognition that theology today needs to
confront the reality and enormity of evil and suffering. He stresses that no mere theoretical solution is adequate. Moreover, the authentic human being will respond by seeking to transform the situation of negativity to a situation of justice and freedom.

However, **Edward Schillebeeckx** is somewhat critical of Metz’s strong dialectical bent that transposes the presence of God into the unknown future. God is, albeit paradoxically, present in the "surd of human suffering" just as God was present in the Cross of Jesus. The absurd – much suffering defies explanation – does not negate the divine reality. Rather, God’s grace is present in every genuine event of humanization as well as in the attempt of humans to resist acts of dehumanization.

Schillebeeckx’s theology (especially as developed in his two tomes, *Jesus* and *Christ*) recognizes the normative status of the Scriptures. However, his approach to the Scriptures is "hermeneutical", that is, placing great weight on Christian responsibility to interpret the Word of God for today’s world. For Schillebeeckx, there is no definitive, timeless understanding; all understanding is mediated or understood according to the culture in which it is interpreted. He says it is not valid to distinguish between the kernel or "essence of faith" and its "historical expression". Consequently, it is important that we engage with the Scriptures with the aid of historico-critical methods (understanding the context of the writings) and hermeneutical skills (transposing/interpreting Scriptural meanings for today).

God and salvation are present-rendering realities. They are known not through reading and study alone, but only when one engages in the Christian praxis of discipleship. The God of Christian revelation is a God who calls us to live in the radical promise of the future (Metz), but also One.
whose saving reality is everywhere to be found insofar as humans are engaged in authentic humanizing service to and love of others. In some ways, Schillebeeckx mediates between Rahner and Metz. He recognizes the need to relate theology to Rahner's "God of presence" as well as to Metz's "God of promise".

**Liberation Theologies of Praxis: 1968** is the year that acts as a symbol for the start of liberation theology due to the number of events that signified a new attention to the demands of social justice: peace movement and "bourgeois revolts" against war, racism, elitism signifying the end of "intellectual innocence"; publication of Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; South American Bishop's Conference at Medellin, Columbia, that stated "all liberation is an anticipation of the complete redemption brought by Christ".

It was not just the experience of poverty, oppression and injustice that is paramount. There is a new realization that such evils are embedded in the very structures and fabric of human society. This leads to the critique of developmentalism and the capitalist economic model as promoting dependency. Likewise, feminist liberation theologies critique the way in which both Church and society support systems that oppress women even if this intention may not be conscious on behalf of ecclesial and political leaders. Today there is also new attention given to creation studies which highlight ecological policies that are destroying the very earth. Christian theology itself is caught up in the naivete of systems which, in seeking to be non-political, actually support the political status quo. The "bourgeois project" – including "bourgeois theology" – is critiqued as supporting oppression and injustice!
3. Political Theologies

The Question: Who is the human subject made in the image of God and now effaced by human society and human beings? Where is God in a history flowing in the blood and silent tears of its victims?

New Paradigm: Political theology seeks a new language for speaking of God, grace and the human being. Voices of oppression and dependency are enlisted as a way of retrieving subjugated knowledge, ignored experiences and forgotten religious symbols. The movement is away from the bourgeois subject in search of authenticity to the non-subjects of history whose very identity is denied. Praxis is the focal point of such a theological anthropology. The task of theology is not to explain the world but to change it.

Human Society: Political theologies are pre-eminently theologies of social critique. They address society and the church rather than the academy. Marxist social analysis is a tool for critiquing any over-optimistic or abstract notion of society which over-values the real freedom of human beings. Since human existence is pre-eminently social, economic and political, theology seeks to address the question of God and the issue of Christian faith through analysing the real histories of people in the world. It is clearly not enough for Christianity to posit some "private meaning" for people in a world bereft of "public meaning”.

Method: Theology must be a disciplined, critical reflection on human experience in the light of Christian faith. It seeks to expose and critique the ideological distortions in the Christian tradition and in current praxis that cause oppression. "Liberation" is the root-metaphor: emancipation from specific social evils; a more generic liberation through the process of humanization at work in history; theological liberation from the bias and oppression of sin. Praxis itself becomes the criterion of the truth of religion. The question is not whether religion is true or false, but whether it oppresses or liberates, alienates or humanizes.
Social Grace and Disgrace: How do grace, the Spirit of God, salvation impinge upon human beings in the socio-political realities of history? Christian theology teaches the two-fold reality of sin and grace: the revelation of grace is given to us in the symbol of crucified love: evil becomes sin and sin is transformed into grace. Importantly, sin always translates into social distortion. Sin must be retrieved as a social and historical category. Symbols and institutions operate within all societies to mould personal and collective consciousness. Institutions oppress, social symbols fracture human lives, illusions destroy the human capacity for freedom and transcendence. Consequently, it is not only persons but society – its structures, institutions, symbols – that need to be transformed. No theology of grace can afford to ignore the distortions that operate within the real social world of human beings.

Grace Empowers History: The liberation of human freedom is radically dependent on God’s grace. Love of neighbour means working for social justice. Love must be political, militant. Salvation is multi-dimensional. This means that social emancipation is an intrinsic and necessary moment in salvation – although it does not define the totality of salvation. The principle is that grace needs to be embodied in every dimension of history. Social change begins with the imagination. We live "in between" the time of the present suffering and the utopian time of the future. The Cross stands in judgment over every social, political and theological idolatory, even though they may well proclaim “freedom, justice, solidarity”.

Beyond Anthropocentrism: Until recently, political theologies tended to reflect the "anthropocentrism" of transcendental theologies. The "political turn" of theology certainly focussed on the social realities of the human
person in the historical world. Nonetheless, the Enlightenment split between nature and history was maintained. Now, there is a growing sense that history and nature cannot be divorced; social justice is impossible without justice to the natural environment.

**A Cruciform Freedom:** Freedom and self-determination are specific goals of political theologies. Nonetheless, they remain ambiguous and, of themselves, do not guarantee greater freedom from injustice, oppression, sin, and they may show an even greater capacity for evil. History, even where it is manifested as a history of freedom, is never the unequivocal manifestation of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is always not yet. Liberation and salvation/redemption are never synonymous. In particular, Enlightenment freedom tends to be idealized as freedom from restriction or obligation; political theology prefers to understand freedom as freedom for commitment to the other in justice, love and service. Freedom is service or a cruciform love. It is freedom read through the Cross and Resurrection.

**Strengths and Weaknesses:** The strength of political theologies of the subject is their determination to reflect on human beings in their concrete, historical situations. This overcomes the rather abstract notion of the human being defined according to "transcendental longings" regardless of the social, cultural and political situation. Sin and grace are real not just as a theoretical overlay, but as concrete manifestations in the real world where humans live. The major difficulty with this kind of theologizing is that it may reduce salvation to some kind of human liberation – or, at least, too easily equate the two. God and revelation may also become symbols of critique of present social structures rather than mediators of the divine reality in the present world. One must also be careful that "social sin and grace" do not override the personal calling of every human being before God.

Political theologies witness to the reality that all theologies are regional theologies dealing with the mediation of grace and salvation in the concrete, social realities of people's lives. Political theology arose in response to what was considered a too naïve appreciation of human
existence. Yet, like transcendental theology, political theology is predominantly European. Liberation theologies, which arose in South America, represent a reaction to the Eurocentric nature of most Christian theology. They learn the lesson of political theology: all theology needs to begin with sustained reflection on the social and political circumstances in which humans live.

4. Liberation Theologies

The Image of God Liberation theology is pre-eminently a theology of praxis. It raises the question of God in the light of human socio-historical existence. This history, which includes the history of suffering and dehumanization, is God's history. But since God only creates and sustains what is good, the negative realities of sin and evil are due to humanity's misuse of freedom and the failure to be co-creators of God in history. This misuse of freedom is not only personal, but social, structural, economic and political. The privatization of religion is itself a structural deficiency of human beings to mitigate God to the world. It tries to limit God's activity to "action on individuals" and, in so doing, fails to appreciate the length, breadth, height and depth of God's pathos for the world. It also negates the social reality of human beings.

Questions to be Addressed

a) What is the relationship between God's providence and human freedom? Does not the symbol of God act to make humans passive in the face of history?

16 Gerard Hall SM: Turns in Modern Theology
b) What is the relationship between final salvation and the movement of human history? In Christian terms, what is the relation of the Kingdom of God to human history?

c) What is the relation of God's final salvation and the human concern for social transformation? Was Karl Marx right in his critique of religion as undermining commitment to society and history?

**Human Existence:** The Human Person is constituted with three distinct freedoms or levels of freedom which can be interpreted according to the Christian vision of God:

1. **Personal Freedom:** Such freedom is relative to its goal (the building up of the Kingdom of God in history) and relative to the reality of evil (to which the Christian vision of God provides a possible solution);

2. **Social Freedom:** The vision of God who is against every form of human oppression, and who is an invitation to exercise justice and love in history according to God's intentions, does provide ultimate meaning for human existence within the bounds of history;

3. **Transcendental Freedom:** The absolute fulfillment of the human spirit begins as an invitation to actualise that fulfillment or salvation through loving action in the world and history.

**God's Liberating Presence in Human Existence:** Grace or the action of the Holy Spirit functions as the empowerment of human freedom in history. Its effect is essentially the process of humanization so that we may say, from the existential level of concrete historical existence, that human liberation and salvation from God are convertible. Salvation is the liberation of freedom itself: God's Spirit overcomes passivity and engenders activity. The Spirit does not draw human freedom out of the world but draws such freedom into history and society toward the liberation of others.
The Reality of Sin: In the very revelation of grace, sin is also disclosed: the human situation does not have to be the way it actually is. Evidently, sin pertains to the three levels of freedom. At the personal level, freedom is severely diminished by egoism, selfishness and even the inability to transcend the self in love. The way we are as individual persons is also constituted socially. Social structures are the products of un-free, sinful human beings. We participate in this un-freeing and sinful social reality and mediate it to others. This may be 'sin' in an analogous sense but, when we become aware of it and fail to take responsibility for it through changing social structures, it becomes formal sin. Transcendental bondage to sin is also evident in the way human beings and social systems block human paths to the absolute. This last tendency – which is more than a neutral possibility of a 'fall' – is what can be called Original Sin.

The Reality of Grace: If sin distorts the personal, social and transcendental freedoms of human beings, grace also operates to overturn these distortions. Taking Rahner's notion of "saving grace" as a "human existential," liberation theology emphasises that this grace also operates on the strictly social level. Just as evil can infiltrate social structures and institutions, so does grace. Wherever there is genuine human liberation or social emancipation, grace and the Holy Spirit are present. Every aspect of life, every occupation, decision and action, defines the field of our encounter with God and constitutes how human beings are united with God. Freedom that is closed to the struggle for liberation in public, social history is still in the bondage of sin. Our freedom, in the measure that it fails to respond to the social oppressions in which we participate, is closed to the movement of the Spirit of God.

History should be a history of ever new realisations of the Kingdom of God. The inner purpose and direction of history flows from God’s intention in creation revealed by Jesus in the symbol of God’s kingdom. But, because of sin and the finitude of the human condition, the kingdom of God is utterly beyond the capacity of human freedom. However, over against finitude and
the grip of sin, God does work in history to liberate, to heal, to reconcile, to divinize, and to bring to completion. Nonetheless, because God takes human freedom totally seriously, it is only through human beings that such history is brought to its fulfillment in God.

Christianity and Marxism: The liberationist vision of the world provides deeper grounds for commitment to the liberative process than Marxism whose vision of solidarity with other human beings is not underlined by the call to solidarity with God. Looking to the future in faith and hope does not take away the Christian commitment to present transformation. It provides the vision of the kingdom of God which challenges the way we live our personal, social and transcendental calling in the here and now of earthly existence. Moreover, it is a vision that does not hand the victims of human history to the scrapheap. Total liberation needs a Creator-Saviour God such as the God of Jesus who is able to overturn every evil into good.

Method in Liberation Theologies: Liberation theologies develop their own method or approach to theology which looks well beyond the sources of revelation (Scripture and Tradition) or the vagueness of universal human experience or even the historical realities of sin and suffering. These theologies focus on the root causes of evil in human society. Their approach can be summarized according to the following three mediations:
a) Socio-Analytical Mediation (See - Experience/Understand)

This first step seeks the causes of oppression neither through empirical explanation (poverty as vice / aid syndrome) nor functional explanation (poverty as backwardness / reform the system). These approaches treat the poor as individual or collective objects. Rather, what is needed is dialectical explanation (poverty as real / systemic oppression). This approach employs a two-stage process: (1) sociology (including Marxist pointers) to uncover the root causes in class struggle, ideologies and economic factors; (2) narratives where "the poor stand up for themselves" as subjects so that the voices (not just statistics) of the "disfigured children of God" can be heard.

b) Hermeneutical Mediation (Judge - Understand/Judge)

In this second move, the question is asked: what has the Word of God to say about the situation? In reading the Scriptures, it is acknowledged that such reading is always influenced by our specific 'situatedness' (the "hermeneutic circle"). Questions concerning conversion, grace and resurrection are asked from the vantage-point of being in a poverty-situation. These are pre-eminently practical questions: all understanding is biased towards application and the social content of the Christian message. Texts like Exodus, Prophets, Gospels, Acts and the Book of Revelation are selectively justified according to the social context. Rather than emphasize traditional theological texts or the medieval world of Christendom, there is a return to the Patristic period (the "age of martyrs and mystics"). There is also a new integration of Vatican II and the Church’s Social teachings.

c) Practical Mediation (Act - Judge/Decide)

Praxis is the starting point and goal of all liberation theologies. Generally, the criteria of praxis or action contains the following: it must be historically viable; it should be non-violent; it needs to be related to the
overall strategy of enfleshing the Kingdom of God; it must include programmes of decision-making, implementation and evaluation.

Liberation theology is focussed on practical truth and justice in the name of the Kingdom. There may be some blurring between salvation and liberation but the genius of the "liberation turn" in theology is precisely in making Christians realise that divine salvation and human liberation are indeed two dimensions of the one process of God's saving, liberating presence in the world. Moreover, even though liberation theologies are focussed on particular human situations, there is a powerful sense of the interconnectedness of social, political and economic systems. Part of the reason that the "developing countries" are poor is due to the world economic and mainly capitalist system that keeps poor nations and regions in situations of poverty and dependence. There is a strong meeting point here between theology, economics and human rights. Increasingly, there is new attention to women's experience (feminist liberation theologies) and creation (ecological liberation theologies).

Conclusion

Models always lie! Rahner always described himself as a "practical theologian," someone concerned for the public and political praxis of Christian faith. However, while many of his writings demonstrate his
practical intentions, his approach continues the age-old tradition of dialoguing with the philosophers of his day. Aquinas dialogued with Aristotle; Rahner dialogues with Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. He is very much an academic theologian in the sense he writes for the academy. His desire is to demonstrate that Christianity offers the best rational solution to the deepest questions of the human spirit. Its strength is its theoretical coherence.

Metz and other political theologians take their distance from theory and metaphysics. They are concerned with social critique. However, they too rely on theories that underlie their critiques of society. Moreover, they display a "hidden metaphysics" which understands the human person in largely negative terms as lacking in freedom and justice. This can be contrasted to Rahner's largely positive anthropology. Where political theology takes theology further is in its attention to social systems, especially systems of distortion. Whereas Rahner may too easily accept the world on its own terms, political theologians confront that world – and that Church – with the demands of the Gospel message. The strength of political theology is in its attention to the suffering reality of people's lives, a reality that it understands to be under the judgment and promise of God.

Liberation theologies take the further step of radicalizing praxis as the most important dimension of Christian discipleship. However, liberation theologies are highly dependent on the insights of political theologians. Most liberationists in fact studied European political theology – just as most political theologians were students of transcendental theologies. For example, Leonardo Boff was a student of Metz who was, in turn, a student of Rahner. In other words, despite significant differences, these three approaches to theology represent something of a continuum. No single theology can say all that needs to be said. The important thing is to
recognise that all three theological methods are modern in the sense that they begin with the study of human experience – whether this is understood in transcendental, political or liberation terms. They all represent the modern "turn to the subject" as the very starting point for doing theology today.

**Discussion Questions on Theological Method**

1. Compare and contrast the understanding of the human person in each theological model. Which anthropology is the most convincing?
2. "If transcendental theology is too privatised and idealistic, political theologies are too negative and critical”. Discuss.
3. Apart from the fact that political theology began in Europe and liberation theology began in South America, what are the major differences between these two modes of theologizing?
4. "Compared to traditional theologies, the role of human experience is highlighted in these modern theologies. This represents a revolution in the way that theology is done”. Discuss.

**Selective Bibliography**

**Transcendental Theologies**


**Political Theologies**


**Liberation Theologies**


**Method: General**


This article was written for a course on Theological Method at Australian Catholic University in the mid-2000s. It is derived from a doctoral course I had taken with Professor Peter Phan at Catholic University of America. It makes liberal use of various texts in the “Selective Bibliography” in an attempt to provide an overall introduction to the fascinating question of “The Three Turns in Modern Theology: Transcendental, Political and Liberation Theologies”. Some additions to the bibliography have been made.

This classification is of course heuristic. It is also selective in the choice of theologians. One critique of all three turns may be their failure to adequately account for mystical experience. Hence, it has been suggested a fourth approach to theological method is the “mystical turn”. My own position, argued above, is that attention to spiritual or mystical experience is integral to “transcendental theology”. Some political and liberation theologians are also explicit in naming the importance of the ‘mystical’ dimension of theology, even if their focus is also on the practical, political and social realities of sin and grace.

Another critique may be the inclusion of feminist and ecological theologies in the above turns, especially the “liberation turn”. Do they not represent something more radical? Or, it might be suggested, attention to dialogue with other religious traditions represents a further theological turn. If re-writing this, I might be inclined to add a fourth term – I have toyed with the idea of the “cosmotheandric turn” – to cover some of these critiques. But then I am reminded of T. S. Eliot’s quip that “every attempt is a wholly new start and a different kind of failure”.

Moreover, the major shift covered by all these theologies is the centrality of human experience for the understanding of grace, salvation, church, God. Once one takes the “turn to the subject” as the starting point for doing theology, there will be increasing emphasis on the pluralism of culture, race, gender, ethnicity, relationship to the earth, and responses to divine revelation. Sometimes referred to as the “localising of theology”, it is helpful reminder that the mystery of God is also reflected in the myriad ways of being human as in the innumerable approaches one may take to doing Christian theology.

Gerard Hall SM  2nd October 2018