Materialistic Reading of the Bible

Lecture in Leiden, 18.06.1985[1]

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[1] 1. Apology for the word "Materialistic"[2]

Right at the beginning I want to apologize for the word "materialistic." It is ill-chosen, because it evokes all kind if ideas that in fact have nothing to do with the subject we are about to discuss this afternoon. According to the Random House College Dictionary a "materialist" is either "an adherent of philosophical materialism" or "a person who is markedly more concerned with material things than with spiritual values." Neither of these definitions really hits the mark. Materialistic reading of the bible does not mean that you have to become I an adherent of philosophical materialism (whatever that may be), although you might pick up a few useful things there and although philosophical *idealism* is certainly not the kind of philosophy that "materialistic exegesis" would advocate. Neither does "a person markedly more concerned with material things than with spiritual values" sound like an adequate description of the kind of theologian "materialistic exegesis" has in mind. Although (with all due respect for the Random House College Dictionary) the contradiction between "material things" and "spiritual values" *does* sound rather odd to me, since there could never be *one* "spiritual value" as long as a certain number of "material things" has not been provided for...

Therefore: don't pin me down on this word. Actually, the word "materialistic" in this context has been coined for purely commercial (not to say "materialistic") reasons. When the young and unknown Portuguese Fernando Belo in the mid-seventies, at that time living in Paris, wrote a [2] book on the exegesis of Mark he gave it some very scholarly sounding title. The French editor however did not like it; he was afraid that under that title he might not sell a single copy. So he came up with the intentionally provocative title "Materialistic Reading of the Gospel of Mark." Poor Belo had little option; reluctantly he agreed. The book became a bestseller. The title served at least *one* purpose... But of course, it is just a word, and we should not let words play tricks on us. What would like to discuss is the factual *content* of this word.

Therefore, by way of introduction, I shall now try to give you a preliminary definition of "materialistic bible reading." The full content will become clear in the course of the argument, I hope.

> "Materialistic bible reading" or "materialistic exegesis"
> or (perhaps a better term) "materialistic hermeneutics"
> is a set of theoretical concepts
> aiming at an approach of the text of the bible
> that pays proper attention to the socio-economical context
> of the authors, the transmitters and the eventual readers of that text.

[1] The lecture was found in the archive only in manuscript form. The original page numbers are given in square brackets.

[2] Zuurmond does not make use of the distinction that English, unlike Dutch, allows between "materialist" and "materialistic." (MV)

2. Exegesis and Current Philosophy

A text, in particular a text, from a period and a culture that are far away, is an enigma. If you come to think of it: it is an astonishing fact that we more or less grasp the meaning of ancient texts like the Old and the New Testament in the first place. A text is a highly complicated texture of signs, a labyrinth in which we have to find our way. Any help we can get is therefore more than welcome. I consider "a materialistic approach" such a help. It is not the only one. Exegesis, over the centuries, has developed various approaches, which all of them have their [3] advantages and their disadvantages, their use and their limits. The "materialistic approach" is one of them; one that has been underestimated in the past, I would think, but at the same time one that obviously also has its limits.

One of the limits is for instance that the material we have to work with is rather scanty. One would like to know much more about social, political and economic life in the world in which the bible originated. Another limitation is given with the fact that we *do* see there is a relation between the socio-economic structure of a society and the literature (including the religious literature) it produces. But nobody knows exactly *how* these things are related and how the mechanism that connects the two works; we don't even know whether or not this is the right way to pose the problem. Therefore we have to be careful; not only *we* of course, but everybody who is trying one way or another to interpret ancient texts.

Nobody reads Scripture from a position outside history. Exegesis always has been operating within the gravitational field of current ideas and current practices. The student of the history of exegesis, should not find it too difficult to establish the relationship between the kind of exegesis of a certain period (I mean "exegesis" in the wide sense of the word: the presuppositions, the exegetical methods, the exegetical results and the way these results are being used)... between the kind of "exegesis" of a certain period and the leading philosophical ideas of that period. I won't go into details, but can you think of *allegory*, as practiced for instance by Philo or Origen, without Platonism? Or can you read Calvin's splendid commentaries without noticing that you hear a voice of a theologian who was deeply rooted in 17th century Humanism?

We may also come a bit closer to our days. Is it a coincidence that [4] historical criticism began to develop in the late 18th century (I think of Lessing for instance) at a time that the concept of history was – so to say – philosophically being established? Or do you think that the XlX-th century, indulged itself in writing "Lifes of Jesus" completely apart from the turn to the inner side of the individual that is so characteristic for the literature of that period (compare Jane Austin with the Bronte sisters), the philosophy of that period (think of Kant) and – in fact – the theology of that period (and who could think of 19th century theology without immediately having Schleiermacher in mind)?

The late XIX-th century saw the rise of "higher criticism", as it was called in those days. Its main feature was the splitting up of the Pentateuch into its alleged "sources": J, E, P, and D. Eventually almost everybody seemed to lose interest in the whole of the book of Genesis; that was supposed to be the, work of some "R" – "R for Redactor" – a softheaded patcher who nobody was really interested in (and of course, he was a Jew anyhow...). Doesn't that sound very much like the positivist maxim that you can only understand the whole when you are in full command of the parts, and that for that reason you should concentrate on the parts and not let yourself be led astray by asking abortive questions about the whole? (Apart from the fact that this attitude also had a definite ring of antisemitism?)

The 1920's in exegesis are the years of the rising star of "Formgeschichte." As you may remember the basic question was: what is the "Sitz im Leben" (the position in life) of the various elements of the text. It is basically a sociological approach. Well, the early 20th century was the time in which sociology made headway at the universities. And the leading philosophies of the period are quite appropriately called "philosophies of [5] life." Don't you think there was just a tiny connection?

Do I have to discuss Bultmann's existentialist interpretation and its dependence on Heidegger? Or the advance of "structural analysis" in literature and in exegesis in the late 60's and 70's, and its relation with French structuralism (and for that matter: the comet-like appearance of the computer)? It is quite a catalogue of philosophies and worldviews. And don't you ever believe that exegetes live in such sterile surroundings that they never catch a germ. Of course they do and all the better for it. Every help in understanding and explaining Scripture is more than welcome; as long as it remains a help and not tries to become the boss. Dependence on current philosophical ideas is not shameful. Even a short living theological fashion may bring something worthwhile, to be kept for long after the fashion has petered out. Shameful it is when an exegete is very much dependent on methods and structures of science around him, and yet he is not aware of it. Because awareness of the basic structures of your scientific work is the only way to see your own limitations and to remain openminded towards other ways and means.

3. Marxism

"A whole catalogue of philosophies and world views." But I forgot one. Or rather: I didn't forget it, but theology did: Marxism. When I mentioned the sociological school in literature, I could have gone into some detail and mention its "left wing." Because in the twenties and thirties west-European Marxism has been very much occupied with the theory of literature. Famous political theorists like Gramsci and Trotsky wrote elaborate studies on literature. Neo-Marxists like Lucien Goldman and many others joined them. Most famous of all, no doubt, was the Hungarian born Marxist philosopher [6] Georg Lukacs.

This boom in Marxist theory of literature was not without precedent. Marx himself, in particular in his earlier years, had written quite a few essays on the literature of his days. Engels always had a keen interest in the arts and their function in life. Marxist theorists like Plekhanov and Rosa Luxemburg paid a lot of attention to literature and the arts in general. And even Lenin wrote a few articles on, for instance, Tolstoy that are quite worth reading. There certainly is such a thing as a Marxist theory of literature.

It all goes back, in some way or another, to Marx' theory about "basis" and "superstructure." According to this theory art and science, philosophy and religion, and even the political structure of a society are dominated "in the end" by the socio-economical structure of society. The latter is the "Basis," literature and religion belong to the "superstructure." In the case of literature and religion this superstructure falls under the category of "ideology". "Ideology" is taken is its factual sense, without any sort of positive or negative judgement attached to it. It is simply the world of the mind: thoughts, ideas, opinions, theoretical reflection of any kind. If I am going to use the word later on, I am going to use it in that sense. It is therefore just a matter of classification when I call the bible a product of ideology. Just as I might say that the bible is a work of literature.

As I said: there was in the 20's and 30's a definite Marxist (or neo-Marxist) theory of literature. Yet nobody ever thought of applying this to the bible. Whereas other theories of literature soon found their way in theology, Marxist theory of literature never did. Never, until the mid-seventies, when Belo wrote his book on Mark. That marked the birth of what [7] is now commonly known as "materialist reading of the bible."

It is an astonishing fact that it took so long. If you talk about the "Sitz im Leben"; why should you then go into the details of religious life (which you cannot separate from ordinary everyday life in antiquity anyhow), why should you try to understand parts of scripture as situated in the *cultic* life of Israel and the early church, why try to understand the *cultural* and *political* background of a text, and not bother about socio-economic background? I am not saying that nobody did. There are a few very outstanding exceptions (I might e.g. refer to Joachim Jeremias' book "Jerusalem in the time of Jesus" (1962)) but before the seventies they were exceptions.

Why? I have but one solution to this problem. Church and theology were hermetically and very effectively locked off from Marxism. This was not the kind of philosophy that Church and theology could have anything to do with. A marked anti-socialism and anti-communism in Europe (and even more in the U.S.) prevented the results of Marxist research from penetrating theology.

I might add that here too there were some exceptions. Already Friedrich Engels had written a small essay on the Apocalypse of John, which might be called a piece of "materialist exegesis." Although Engels is - probably wrong in dating this book during the Neronic persecution, it is still very much worth reading because of its method and approach of the text. Among the other forerunners of "materialistic bible reading" I might name Karl Kautzky, the leader of the socialist movement in Germany in the pre-World War One years, who wrote an interesting but on the whole not very convincing book on the origin of Christianity (1908), and the famous Jewish Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch who on several occasions interpreted biblical stories within the framework of his neo-Marxist theory of history.

[8] 4. Breakthrough

It was not in Europe or in the white community in the U.S. that the foundation was laid for "materialistic bible reading." As I said: a very virulent anti-socialism. that regarded anything coming from Marxism as a deadly threat to its very existence, blocked the way. Even Christian socialists like Ragaz never were really influenced by Marxist theory of literature. Ragaz (and also people like Tolstoy) read Scripture basically on an *idealistic* levels which means to say that for them Scripture provided us with the better kind of ideas about society and that in fact we should abandon Mammon and finally become real Christians. They drew – so to say – the "consequences" of Jesus' teaching. Or maybe this is not quite fair to them. Because in some ways it *did* occur to them that Jesus' teaching was not just a good idea to be put into practice, but that in fact it was much more than that: the expression of an historical rebellious movement itself. They *did* realize that the New Testament (they didn't think very much of the Old Testament) was not so much an *appeal* to mankind, as a testimony of a liberation movement *among* mankind, a liberation movement that was still there in the emancipatory movement of their days, before all: in the labor-movement. But they failed to give this thought a theoretical basis. And so, it slowly disappeared.

It was in Latin America, in the sixties and seventies, that a new impetus was gained. This time the background was suppression and exploitation perpetrated by the "Christian" West and to a large extend defended by theology and even by all sorts of quotes from Scripture. This experience of total contradiction between what the Old and the New Testament preach on human dignity, on a society of brother- and sisterhood, on unselfishness as [9] the root of messianic life at the one side, and the reality of brutal suppression of human freedom, shameless exploitation of the poor by the rich, violent and murderous behavior of the so called "Christian world" towards any movement that threatened its privileges at the other side, ... this experience of total inner contradiction began to make people aware of the truth in much of what the despised Marx had already been saying for a century. This "Christianity" was ideology; of course, how could it be anything else. But it was not the ideology of the suppressed, it was the ideology of the suppressor. It was not rooted in the reality of a liberation movement; it was rooted in the reality of capitalism. It had swapped God for Mammon and its *theology* in fact had become a defense of Mammonism. It had stolen the words of Liberation and Freedom from Scripture and corrupted them by putting them into a context of violence and oppression. It had put the right text in the wrong context and by doing that perversed the text.

This experience was the birth of modern "contextual theology": liberation theology in Latin America, peasants theology in Asia, black theology among the black Christians in North America and in Africa. "Materialist bible reading" was just one offspring of this movement. If you want to meet it in its simplest and non-reflected form you should read Ernesto Cardenal's "The Gospel in Solentiname": protocols of discussion among peasants in Somoza's Nicaragua about New Testament stories. The theologian, the exegete, is – in these discussions – only an assistant. He deals with difficult words and historical situations that need some explanation. But the basis of the exegesis is the experience of a community that – in fact – has very much in common with the Jewish communities in some periods of the Old Testament and the political and socio-economical conditions of many [10] Jews in New Testament times. Using Marx' theory: the "basic position" was more or less the same: a struggle with the oppressor. The struggle on the level of the basis, would reflect itself in the struggle on the level of ideology. Given the equality of "basis" one might expect an equality of the "superstructure." Exegesis on this new basis would lead to a new type of bible reading; the type of bible reading that later was to be coined "materialistic bible reading."

[11] 5. Fernando Belo

Cardenal's books provide us with an example of "Materialist Bible Reading" which is based on intuition rather than on theoretical reflection. The latter was formulated for the first time in the book of Fernando Belo to which I referred before. Fernando Belo was a Portuguese. He grew up in fascist Portugal and saw how his church (the Roman Catholic Church) seemed to have no problems with Salazar and his regime. A large proportion of the clergy openly supported the government and sort of gave their blessing to its practice and ideology. Belo got into trouble with the fascist authorities. He fled to Northern Europe. First to Belgium, then to Paris. In Paris he received his final training in literature and in theology.

Through this background Belo was just the right person to develop a theory of "materialistic bible reading." Portugal in those days was more or less a Latin American country in Europe. Belo shared with Latin American Christians and others the experience of a church that used Christian terms and biblical ideas to support a political praxis that was completely dominated by the

interest of the ruling class. He developed a keen mind for the falsification of the Gospel that occurs when there is no awareness of the ideological aspects of theology and preaching. All he needed was the scientific instruments that would enable him to build this into a more or less coherent theory.

Paris gave him those instruments. It was in particular the brilliant Roland Barthes, left-wing structuralist, professor of literature, who deeply influenced Belo, But at the same time there were: Althusser the Marxist philosopher, Lacan the neo-Marxist psychologist/philosopher, the neo-Freudian psychiatrist Bataille, and many others.

I don't think it would be wise to go into the details of Belo's [12] theories. I just recall a few things. Of course, Belo also wrestles with the problem of the connection between basis and superstructure. How can we distinguish between a text that reproduces a praxis of liberation and a text that is part of a praxis of oppression? How do we know that Scripture belongs to the first and much traditional theology to the last?

Belo, in typical French neo-Marxist style, finds a criterion in the attitude towards sexuality. For him sexual taboos are a sure sign of political and economic repression. Sexual taboos, according to Belo, there are quite a few, not only in Christianity both also in Scripture, both in the Old and in the New Testament. Wherever people are threatened with "defilement" Belo sees a sign of oppression. Which in fact means that the Book of Leviticus, large parts of the Old Testament Prophets and even St. Paul on some occasions are labelled "oppressive" and rejected from the Canon.

In opposition to the "system of defilement" Belo sees the "system of giving and sharing," which he finds expressed in the book of Deuteronomy, and in the teaching of Jesus. The teaching of Jesus he tries to capture in its earliest form; that is why he wrote a commentary on *Mark* and is rather negative about Matthew and John. (Apart from the fact that there is a possibility of a pun, a sort of structuralistic gag, on the names of Mark and Marx..., just as Roland Barthes had done in his analysis of Balzac's short story Sarrasine, which deeply influenced Belo.)

I have my doubts about some of these positions. Belo follows Althusser and Bataille in considering sexuality basically a meta-historical *phenomenon*. I would not agree to that. I can think of sexual abstinence as a sign of sexual repression, embedded in a system of overall repression. (Compulsory lifelong celibacy I would consider such a sign of overall repression.) [13] But I can also think of sexual abstinence as a sign of protest against a society that manipulates its citizens by means of sexual promiscuity. Most of the Jewish and early Christian morals on sexual behavior I would place in the second category rather than in the first. But Belo's position still could be a starting point for further investigation. In many cases of course he is right.

This sexual criterion is not Belo's only criterion. There are also a few that have to do with the literary form. For instance: a text may be a "closed" text or an "open" text. In a closed text the final situation of the story is basically identical with the initial situation. There is no incentive to continue the movement of the story into your own practice: An open text has the capacity to involve people in its movement. After the story has been told the reader knows: now it is my turn. You won't be surprised to hear that the Gospel of Mark, according to Belo, is such an "open text". In Matthew however Jesus goes back to heaven where he came from; the text is "closed", does not really challenge us to be continued by ourselves.

I don't agree with that either. I don't think Jesus' ascension "closes" the incident of his life. To the very contrary: it guarantees his permanent presence. Belo uses a very unbiblical concept of "heaven," I think. Which does not mean to say that this concept does not exist all around! Personally, I had rather coin the word "heaven" anew, more along biblical lines, than use it as a criterion for "open" or "closed" texts. But again, there is some truth in Belo's position. Many sermons I hear are very "closed texts," even using "heaven" as a drug to keep people away from the very earthly struggle for life and for a better life for all. We shall leave it at this. It is not the detail of Belo's typically [14] Parisian type of analysis that is of particular interest to us. The basic assumption is that you have to interpret a text as a piece of ideology that is part of a particular praxis. Once you forget that you are about to *indulge* in idealistic exegesis. That is a type of exegesis which is not aware of its ideological function and therefore, willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, builds its findings into the dominant ideology which is – according to Marx – the ideology of the dominant classes.

6. Suspicion

Another Frenchman, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, came with the theory of the three suspicions, that I would like to hand over to you as a short summary of what "materialistic bible reading" is all about. Ricoeur takes his starting point from three thinkers of the XIX-th century that have deeply influenced the culture of the XX-th century; Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Each of them he connects with a particular kind of criticism, a new kind of suspicion about the apparent reality.

Marx founded the "ideological suspicion." That means that Marx opened our eyes to the ideological function of ideas and thoughts. We do not think and reflect in a totally free and empty space of mind. Our thoughts are not "free"; freedom is something you have to fight for, it can only be the result of hard work, also hard intellectual work. You are *not* swimming across the river when you just let yourself float downstream. You may move with great speed, but you are still not swimming. We all think and develop ideas and theories in the gravitational field of existing economic, political, and ideological powers. Our thoughts have a natural tendency towards self-justification (which – by the way – was also very strongly put forward by the Danish theologian Soren Kierkgaard). Arguments, even arguments that [15] sound very critical at first hearing, tend to take the form of apology of the status quo. Theology operates in *that* field. It had better be aware of it.

Nietzsche questioned the philosophers of his days about their *real intentions*. Words and ideas play tricks on us. Where do they really come from, what are the hidden motives behind them. Could not the real intention of the Churches' preaching on humility be a lust for power? Could not the permanent assurance of good intentions hide for ourselves and others that in fact we are on our way to disaster? Ricoeur calls this suspicion the "genealogical" suspicion. He wants to know the roots of the tree, rather than the leaves.

Freud gave an extra dimension to this. His concept of the "sub-conscious" is a theoretical device to understand the mechanisms of the human mind. This is the psycho-analytical suspicion. According to psychoanalysis things may, deep in the human soul, be quite different from what they look like at the surface. Many words and ideas have a symbolical value that is usually hidden from the speaker or the listener. Thing may appeal to layers in our soul that we are not aware of and that actually we would hate if we were. I could name racism and sexism as transmitted by symbols, quite unconsciously, rather than by open racist or sexist theories.

Theology has to try to be aware of these things. It is not enough to preach love and solidarity. In the wrong context it may in fact strengthen hate and selfishness. Words and ideas are nothing in itself. In different contexts they can get totally different meanings. If a black South African preaches about "love for the neighbor," don't you think this will function completely different from the white man's sermon on that subject; even if the words are identical. Not to be aware of that is "idealism", is based on [16] the assumption that ideas govern reality, that ideas actually *are* the ultimate reality, that if you *think* united, you *are* united, disregarding the actual situation you are in.

Materialist reading of the bible tries to become suspicious in the above-mentioned ways. It tends to give precedence to the first, the ideological suspicion and regards the others as aspects of the first. But that is not really important. What it boils down to is the awareness that things may be different from what they look like. And that because of this we have to ask for the reality, including the socio-economic reality, of the authors of texts, the transmitters of texts, and eventually the readers of texts, that is ourselves. *Cui bono*, to whom is it a profit, is usually a good guideline in developing this suspicion when you try to explain a text.

Of course, that must be seen as something in addition to exegesis as it has been practiced all through the ages. "Materialistic reading of the bible" does not abolish the work of the past, it tries to reconsider it, put it in a new perspective, enhance it with a new dimension. In fact, it needs things like textual criticism, linguistic analysis, historical research, psychological insight. Far from being the end of all wisdom it is only the beginning. Materialistic exegesis is – as Belo put it – "a stone in the pond", as the French say, "un piste de travail," "a line of work." The fact that it deals with very complicated things should not refrain us from keeping in mind that we have a definite problem here and that we'd better do something about it.

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