

God's Suffering Power and Liberation

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My objective in this essay is to suggest ways of gaining a more comprehensive and historical view of power in relation to suffering. In this way I hope to make a contribution to the development of liberation theology, particularly as reflected in the North American context. I assume that the understanding of human power is derived from the God-situation in which one lives. Liberation theologies should be more aware of the concept of human power which emerges from the God-situation of the crucified Christ. This understanding of power is more historical than many power concepts held in liberation theologies and it can better serve their concrete expectations of liberation.

The most pressing issue of any liberation theology which claims to be biblical and which intends to serve the actual freeing of persons within social conditions is a radical reinterpretation of power, especially in relationship to suffering. Without a thoroughly critical theological interpretation of power, liberation theology is in danger of adopting power concepts which are fundamentally alien to its vision of freedom. Such a reinterpretation can emerge from a concept of God, of the incarnation, and of anthropology derived from the cross of Christ. If the passion and the death of Jesus are expressions of the being of God (and not just expressions of the saving activity of God), this means a revolution in the concept of God and thus a revolution in the concept of power. We should ask about the crucifixion of Jesus not merely as the ground of salvation; we should view it also in terms of what the death of Jesus means for God himself. This will mean trying to comprehend the Pauline claim that "the word of the cross . . . Christ crucified" is the "power of God" (I Cor. 1:17-25). It will mean viewing the liberating power of God not only in terms of exodus and resurrection (the principal paradigms of liberation theologies) but also in terms of exile and crucifixion. What is at stake here is an enrichment of divine power as well as an empowerment of divine and human suffering. This perspective speaks of a relationship of power and suffering in which they mutually condition, enrich, and transform each other.

A genuinely liberating theology of liberation requires us to begin dialectically by asking about the power and suffering of God as we ask about the power and suffering of history, the city, and nature. For Christian faith has to be confident about the God of whom it speaks for the sake of Jesus Christ and from it expects liberation. Otherwise it will find itself expecting liberation from the idols of history, the city, and nature.

I

Liberation and the Power of God

Power and suffering must be ultimately related to each other in terms of our concept of God, since men and women develop their humanity in relation to the divinity of their God. The tendency of the God-concept in recent liberation theologies has been to polarize power and suffering so that on the anthropological level they become mutually exclusive. Liberation is understood as the end of suffering and the end of suffering is the plenipotent demonstration of the end of oppression. "We are through suffering, period!" is a pronouncement heard in some liberation theologies. But power without suffering is ahistorical and self-destructive, just as suffering totally bereft of power would be a state of non-being or an illusion. The reason for this mutual exclusion of power and suffering in human intention and action lies in a God-concept which cannot embrace both power and suffering. It is a doctrine of God which is derived from 1) a residual classical theism or 2) an exclusive emphasis on the eschatological act of God. The characteristics of the resulting notions of human power do not correspond to the historical process of liberation which is envisioned and demanded by most liberation theologies.

Let us look first at ways in which the God-concept of liberation theologies have determined their anthropology as regards power and suffering.

For the liberation theologies God begins to make sense again in terms of power conceived in the broadest political sense. The hunger for liberation appears in the cries of suffering. Suffering — suffering from racial and sexual alienation, from economic exploitation, from political oppression, from the destruction of nature, or from the repressed meaning of life — raises the question of God. The great advance which is reflected in almost every liberation theology is the insistence that the question of God is raised out of a concrete situation of suffering and that knowledge of God moves

consistently from the particular to the universal, from the concrete situation of suffering to the general context of meaning. From this derive the two key contributions of liberation theologies to contemporary theology, their soteriology and their anthropology. 1) Salvation is the real historical transformation of the powers which cause oppression. 2) Oppressed human beings, as they gain power, are participants in God's creative acts of liberation. It may be safely said that these gains have or will soon affect theology everywhere in the West. The problem arises when it is claimed that the divine and human acts of liberation end human suffering or that suffering is eliminated without suffering. The problem is that power is then conceived in ahistorical terms. And the reason for this can be found in the residues of classical theism and one-dimensional (eschatological) biblical views of God which have obviated suffering in the internal life of God. Liberation theologies begin with the practical question how to get free from the oppressors' God-attributes, according to which they conceive and justify their power. But they have not become radical enough in this criticism.

The classical concepts are correctly recognized as part and parcel of the oppressors' power. But there is in liberation theologies enough residue of the classical attributes to have a significant effect on the human attributes of power developed by these theologies.

Liberation theologies bring together in a highly creative way an emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the struggle for human liberation. At the heart of the "liberation" soteriology is the claim that God identifies with the oppressed by giving them the attributes of his power. Suffering is analyzed in terms of the historical experience of oppressed people and then power is analyzed in terms of the attributes of God's sovereignty. God's *kenosis* is grasped unequivocally as human empowerment. Powerlessness in human beings and nature is the condition for knowing God. The overcoming of powerlessness in human beings and nature is the condition for verifying the power and thus divinity of God. Since human beings understand their humanity in terms of the divinity of their God, the understanding of human power will derive from the understanding of God's power. What, however, if the attributes of God's power are still essentially those assigned to Greek conceptions of deity or the idols of power in modern technocratic and revolutionary humanism?

There is still a tendency in liberation theologies to view the essential attributes of God's sovereignty as 1) realized potentiality (*actus purus*), as

2) indivisibility, as 3) aseity, and as 4) impassibility. The resulting anthropological image includes notions of power which are ahistorical.

1. If liberation is construed as happening in the *pure act* of the transformation of powerlessness into power, power becomes ahistorical. Power understood as *pure act* does not exist through time. God shares with human beings the fulness and perfection of his power. Power then is an event, not a process. Liberation happens in the act of the transformation of powerlessness into power: when culturally alienated people gain a new identity; when politically impotent people gain new political power; when economically impoverished people gain a just distribution of wealth. Rather than creating history and living through its ambiguities and complexities power as pure act brings history to a close. It completes and realizes all available possibilities so that risk and danger are removed from the life of the liberated one. Nothing of power is left over after its exhaustive realization.

But where in history would such a liberating power appear? We may be able to speak of a freshly realized act of liberation in relation to a new oppression. But what about the oppression that abides through time? How shall we live not only from oppression to oppression but also in the face of the oppressions which are not eliminated in a day? The impatience which accompanies power as pure act easily degenerates into despair and self-destruction when the powers of history prove more resilient than the pure act of liberation.

2. If an essential attribute of God's sovereignty is *indivisibility*, power is understood as autonomous and essentially unrelated to anything external to it. The self-image of one empowered by this attribute of God is one of isolated completion in a closed universe. There are no differentiations of divinely posited power; it is of one piece and substance. It does not have inner tensions and conflicts. Its absolute unity and non-relatedness assure its uncontested self-identity. It is understandable that liberation theologians express a certain predilection to this power model, since they have addressed themselves to the radical problem of how to gain power when one does not have the *power to be*. They express an intense, over-riding concern not to jeopardize identity (the power to be) with external relationships.

But power which gains its identity through absolute unity and non-relatedness is ahistorical. To be sure, theology should, as liberation the-

ologians have claimed, begin by addressing the problem of power in those situations which are most patently powerless. Otherwise we would not be able to recognize a power which relates itself to the totality of powerlessness and oppression. By the same token, however, theology cannot define powerlessness and power in indivisible, one-dimensional terms. If it does this, it will surely miss the multi-dimensionality of oppression and suffering, not to speak of the multi-dimensionality of power and of historical liberation.

The model of indivisible power corresponds to the emergent moralism in which each liberation movement claims that its peculiar area of oppression is the sole repository of "original sin." Neither oppression nor its etiology can be construed in indivisible terms. To work only for liberation in the dimension of cultural alienation, for instance, may in fact aid in the creation of oppression of others in different dimensions as well as the diverse intensification of one's own oppression. If oppression is objectively multifaceted, can the actual liberation of persons in society take place without the concrete cooperation between liberation movements?

3. If an essential attribute of God's sovereignty is *aseity*, human power is understood basically as self-sufficiency. In the resulting human self-image a person becomes powerful by freeing himself or herself from need of anyone or anything. This requires the renunciation of real interdependence between persons or groups whose lives have different power configurations, interests, and values. It also demands the renunciation of dependence on one's own life-situation and even one's body. By becoming free from one's own needs and learning to dominate oneself, one gains an internal freedom. God's transcendent freedom from the world can thus be reflected in a person's transcendent freedom from that part of the world which would create a *need* in him or her. One brings all one's passions and interests into a strict definition of one's own self-sufficient power. There is no "plus extra" of power which is not exhaustively realized in one's self-definition. Anything that would draw a person into dependent relationships is to be assiduously avoided. Once the event of power has occurred, one is beyond anger and love, trouble and fear, laughing and crying. Self-sufficient power makes one apathetic, in the common use of this term, that is, disinterested. Disinterest is a well-proven way to a kind of freedom.

One of the great values of the liberation theologies is their intention to place their concerns in the political context, that is, the context of value

and interest-oriented policy decision. But if their understanding of power is that of aseity/self-sufficiency, their tendencies will be apolitical, since they will be fundamentally opposed to the power compromises and coalitions which are incorrigible characteristics of the political sphere.

4. Finally, if an essential attribute of God's sovereignty is *impassibility*, the self-image of persons will conceive of power as invulnerable. This is a power which can intellectualize justice but cannot suffer for its realization. The *conditio sine qua non* of this power is the repression of one's own experience of suffering as well as those of others. The uncritical pronouncement "we are through suffering" can lead to a new kind of apathy. Here apathy is understood in the classical sense of being *incapable of suffering*. Liberation theology can easily be threatened with the loss of passion through its conception of power. In refusing to see suffering at the heart of power, liberation theologies often fail to sense the genuine power in the communities they represent.

It is right that the notion of love spawned by a white, male-dominated culture should be utterly rejected by all liberation theologies. But a liberation theology has to be careful not to reduce love to an *act* and thereby lose the meaning of love as a *passion*. Passion is not passivity but rather the capacity to be affected. The practice of a power which refuses to suffer leaves historical vacuums into which new forms of dominance easily rush. This view of power is not ready to deal with the negative which is not utterly destroyed and which abides. Therefore it is in danger not only of not being able to continue the negation of the negative but also of not even being aware of the continuing negative. The result here may indeed be a remystification of the situation of oppression. An invulnerable, impassible sense of power can issue in a mere esthetic interpretation of the real conditions of suffering. One gains a new consciousness or feeling of power and then is no longer capable of feeling the chains of others or suffering from the emergence of new forms of oppression.

II

A New God-Situation

What we have just discussed is the residue of classical theism in liberation theologies, which should be understood as a constant deleterious tendency in them. In point of fact, most liberation theologies have directed

a strong critique against theistic concepts from an eschatological perspective. Liberation theologies tend to understand the being of God from his act in the events of the exodus and resurrection. But if it is not to turn into an ahistorical enthusiasm without the long wind to persevere in situations of oppression and to transform them from the roots up, this faith will have to understand its power also from God's suffering in the cross.

A liberation theology's concept of God will produce an anthropological understanding of power which does not serve the intention and process of liberation unless it can understand the being of God from the cross of Christ. Its concept of God should develop from the dialectic of the resurrection of the crucified one and the cross of the resurrected one. If in the resurrection we see God *in action*, in the crucifixion we see God *in passion*. To understand the being of God from the suffering and death of Jesus may be the most audacious and yet crucial task for contemporary theology. The next stage in the development of liberation theology should take up the problem of criticizing the idols of our capitalist society not only in order to gain the identity of internal freedom but also the real public freedom of men and women in society. But to serve precisely this concrete public liberation, I believe theology needs to speak audaciously of the internal life and history of God himself. This project will make clear above all that the internal life of God is not exhausted by his mighty deeds, not absolutely self-enclosed, not totally self-sufficient, and not apathetic.

III

Liberation and the Suffering of God

Our understanding of the power of God and of human beings from the perspective of the trinitarian history of God's suffering can be augmented by current scholarship on Old Testament laments. The lament can be understood as the most authentic expression of the faith which embraces Israel's deepest suffering together with God's saving response to situations of misery. It is in and through the experiences of suffering that Israel comprehends Yahweh's power as well as her own. To know God is to suffer God. But laments, especially the "lament of God" himself, have reference not only to the history of human suffering but also the history of God's suffering. As such, they illumine a new God-situation in which God in his wrath and judgment struggles with God in his grief and mourning. The powerful God places his interest in his covenant with his people.

His *esse* becomes his *inter-esse* (Moltmann). He goes outside of himself. His grief, his anger, and his suffering are expressions of his historical interest in his creatures. Identification with his people therefore means not an *actus purus* but the affection and changing of God. The power of his faithfulness makes him suffer. The suffering of God is the means by which Israel is saved. *Lament* is the shape of the people's relation to God and *pathos* is the shape of God's interest, faithfulness, and power.

If we try to understand the incarnation and God's being from a trinitarian view of the cross, then we must go further and say not only that God suffers for and with his people (as liberation theologians have said), but also that suffering, rejection, poverty, weakness, and death are *in God* himself. That God himself was actively suffering in the cross of Jesus is the condition on which Christian theology can address itself to the theodicy question, the question of the present suffering of the oppressed and the question of the past dead. But this is also the condition on which we can begin to understand a power which lasts and does not destroy itself; a power which does not allow itself to be determined by the negative and the rules of the opponent; a power which can get a second wind in the face not only of evil, but also in the face of the transcendent power of death and the recalcitrant power of one's own guilt.

What are implications of the God-situation in the cross of Christ for the process of liberation? What does it mean for Christians to understand their power in the liberating process from the suffering of God? God is not pure act or simply the God who acts in the resurrection. God is himself passion. Where there are acts (*opera*) of God, there are also passions (*passiones*) of God. He waits on his creatures in his "costly love." He himself suffers in the wandering of his people in the wilderness, with the exiles, and in the cross. He suffers through time, struggling with himself, but in hope for the coming occupation of the land, the new exodus, and the resurrection. Human beings living in this God-situation are called to understand their power as *passion*, that is, power which has interests, yearnings, expectations and which lives from time through time in faithful anticipation of the promised full liberation. Power as passion is power which will not give up its goals, precisely when one can feel only impotence or even when one's goals seem mostly realized. Thus power as passion is the stuff of resilience and insatiability. From the perspective of the Stoic ethic, this is not a particularly prudent understanding of power because it keeps one stubbornly restless and unsatisfied.

The suffering God is the *Deus Absconditus*. But he is often hidden to us merely because we cannot bear to apprehend his suffering. We like to see God when he is *in act*: as creator, conqueror, judge, redeemer. But this God can be easily coopted by the *homo Americanus* who wants to worship a God of success, achievement, action, production and consumption. God is most problematic and "dangerous" for us (theologically speaking) when he is *in passion*: angry, cursing, in rage, crying, broken hearted over his creatures, and suffering to free them. These are the unbecoming aspects of God which we had not expected to encounter. But should we not take seriously the *theologia crucis* of Mark and Paul: God's glory, that which is required for a radical liberation of all things in a new creation, is seen here and now in God's passion? This means that we are asked to look for the power of God in unlikely places? For instance, on the faces of those who remain in the crucifixion spots of the world. Such an image of this crucified power in the suffering Mother Love of the Father as reflected in the face of Mary who, when the others have fled, stays at the foot of the cross until the end. It is the courage of this suffering love which in the end sees the radical transformation.

Persons who enter the process of liberation with suffering power become more passionately interested in the crucifixion spots because they find their own freedom reflected and promised there. Our theology and practice are still beset with the notion of being where the "action is." We like to visit the trouble spots, to make our play, our protest, and to *do* our thing. But when the first sign of failure or suffering appears, it's on to the next action spot. The point is to find the power which will keep us where people are suffering until the causes of that suffering are radically transformed. Staying-power, so to speak, is an urgent requirement of liberation. But anyone who thinks that this liberating process does not involve suffering through time is not taking history or suffering seriously.

The God who takes history seriously and takes suffering into himself is not *indivisible*. The partisanship of his love does not make him a one-dimensional sufferer. In the cross he does not spiritualize himself or define himself as a contract partner so that people have to meet religious or community standards in order to be an object of his suffering. It is obscene to say that oppressed people should suffer for their salvation. It is profane to believe in a God who is not suffering in, with, and for oppressed people. But it is shortsighted to overlook the multiplicity, the interrelatedness, and the simultaneity of historical sufferings. The God

who suffers from an internal struggle with himself by taking the history of suffering and death into himself is opposed to such short-sightedness. If one holds out for God's indivisible identification with one's own class, race, sex, party, nation, or environment and thereby gives up hope for the other dying people, one will soon lose all hope for one's own future. The process of liberation cannot be indivisible.

The God who hopes for the future of the misused and the damned is not utterly *self-sufficient* in himself. He has his identity from freely choosing the radically other. God enters into the human situation of finiteness (as liberal theology has always said), but also into the situations of godforsakenness. Jesus is condemned by the religion of law and the law of the Roman peace. Jesus' suffering, however, goes deeper. It is suffering from condemnation by the one whom he called Father. If we take a third step and speak of God's own suffering as the pain he feels at his Son's death, we cannot understand our power from simple notions of kenosis. We are not empowered simply with act-attributes of God's power but also with the passion of God's power.

The process of liberation which takes place in the God-situation of the cross is sensitive to that power which finds its strength in its need for those who are radically different. This need springs from obedience to the crucified lordship of God and has nothing to do with the weakness and the humility of the cowed head. Rather it is a sign of regained creatureliness and humanity. On the most practical level liberation theologies and movements will have to discover the interfaces of their various power configurations in order to cooperate with each other. If their power concepts prevent this, their results will be at best piecemeal. Cooperation can come about through the location of common negatives and common oppressors. But this ground for cooperation is shaky without the common experience of a power which can suffer by accepting the negative into one's own life.

The God who accepts the negative into his own life is not *impassible*. His interest in life, his love, makes him vulnerable and causes him to suffer. Men and women who practice liberation in the situation of God's pain know that they can remain *in love* despite the suffering and dying of this world. They do not expect a religious or metaphysical answer to the question of suffering but they do expect to share in the love which God expresses through death and for life. Therefore they are not compelled to seek God in the law and the compulsion of their own work; in political power and the increase of their own status; in nature or in the artifacts

of the city and their own power of control through knowledge. They are able more clearly to see the interests of the idols of power in our society. They suffer from the interest which these idols have in death-oriented systems and from the necrophilia (Fromm) which is spreading through our society. But they can remain in love without the self-deluding power idols of Prometheus and Atlas. Thus they are free for the transformatory suffering which reaches to the roots where all power (whether understood as ideas, groups, or material interests) is shored up, namely, to human values. Values are human self-expressions of one's own power-embodiments or power-desires as determined by a particular God-situation. Liberation theology is called to serve the transformation of power by clearly pointing to the God situation in which power is *cruciform*. In this situation power and suffering are not mutually exclusive; they embrace each other already here and now in the courage and thankfulness of the liberated ones and in anticipation of the joy of the redeemed new creation.

What I have said is by no means a recommendation for further suffering by oppressed people. I have spoken of suffering in a soteriological context only after speaking of it in a theological framework, since I am convinced that we will make sense out of suffering in the process of liberation only if we can make sense of suffering in God himself. This will not amount to a theoretical theodicy but rather to a call to faith and hope in the crucified God. A critical theory of the *practice* of liberating power in the God-situation opened up by the crucified risen one *is* theodicy. From the Christian perspective, it seems to be the only practically faithful and faithfully practical way of speaking of power and suffering in the same breath.

I have spoken of the God who *acts* for the freeing of his suffering creatures and the selfsame God who *suffers* for the freeing of his acting creatures. God's suffering is not simply a matter of his identification with the powerlessness of the oppressed. God himself actually suffers. An adequate understanding of our power in the God-situation of the cross must therefore include suffering at the heart of power. This does not mean a denial of what liberation theologies have generally accomplished in their doctrine of God and their anthropology of power. Rather I have argued that the recognition of God's suffering in the cross in a dialectical relationship with God's act in the resurrection will ground a more open and historically realistic understanding of power in the experiment of liberation. In this we can agree with Sigmund Freud: "As long as man can suffer he may still become something."