The Ground Beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría

Kevin F. Burke

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol10/iss2/8

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

The Ground Beneath the Cross is a densely, if carefully, argued and learned book. It should stand the test of time as the standard exposition, in English, of the theology of Ignacio Ellacuría. It is, however, a book which absolutely requires, yet will repay, careful study. I read the book three times! Ellacuría’s theology is little-known and cited, partially because, although he wrote prolifically, “he wrote out of multiple concerns, in different genres, for diverse audiences and with varying degrees of editing and polish” (p. 33). Ellacuría also relied heavily on the relatively inaccessible philosophical vision of an obscure and academically isolated Spanish-Basque philosopher, Xavier Zubiri (1898–1983) who constructed a philosophical lexicon entirely of his own devising, developing a range of neologisms and new definitions for standard philosophical terms. Zubiri was both the rich source for and the main obstacle to penetrate the theology of Ellacuría.

Burke argues that it is worthwhile, literally plowing through Zubiri’s often quite idiosyncratic philosophical system, to see its cash-value in Ellacuría’s use of it for a theological method which delivers a rich, neither naively realistic nor idealistic, sense of reality, history, nature, and a version of theological ethics. I want to construe this review as a kind of drama in three acts. In Act One, I am asked to review the book and accept enthusiastically because I much admired Ellacuría, the
man and the martyr. I once met him at a conference on human rights in the Americas. Like many, I deeply admired his courageous leadership as the rector of El Salvador’s Jesuit University of Central America as a university committed, unflinchingly, to a knowledge which serves truth and justice. I knew he was martyred for the kind of life he lived which grew, in part, out of his philosophy. Finally, I have long thought that liberation theology would be enriched by a more careful philosophical and ethical anchoring. Perhaps, I wondered Ellacuría, the quintessential philosopher, provides it.

In Act Two, my enthusiasm for the project bogs down in a kind of trough of near despair as I slog through the relatively obscure and idiosyncratic system of Zubiri (a kind of revision of scholasticism through the lens of Kant and Hegel). I need to take notes to track his neologisms such as theological (the implicit God dimension in all beings); sentient-intelligence (an epistemology peculiar to Zubiri by which sensing and understanding are linked in a unity); religation (a technical term for what binds intra-mundane reality as a whole to its fundament); respecativity (the prior and primary unity of reality by which all things are related to each other); substantivity (connected to but distinguished from what ordinary philosophy calls substance: “substantivity is realized in substance but consists in the formal structure of the constitutional unity that is formally individual—but not specific or generic,” p. 92); transcurrence (defined on p. 71 as “the now-present itself being constitutively and formally a now-from to something that is open, in itself and from itself, to its own past and future”).

The reader will have seen my point that this book requires study. I am also not very metaphysically musical! Part way through this slough of despond, I find, finally, a treatment of Ellacuría’s use of Zubiri, to deal with the four grounds of the real unity of history: in matter, spatiality, temporality, and the biological foundation of history. I began to see how Zubiri’s scheme makes both history and sociality central to reality, how it embraces the individual and freedom without falling into individualism and how historical reality becomes closely linked to nature. I approve of these conclusions. I must admit, however, that during Act Two, the exposition of Zubiri’s philosophy of reality and the human, I almost walked out on the play!

In Act III, the latter part of the book, we get a pay-off in Ellacuría’s application of Zubiri as a foundation for theological method. There are three major moments to this method: (1) “Realizing the weight of reality.” In this first moment, we become vulnerable to the real and “the human apprehends reality and reality confronts the human” (p. 100). To realize the “weight” of reality (which we stand in the middle of), theology needs to turn for help to the social sciences which enable
theology to employ concepts and ideologies in a critical, ethical, and efficacious way. (2) "Shouldering the Weight of Reality." This moment turns to the ethical and asks squarely about the place where one does theology, since what one knows and who one becomes depend on where one puts one's body. Zubiri's notions of temporality and spatiality do help us better understand the need to think clearly about the "place" where we do theology. (3) "Taking charge of the weight of reality." This third moment of the method looks toward praxis. This aids us to know where one must stand in the middle of reality.

There are four constitutive background conditions for exercising Ellacuría's three-fold method in theology: (1) The object of theology is not God in se but the self-communication of God in history. The core of theology revolves around the Reign of God in history and a salvation which is both in history and has effect upon history. "A real theological commitment to the realization of the Reign of God almost inevitably leads to conflict, often brings on persecution and, in the extreme, ends with martyrdom" (p. 142). (2) Social interests lurk behind all theological activities so one has to ask always: for what and for whom is theology produced? (3) Theological activity not only serves the faith, it is also conditioned by and serves an ecclesiastical institution. The core notion of the people of God is larger than the ecclesiastical institution which is the church. The institution also has interests which may pervert theology. The true people of God is a "crucified people" in history who continue Christ's role of judge and savior of history through the cross. (4) Theological activity has a multi-layered social-historical character. Ellacuría appeals to Zubiri’s fourfold notion of an open materialism, spatiality, temporality, and the biological rootedness to reality to help unfold the layers of socio-history.

Finally, the ethical scheme which flows from the second and third moments in Ellacuría’s method for theology (shouldering and taking charge of the weight of reality) is called prophetic-utopianism. The prophetic contrasts the proclamation of the full Reign of God with one’s own specific historical situation. It links this to a historization in concrete yet realizable utopias.

Quite frankly, I am not sure how much of Ellacuría’s theological method can be extracted from the dense woods of Zubiri's philosophical scheme. I doubt whether Ellacuría will be much read and used without that extraction. Attempting this extraction seems to point the way for the next step in Ellacuría studies. Can you translate his work without being lost and entangled in the thickets of Zubiri's very difficult, arcane, and idiosyncratic philosophical system? In any event, we can agree with the conclusion Ellacuría came to, using his method, about a consumerist capitalism which exploits the earth without care for the
ecological consequences: "If the behavior and even the ideal of a few
cannot become the behavior and the reality of the greater part of hu-
manity, that behavior and that ideal cannot be said to be moral or even human, all the more so if the enjoyment of the few is at the cost of de-
priving the rest" (p. 141).

John A. Coleman, S.J.