21 *Unquiet Souls*, p.150.
22 'Eckhart and Women', *Eckhart Review* 3 (Spring 1994), p.41.
23 op. cit. p.46.
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25 'Apocryphal Followers of Meister Eckhart?', *Eckhart Review* 7 (Spring 1998) pp.3–13.
26 'Friars as Confidants of Holy Women in Medieval Dominican Hagiography', Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski & Timea Szell, ed.: *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, Cornell U.P. 1991, p.225.
27 See Oliver Davies: *Meister Eckhart: Mystical Theologian*, SPCK London 1991, ch.3: 'Meister Eckhart and the Religious Women of the Age.'
28 Translations from Eckhart's Middle High German and Latin are taken from M. O'C. Walshe: *Meister Eckhart: Sermons & Treatises* I–III, Element Books, Shaftesbury 1979–1987; Edmund College & Bernard McGinn: *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, Paulist Press, New York 1981; Bernard McGinn: *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Paulist Press, New York 1986; Oliver Davies: *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, Penguin Classics, London & New York 1994.

Difference and Otherness: A Non-Western Conversation

Andrew Dawson

In the opening chapter of the book *On Naming the Present*, David Tracy engages with three "conversations" upon "difference and otherness" currently on stream in the West.[1] Reflecting upon the "bourgeois subject" of modernity, the "communal subject" of anti-modernity and the "non-subject" of post-modernity, Tracy concludes that the wealth of insight offered by these conversations still falls short of supplying the "Western centre" with the hermeneutical perspective necessary to a contemporary discernment of God's presence among us. Holding such a perspective to be had subsequent to a multiplicity of conversations taking place, Tracy remarks upon the West's need to "listen to other [i.e., non-western] conversations" which transcend the interpretative framework of our modern, anti-modern and postmodern narrative *traditions*. Only by opening ourselves to the discourse of those engaged "in the concrete struggle for justice against suffering and oppression and for total liberation" will we in the West be allowed "once again" to hear "the healing and transformative message of the Christian gospel." (p. 18)

Responding to the findings of Tracy, and guided by his subject-

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centred focus, the following material endeavours to sketch the contours of a conversation currently under way among the Latin American community of liberation theologians. Focussing upon a theological understanding of the human subject as *person*, this particular conversation offers a valuable source of insight to those in the West who are concerned to ensure that the subjectivity which our own discourses narrate remains free from cultural solipsism and ever open to the *novum* by which the Divine is so often encountered in our own context.

Allowing for the great many nuances and differences in emphasis among Latin American liberation theologians, the following can be no more than a series of broad brush strokes upon an all too extensive canvas. Nevertheless, there exists a sufficient degree of common ground within the liberationist school so as to allow a representative picture to be drawn of *its* concept of the person. This common ground upon which all liberation theologians stand is constituted by what they regard as an "integral," we might say "holistic," concept of the human subject. Two preliminary points by way of clarification.

The Integral Person

First, in *theological* terms, liberation theology fundamentally rejects the traditional distinction between the orders of Creation and Redemption; that is, the belief that God effects the salvation of humankind by means which are other than historically realizable and practicably concrete. The realms of the *supernatural* and the *natural* are thereby conjoined by liberation theology, elided within one and the same historical process. For liberation theology, then, there exists no such thing as a "pure nature" which has not, in some way, already been *touched* by divine grace. God is intrinsically immersed in the warp and woof of everyday existence. There is no historical reality which does not, in some way, bear the marks/impulse of its divine origins.

Second, in *anthropological* terms, liberation theology works with a *decentred* concept of the subject. Although the term "decentred" is more readily employed by post-modern social theorists (e.g., Foucault, Ricoeur) than by liberation theologians, it serves well to emphasize the liberationist concern to de-individualize all talk of personal existence. Liberation theology rejects traditional theological (e.g., Boethius, Anselm) and modern liberal (Rousseau, early Sartre, Novak) conceptualisations of the subject as *social isolate* whose personhood is a pre-constituted fact. Whether in traditional or modern guise, personal atomism runs counter to the liberationist view that we are never simply discrete individuals whose personhood is actualised in isolation from other factors.

Concomitant with this rejection of an individualized

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conceptualization of the person, liberation theology likewise refuses to countenance the overly abstruse and ahistorical accounts of the "bourgeois subject" offered by Tracy's "modern" conversation. For liberation theology, we are subjects only to the extent that we are *persons-in-relation*. To exist is to be *located*, and to be located is to be *situated* amidst a plethora of interpenetrative determinisms. In the simple act of existing, the human subject engages with a plurality of bodily, historical and social phenomena which, in a wide variety of ways, constitute the environment within which each individual realises personhood in relation to others.[2] Within liberation theology, the word "person" stands always as a shorthand rendering of *person-as-related-to-another*. Yet personhood is fulfilled only to the extent that the subject participates in relations with others in a truly liberative (i.e., historicised and decentred) manner.

To facilitate an understanding of the liberationist conversation upon the human subject, the concept of *person-as-related-to-another* will be examined by way of a tripartite analytical framework comprising the *intrapersonal*, the *interpersonal* and the *transpersonal* dimensions of human existence. (Whilst this tripartite analytical framework is somewhat artificial by way of lacking an authentic Latin American provenance, it is of use to us in that it allows for a clearer appreciation of the liberationists' contribution to the Western conversations with which Tracy engages.) Each of these three dimensions represents a nuanced way of conceptualising the *person-as-related-to-another*. As such, the *intrapersonal* (microscopic) dimension concerns itself with a theological articulation of person-constituting relations at a nonpublic level; the *interpersonal* (mesoscopic) dimension focuses upon the communal level of person-to-person relations; whilst the *transpersonal* (macroscopic) dimension comprises an examination of person-forming relations as they are mediated through historical and societal structures. It should be noted from the outset, however, that each of these dimensions is separated from the other two solely by means of reflective abstraction for the purposes of analytical clarity. In actuality, each of these dimensions of personal existence is penetrated by and dependent upon the others for its fullest expression. As all three dimensions are mutually constituted and reciprocally constituting in their relations, no representative picture of human subjectivity can be drawn which does not include reference to each one.

The Intrapersonal Dimension

Within the intrapersonal dimension of human subjectivity, the formal object of the self is the *Absolute Other* whom the Christian religion knows as God. Although no consensus exists in liberation theology as to the extent and manner of humankind's natural orientation towards the

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"Absolute Other"—the diversity of approaches traditionally typified by de Lubac, Rahner and von Balthasar being reflected within the liberationist community—there is widespread agreement that the presence and activity of God serves as the foundational basis of human subjectivity.[3] From the very beginning, human subjectivity is relational. The "non-subject" of Tracy's postmoderns makes way for a relational self in which personal subjectivity is grounded in the integrating dynamic generated by the primordial and constitutive presence of God. This integrative (ontological) dynamic is recognized at a conscious (i.e., existential) level by way of *faith*. Comprising the acknowledgement of our absolute dependence as subjects upon a personal God, faith both informs our reading of the world around us and impels us to personalise this world by way of practical engagement with it.

The Absolute Other, however, is not only the foundation of all human experience. As the person in all of his historical concreteness "is destined to communion with God,"[4] God is present to the subject also as the *Transcendent Other*; that is, the goal, the end of all human striving—see, Augustine, *Confessions*, I, i; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 8, 3. Utilizing the classical definition of the Trinity as a "community of persons," liberation theologians regard humankind as being *called* to "participate" within the Divine "society."[5] The perichoretic harmony of the Trinity constitutes a community of divine persons which is at all times open to the participation of each human subject. Although of a primarily private nature, the intrapersonal dimension of human existence is nevertheless a social affair—a *social* affair in which the Transcendent Other is encountered as a community of persons, and human subjectivity enhanced ("divinised") by means of inclusion within the Divine life. The more we respond to God's call to become the other (i.e., better person) that God would have us be, the more we are included within the personalizing dynamic of the divine life. Initiated by the prevenient activity of God as the absolute foundation of all subjectivity, personhood is nevertheless enhanced by the assumption of individual responsibility for who we are and what we might become.

Although never shying away from exploring the intrapersonal dimension of human existence as a relationship with the *Transcendent Other*, liberation theology is at constant pains to avoid an uncritical privatisation of human religiosity. In developing a "spirituality of liberation," Latin American theologians have highlighted the wholesale "interiorization" to which our personal relations with God have been subjected within the Christian tradition.[6] Liberation theology maintains that tradition's concern with the private, "vertical" dimension of God - human relations has resulted in the subjugation of the public, "horizontal"

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dimension of the Christian faith.[7] It is for this reason that whenever liberation theology describes salvation as "the communion of human beings with God," it does so by adding "and among themselves."[8] For liberation theology, God is encountered not only as the ground and end of my being, but also in the concrete, visible face of my neighbour. Within the internally orientated dynamic by which God is experienced as foundation and goal of subjectivity, there is contained a complementary centrifugal dynamic through which the personal subject is impelled to seek communion with other persons. This affirmation leads us to consider the second (mesoscopic) dimension of human subjectivity, the *interpersonal.*

The Interpersonal Dimension

The interpersonal dimension of human subjectivity is constituted by the tangible presence of a *visible other* who is my neighbour. Upon being confronted with the limitless possibilities of direct, face-to-face relations with another person, the subject encounters a public domain which demands either affirmation or rejection. There can never be any neutral, third way of indifference (*apatheia*) to the visible other who is my neighbour. Translated as "solidarity" by theologians of liberation, *agape* requires both a recognition of the other as independent of myself and an acceptance of the obligations which the freedom and equality of the other impose upon me as his/her neighbour.[9]

The cause of solidarity is never allowed by liberation theology to spill over into an uncritical homogenization in which individuality and difference are subsumed within a superficial sameness—thereby qualifying the "communal subject" of Tracy's anti-moderns. Certainly, the theistic metaphysics and universalist anthropology of liberation theology makes for an easy affirmation of our "common humanity."[10] At the same time, however, it is strongly affirmed that true personhood is realized by "the one who achieves a balance between autonomy and communion, solitude and fusion."[11] Within the interpersonal dimension of human existence, personhood flourishes at that mid-point which stands between the two poles of individualism and massification. The extreme of individualism is countered by the constant struggle for solidarity, whilst the excesses of collectivism are neutralized by the ongoing affirmation of difference.

Solidarity with and difference from the *visible other* are best guarded from the excesses of atomism and homogeneity by the formation of community. For liberation theology, there can be no meaningful talk of human subjectivity which does not make explicit reference to the impact which *community* has upon any particular person—"there is no such thing

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as a person apart from community."[12] To be personal is to be in community; to be a person, is to be *related-to-another.* Whether in the primary community of kinship structures or in the secondary community of the work-place, for example, it is in the face-to-face encounter with other human beings that personhood is most facilitated and enriched. "The essence of the Christian life," "Christianity's contribution" to the liberation of the world and humanity's "response to God's call" all lie in the formation of community as the arena for personal becoming.[13] It is no coincidence that liberation theology has found such a rich source of material in the concrete experience of the base ecclesial movement in Latin America—a movement predicated upon the fructification of personhood within a context of Christian solidarity with the *visible other.*

Within the face-to-face encounter of community, the other is experienced for what and who she is. The tangible presence of the *visible other* before me inhibits any false projection on my part in which the other is constructed out of the matrix of my own wishes, preoccupations and personal prejudices. In standing before me in the act of community, the *visible other* challenges the stereotypes by which I seek to define and thereby delimit his personhood. Authentic community both transcends simplistic appeals to *sameness* which subvert the challenge of my neighbour's difference from me and demands that this difference not be allowed to obscure an appreciation of those things we hold in common.

As personal existence is situated existence, Christian love—solidarity with the other—can never be blind, it is instead "love for the other in view of that other's own reality."[14] The "veil of ignorance" of bourgeois liberalism is rent as the *visible other* is met as one who is poor, one who is black, one who is female, one who is a Serb, Croat or Muslim. Consequently, true love for the other comprises both the affirmation of solidarity, in that infinite value transcends all plurality, and the acknowledgement of difference, in that we are each encountered as male or female, black or white, rich or poor, Protestant or Catholic. Authentic community among persons, *koinonia*, is "communion with diversity."[15] Such reflections bring us to the third dimension of human existence, that of the *transpersonal.*

The Transpersonal Dimension

It is perhaps in its reflections upon the *transpersonal* (macroscopic) nature of human existence that liberation theology makes its greatest contribution to the ongoing conversations of the "Western centre." Within the *transpersonal* dimension of human existence, the formal object of the self is what might be termed the *invisible other*, the one who is "distant from me."[16] The term *invisible other* is used to underline the indirect,

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oblique nature of person-to-person relations within the *transpersonal* dimension of human subjectivity. Here, the face of the other is not directly before me. Who and what the other is for me is not communicated by the tangible presence of the visible other whose subjectivity is experienced in the immediacy of interpersonal encounter. Instead, the effect of my actions upon the other and the other's actions upon me are mediated by any number of historical, cultural, religious, ethnic, economic, political, and social matrices.

Within the *transpersonal* dimension of human existence, societal relations are channeled by objective structures, rather than taking place at the level of subjective, intentionally directed encounters. The indirect and structurally mediated nature of these relations facilitate the fabrication and proliferation of stereotypes and representations which ultimately obscure and pervert the true identity of the other. In obfuscating the reality of who the *invisible other* is for me, these stereotypes and representations leave the *invisible other* open to an unfounded rejection and subsequently serve as the justification for her subjugation. Whether in post-discovery South America, prewar Germany, Apartheid South Africa or the Bosnian conflicts, the use of sexual, racial and ethnic stereotypes serve to depersonalise, vitiate and ultimately constrict the life chances of those subjects categorized under one pejorative heading or another.

The *transpersonal* dimension of human existence unfolds within a societal arena constituted by a plurality of conflicting world views and competing structural processes—many of which are unintentioned effects generated by the transposition of our everyday practical options into objectively existing life-worlds and structures. Mediated by way of, for example, class relations, inter-racial tension, sexual discrimination, and internecine ethnic strife, such *transpersonal* processes serve to pit person against person on the grounds of difference and otherness. Thus, whilst many individuals go through life not counting themselves as racist, sexist or ethnically prejudiced, for example, the *transpersonal* ethos or structural processes within which they exist may well induce them to act in ways which, intentioned or not, ultimately result in consequences injurious to the personal becoming of others. In effect, the *transpersonal* dimension of human existence comprises structures and processes which, directly or tangentially, generate requirements and facilitate actions through which the infinite value of the *other* is either obscured or perverted. In both cases the moral demands of personhood are lost sight of, and the *other*, by way of spatial or epistemic distance, is rendered practically *invisible*—and all the more readily exploitable.

A further contribution of the base ecclesial community to the maturation of liberation theology has been the manner in which it has

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grounded theological reflection upon the personal subject in the concrete experience of the day-to-day struggles of the exploited masses (Latin America's *invisible others*) at the base of society. It is a constant refrain of liberation theologians to remind the theological community in the North of the difference between their respective theoretical problematics. The *northern* community, it is said, has a predilection for asking how it might speak of God in an age of unbelief. For liberation theology, however, the issue is not one of secularisation, but that of reflecting upon the personalising affirmations of the faith in a society which is thoroughly dehumanizing.[17] Rooted in the daily experiences of the impoverished majority, liberation theology is never allowed to reflect upon *the person* as some abstract phenomenon divorced from the concrete realities of existence. Human existence is always *situated* existence, the *invisible other* is always mediated as one embedded within a given historical, social, economic, political, and cultural milieu.

Those structures and processes which encourage or facilitate the obfuscation of personhood at a *transpersonal* dimension, liberation theology regards as sinful. Defining sin always in relational terms, sin is manifest at the intrapersonal level as an ignoring of the call of God, at the interpersonal level as the breakdown of face-to-face relations and at the *transpersonal* level by means of unjust structures. Social or structural sin has for decades been a key component of the liberationist articulation of the *transpersonal* dimension of human existence. It is not suggested, of course, that it is the unjust structures themselves which do the sinning. Instead, unjust structural conditions such as poverty, hunger, exploitation, oppression, racism, sexism, and all forms of bigotry and inequality generate a social context in which sin is objectified and the person placed in an environment which facilitates and propagates selfishness, prejudice, ignorance, ambivalence and other forms of injurious dispositions and actions. As Comblin maintains:

> "Personal sins do not occur in isolation. They do not proceed merely from individual wills. Quite the contrary, personal sins also proceed from social and cultural contexts. No one is forced to sin; but cultural and social conditions are such that sin becomes, as it were, normal and easy. While someone is personally responsible for individual sins, these sins are also bound up with situations of sin—tied to social, structural sin."[18]

Individual responsibility is not ignored, it is, however, mitigated with reference to the situated nature of personal becoming. The relationship between individual and structural sin is dialectical in nature, "they mutually strengthen and feed off each other."[19]

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In explicating the *transpersonal* dimension of human existence, liberation theology has decentred sin and thereby posited salvation—as the overcoming of sin — not only as an intrapersonal phenomenon, but also as a social and historical reality. Consequently, there can be no remedy for sin which is not also *transpersonal* in nature. Given the unification of history and the decentred concept of personal existence, salvation ceases to be articulated in terms of a private and internalized elevation of the soul from a natural to a supernatural plane. Instead, an integral concept of the person demands an integral concept of salvation.

> "Salvation does not take shape, therefore, as a reality beyond the world, to be reached only *post*-history, in the life of the hereafter. Rather, it begins to be realized here. Though still not fully consummated, eternal life is already given to us by the Son of God in the here and now of human life...erupting within the fabric of human history, being revealed in the long and complex process of human liberation."[20]

Although careful not to undermine the transcendent dimension and *post*-historical fulfilment of God's saving activity, it is in order to underline the *historical* and *decentred* nature of salvation that the term "liberation" is utilized. Talk of salvation as liberation entails that in being saved, humanity is not saved from history, but saved within and for the sake of history. As Hugo Assmann puts it, the history of salvation is "the salvation of history."[21]

Structural sin finds its nemesis in "structural grace."[22] Structural grace is a term used by liberation theologians to designate God's love for the world as it is mediated through historical structures which strive to combat the realities of social sin. For liberation theology, such structures of grace find their ultimate *raison d'être* in a preferential option for the poor—an option which liberationists ground in biblical warrant, natural law, epistemological insight, and contextual relevance. Sacramental participation is a structure of grace, as are the base ecclesial communities or any other form of socially organized activity which enhances personal becoming in all of its dimensions. It is important to note, however, that whilst serving as a structure of grace, such structures never cease to be historical mediations and so remain at all times "imperfect," "ambivalent," "partial," "ambiguous" and "relative"—that is, open to the effects of sin.[23]

Emerging from the above recognition, liberation theologians refuse to reify any one political party, economic system or mode of activism over and against others. The primary issue is not which political party must be followed or which economic system adopted. Instead, the principal preoccupation of liberation theology concerns which practical means will

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best effect the desired end of a social structure in which sin and its effects can be fought. Those options which are chosen or recommended are done so solely on the basis that these means represent the most effective available route, given the historical and social circumstances, to the desired end of a personmaking society. No economic, political or ideological system stands as an end in itself. Instead, such historical structures are valued only to the extent that they mediate grace in the battle against all depersonalising historical and social phenomena. That measure against which liberation theology evaluates every potential medium of divine grace is the theological concept of the "reign of God."

Conclusion

Given the unification of history and the decentring of the concepts of sin, grace and salvation, the eschatological motif of the reign of God— guided by the overarching tenet of the preferential option for the poor—is brought to bear as a tangible, historical reality by which every liberative practice is to be measured. Although the reign of God stands as a tangible, historical phenomenon, it is a reality that will not be fully consummated until the denouement of the created order itself.[24] Dependent for its gradual, yet always partial, realisation in history upon the efforts of humankind to construct a more personalizing world, the reign of God comprises the complete affirmation of the subject in every dimension of human existence. As the one "true human" and "herald" of the reign of God, Jesus' life, death and resurrection constitute a paradigm experience by which those struggling for a world conducive to
the flourishing of personhood might find encouragement and strength.[25]

Initiated by humankind's co-operation with the underlying presence of God, activities as diverse as private contemplation, communal prayer, individual stands for justice, collective action for peace, and every kind of corporate struggle for a better world serve to liberate humanity in every dimension from the depersonalizing effects of sin. Whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal or *transpersonal* level, any disposition or action which enhances the capacity for personhood is, in some way, a partial contribution toward the unfolding of the reign of God in history. Undertaken *sub specie regni* and articulated by way of an historicised and decentred understanding of the personal subject, the reflections of liberation theology offer a degree of insight which Tracy's three Western conversations upon difference and otherness would do well to acknowledge.

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