

Faith Seeking Effectiveness

Missiological Insights from the Hermeneutics of José Míguez Bonino

By Paul Davies¹ and Johannes Reimer²

Abstract

This article examines the theological methodology of José Míguez Bonino, the Argentinean Methodist theologian. It proposes that his theology can be understood as a mission theology summed up in the phrase, 'Faith Seeking Effectiveness.' Míguez Bonino's methodology begins with missionary praxis and aims at a more effective missionary praxis. Obedient involvement in mission is a prerequisite for knowledge. This leads him to propose the necessity of a sociological analysis of both the context of mission and the place of the church in that context in order to establish the themes which mission theology needs to reflect upon. The issues raised by this analysis are taken up into biblical and theological reflection. This reflection is done in order to reveal God's present word to the church within the text. This leads to a new and living rereading of the gospel in the light of the new context. Finally, the biblical and theological reflection suggests new and more effective pathways for missionary obedience. In this, the journey from praxis to praxis is complete. The article ends with a reflection upon four insights Míguez Bonino gives us for contemporary mission theology: it should be praxis driven, contextually orientated, ecumenically realised and biblically rooted.

Keywords: Míguez Bonino, Latin American, mission, theology, liberation, methodology

1. Introduction

The thesis of this article is that the theology of Argentinean Methodist, José Míguez Bonino³, one of the most influential Latin American Protestant theologians and one whose ministry has spanned the fifty years of missiological ferment that constitute

¹ Dr Paul Davies is a Theological Consultant for Latin Link, Baptist. He can be contact at pauljdavies_3@hotmail.com

² Prof Johannes Reimer is professor extraordinarius in the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology at UNISA and professor of mission studies at the Theologische Hochschule Ewersbach, Germany. He can be contacted at johannesreimer@icloud.com.

³ In the English speaking world it has been common to refer to José Míguez Bonino as Bonino. However, when in Latin America two surnames are used, the second is normally the mother's surname, in this case, Bonino; and the first surname is the father's and the official one. In Latin America using both surnames is more acceptable. A person would never use only his or her mother's surname. Therefore throughout this study "Míguez Bonino" will be used in order to maintain Latin convention.

the second half of the twentieth century, is a mission theology and has relevance and challenge for the world church, the mission world and contemporary theology.

Its nature as a mission theology can be summed up in the phrase 'faith seeking effectiveness'. Obviously an adaptation of Anselm's famous axiom, this phrase is the title of the Spanish translation of one of Míguez Bonino's most famous books: *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* (1975b).⁴ This book is an early description, defence, and critique of the Latin American theologies of liberation. When it was originally published in English, Míguez Bonino disliked the title given to it by the publishers (interview with author 1997). When he translated the book back into Spanish he gave it the title *Fe en busca de eficacia* (1977)⁵.

2. Mission theology: A Definition

We would like distinguish between the terms 'theology of mission' and 'mission theology' or 'missionary theology'. In the context of this article the distinction is fundamental. Johannes C. Hoekendijk, formerly of Utrecht University, asserted that whereas 'theology of mission' functions as a division of systematic and practical theology, 'missionary theology' is systematic and practical theology 'permeated by the spirit of the apostolate' (Hoekendijk 1967:339; cf. Jongeneel and van Engelen 1995:442-443). Jan A.B. Jongeneel, successor to Hoekendijk, offers a tentative definition. Mission theology is:

that form or type of Christian theology which both theoretically and practically reflects upon the relations of Christians and churches with, and their responsibilities toward, adherents and communities of other religions, world-views, and ideologies in all spheres of private and public life (Jongeneel 1997:10).

For Jongeneel, mission theology is a reflection upon the 'outward' movement of Christians and churches. This is not the whole of theology because he also asserts that theology must not only be missionary, but also 'communal and adoring' (Jongeneel 1995:68). That is theology must reflect upon fellowship and worship, as well as mission. Jongeneel does not, however, include these into missionary theology.

I agree with his distinction between mission, fellowship and worship; it is dangerous to try and embrace all parts of theology under the heading of mission. In the same way that 'if everything is mission then nothing is mission' (Neill 1959:81) If all theology is mission theology then, on the one hand we need to find missionary outworking for every theological statement and on the other hand, mission loses its distinctive role within the church's theology. However, I do think we need to

⁴ Published as *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (1975a) in the United States of America

⁵ Faith Seeking Effectiveness.

recognise that all the church's activities especially worship and fellowship have consequences for mission and therefore mission theology needs to include them in its reflection. Lesslie Newbigin's ecclesiological distinction of the *missionary dimension* of the church and the *missionary intention* of the church (Newbigin 1958:21, 43) is helpful in this regard. The missionary dimension of the church is seen in its worship and fellowship whereas the missionary intention of the church is its preaching and service. Mission theology while including both the missionary dimension and intention in its considerations needs to recognise the distinction between them. For example, the missionary dimension is part of how the church contextualises to a new situation and is *ipso facto* missionary, however the mission dimensions are not part of the missionary activity of the church. Mission theology reflects upon anything that has consequences for the outward movement of the church towards the world but differentiates between direct and indirect consequences.

3. The Primacy of Mission Obedience

Míguez Bonino shares with most liberation theologians the belief that involvement in the liberation process is primary in theology. He believes that any theory emerges from praxis rather than the other way round. He argues from both a biblical and sociological standpoint that knowledge is only possible through involvement. Therefore, theology cannot be done from a position outside the struggle for liberation. Theology is truly a synthetic act between action and reflection.

An interesting point to note is that Míguez Bonino came to this conclusion much earlier than most liberation theologians. As far back as the last training conference of the World Federation of Christian Students (WFCS) in Strasbourg (July 1960), he first perceived the importance of obedience in relation to both knowledge and mission. In a reflection on the conference he states:

'the discernment of the will of God is given only in the concrete act of obedience. Only in the measure in that we do the will of God humbly and silently that will we understand, confidently, even in the darkness of our own uncertainty will we discern our mission more clearly and widely' (1960c:54-55, my italics).

This is also clearly reflected in his report on the first ISAL meetings later that month. He remembers how he proposed that 'the precedence of obedience over reflection is the theologically correct order' (1972b:208). Praxis, or what he describes as a 'concrete act of obedience,' is primary because knowledge is only possible in obedience; praxis is a prerequisite for knowledge. Or in other terms, faith's search for effectiveness can only be successful when carried out in obe-

dience. This is sometimes interpreted as a Marxist epistemology but it must be noted that Calvin's famous line *omnis recta cognitio dei ab obedientia nascitur* (Calvin I, 6, 2)⁶ says much the same thing!

This means that for Míguez Bonino, the theologian is not simply a victim of his or her own social conditions but is free to make an option to locate him or herself differently. He refers to it as the 'double location' of the theologian. 'We are *situated* in reality, to be sure—historically, geographically, culturally, and most of all, groupwise and classwise—but we can also position ourselves differently in relation to that situation' (1983:44 *Italics in original*). There is no doubt that class and group background affect interpretation but one can choose to interpret both the text and the context from the position or location of the other. This is summarised in a paper Míguez Bonino gave to the 15th Council of the YMCA, in Oaxtepec, Mexico.

We all are already, whether we want it or not, in a certain 'location' and therefore not in another. But also we can adopt a voluntary 'position'. This is, in very simple terms, what being human means. Every human being and every association of human beings is born or created in certain terms, and conditions- this is their location, determined by history, place, social, cultural, religious background, environment, traditions. Being human is always being 'located' somewhere in time and place. Even theologians should understand that! But being human means also the possibility of being dissatisfied, of rebelling, of moving to another place, of examining other conditions, of 'placing' themselves differently. Thus, the dialectics of 'location' and 'position' is the dynamics of human life (2002).

For the Christian, Míguez Bonino believes this is a kind of 'conversion'. Moses had to choose to leave the luxury of the Egyptian palace to 'rediscover' his people. Saul of Tarsus had to become a follower of the one whom he saw as the fulfilment of his faith (2002b). In the case of Latin America, this conversion means conversion to the location of the poor. Argentinean Methodists, mainly drawn from the middle classes, clearly had to have this type of conversion. Míguez Bonino concludes 'Theological and social location for the Christian are one, united in the specific commitment to the poor' (1983:44). Consequently, theology is not only a mental exercise but also an ethical choice.

4. Three moments in Faith's Search for Effectiveness

Clodovis Boff wrote a book outlining his understanding of theological methodology (Boff 1993:1-21) in which he proposed to view the basic schema of the methodology as developed in three 'moments' or 'times' which correspond to

⁶ All true knowledge is born from obedience

the classic pastoral methods of the Roman Catholic Church seeing, judging, and acting. He calls each stage 'a mediation' because, apart from being moments in the theological process, they serve as instruments of theological construction. Boff calls them the *socioanalytic* mediation, the *hermeneutic* mediation, and the *practical* mediation.

The *socioanalytic* mediation contemplates the world of the oppressed. It seeks to understand why the oppressed are oppressed. The *hermeneutic* mediation contemplates the word of God. It attempts to see what the divine plan is with regard to the poor. Finally, the *practical* mediation contemplates the aspect of activity and seeks to discover the appropriate lines of operation for overcoming oppression in conformity with God's plan (Boff 1993:11).

Míguez Bonino's method corresponds generally to this schema but with significant differences. Míguez Bonino expands *socioanalytic mediation* beyond the world of the poor and oppressed. The context of the poor and oppressed is not forgotten by any means in his theology, but the contexts in which Míguez Bonino has worked out his theology are wider. The context of his life and theological career has led him to reflect not only upon issues related to Latin America and its context but also issues such as ecumenism and power. Also related to the socioanalytic mediation, Míguez Bonino includes, and indeed starts from, an analysis of the church. He starts from the Christian community and its expression of faith and then moves onto the church's expression of faith as part of the concrete historical situation in which the church finds itself. To analyse the social and political context without relating it to the church, or to analyse the church without relating it to the context, is to ignore the fact that the Church is part of the society in which it ministers. The first ISAL consultation (1961) was concerned with this issue. Míguez Bonino attended and gave a paper at this conference. In the development of his theology, he always emphasized the importance of the church in the context of its mission.

In regard to the *hermeneutic mediation*, Míguez Bonino emphasizes the re-reading of the revelation of God in his salvific actions. In the light of an analysis of the Church in the context of its mission, Míguez Bonino reflects upon how the church reads and re-reads God's action in saving humanity and establishing the kingdom. The Bible is less of a source of inspiration for further action as God's present word to the Church in its mission. Whereas Boff notes that most liberation theologians prefer the Exodus, the Hebrew Prophets, the Gospels, the book of Acts and Revelation (Boff 1993:17), Míguez Bonino prefers the Pauline and Johannine writings which point to the Church, the kingdom of God, and the Trinity.

In regard to the *practical* mediation, Míguez Bonino considers the role of the church in God's plan for the world. His theological proposals are more or less restricted to general lines of action; however, his theology is not properly understood unless the aspect of practical mediation is included. In certain books he emphasises the more pastoral role, in suggesting concrete ways of carrying out the mission of the Church (cf. 1972a; 1975c and 1979).

In terms of 'faith seeking effectiveness' we can pose three questions. The *socio-analytical* mediation poses the question: How can the context of faith's search for effectiveness be understood here and now; and what is the church's place in that context? The *hermeneutical* mediation asks: how does God's revelation, both in the Bible and in current history, relate to, direct, and inform faith's search for effectiveness? The *practical* mediation raises the question: in the light of the context, the church's place in that context, and the reflection on God's action, how, in concrete terms, does faith find and work out its mission effectively? We will examine each of these moments in detail.

5. Analysis of Context and Church

If faith is to be authentic in its search for effectiveness, then the analysis and interpretation of that context are vital. This is especially true of the socio-political context. Any context, however, is bewilderingly complex and therefore Míguez Bonino's hermeneutics seeks for 'a scientific analysis of reality'. The choice of these tools will affect greatly the outcome of the analysis.

Míguez Bonino posits that, in general terms, functionalist sociologies represent a vision 'from above' and serve those sectors of society for whom the *status quo* benefits their position and the dialectic sociologies represent a vision 'from below' and serve those for whom 'society appears as inadequate, badly structured, full of conflict, and in need of transformation' (1983:47). Míguez Bonino opts for dialectical sociologies in order to understand the context in which Christians search for obedience in their mission in the world. These sociologies, lead him to opt for a Marxist analysis of society. Recognising how some people who have embraced Marxist theory uncritically have tended to lose their faith or give up the historical nature of the gospel, Míguez Bonino proposes another way. This approach recognises that Marxism can be assumed not because it is 'an abstract or eternal theory or dogmatic formulae' but rather it needs to be 'properly modified, corrected and supplemented' in order to 'provide an adequate means to grasp our own historical situation' (1975b:95-96). It needs to be *modified* because it does not exactly fit into the Latin American context due to the fact that it originates from nineteenth century Europe. Furthermore, it needs to be *corrected* because it contains both errors and reductionisms. Finally it needs to be *supplemented* by other sociological tools because it does not embrace

all elements within the Latin American social and political context. Míguez Bonino's argument is weakened by the fact he does not elaborate in detail on how these tools can and should be modified, corrected and supplemented.

It is not only essential to analyse society itself but also the church's place in society. Faith, in its search for effectiveness, starts from the Church's missionary obedience, i.e. the obedience of the church in its mission in the world. The introduction of sociological tools into the hermeneutical process has enabled this analysis.

Míguez Bonino asserts that it is important to examine 'Christianity as it operates historically' (1975b:92). Any church or mission agency does not only present itself in the world as a set of beliefs or philosophies but as an historical agent. Every expression of Christianity, whether it is a State Church in Russia, an African Initiated Church in Nigeria, or a small group of Christians in the *Altiplano* of Bolivia, operates within history either as an agent of change or a sustainer of the status quo. Míguez Bonino's hermeneutics proposes that these should be studied in order to make explicit 'the ideological frameworks of interpretation implicit in a given praxis' (1975b:94).

Faith, to be effective, must have an ideological framework which enables it to think through its own positioning within society; its reading of the Bible; and the consequences of its actions. This framework must be made explicit in order to serve faith's struggle.

6. Confronting the Context with the Text

There is a danger that in faith's search for effectiveness in mission it can lose its theological nature and become a glorified sociology. To make sure that this process remains theological, faith must be confronted with God's Word so that the effectiveness that faith seeks conforms to God's purposes in the world.

Míguez Bonino's concern is pragmatic here: how does the confrontation of the context which has been analysed, with God's Word improve, correct, supplement, and advance the Church in its mission. Míguez Bonino's ThD thesis forms the basis for his later reflections on Biblical interpretation. It will become clear that even as far back as 1960, he was developing an interpretational method that would be used later by other theologians and in due time become, what is contemporarily recognized as a liberationist reading.

Míguez Bonino believes God's Word to be the revelation of God's action in history, especially in Jesus Christ; he understands the Bible as the Apostolic Witness to that revelation; and tradition as the Christian interpretation and communication of that revelation in Jesus Christ as read through the apostolic witness. This means that tradition includes all Christian doctrine, dogma and theology, as well as the creeds, and up to and including the full life of the Church and its presence in the world; i.e. in mission. The preaching and living out of the gospel in a new context is, by nature, the creation of new traditions.

Míguez Bonino regards God's revelation as the starting point in the process of Biblical interpretation. The Scriptures (or the Apostolic witness) have a special place in Míguez Bonino's theology not, because it is the Word of God itself but because it is the primary witness to God's revelation in Christ. He says that 'the Scriptures must be distinguished from all later witness as the only normative instance for the knowledge of revelation' (1960b:365). Scripture has a special relationship with revelation that tradition does not.

Míguez Bonino insists, however, that because of the presence of the Holy Spirit, it is imperative to take seriously how God's revelation is related to the Church (1960b:367). In the very life and preaching of the Church, in communion with the Holy Spirit, the Church not only interprets God's revelation but lives it out. Furthermore, the church also listens 'to the voice of the Church of the past, not merely as a voice of the past, but as the voice of the Church in obedience to the Holy Spirit' (1960b:368). In terms of the thesis of this article: the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church enables the Church to achieve effectiveness in its life and mission: its handing over and handing down of the gospel.

This handing over and handing down, does not render the Church immune from the creation of human traditions. Human traditions are created when human understanding of the *Paradosis* (Gospel Tradition) is elevated to a divine reality in itself or when authority is claimed for human understanding of that *Paradosis*. This, Míguez Bonino says, makes our traditions not only meaningless but also contrary to God's revelation. Moreover, when traditions really communicate God's revelation in Christ, they will lose their effectiveness when they claim authority. The only authority is that of the *Paradosis* itself as recorded in the Apostolic Witness.

The church's reading of the Bible, its listening to the Spirit and its listening to the obedience of the church in history is always contextual. Therefore any reading of the gospel gives birth 'to a tradition which at the same time is and is not what we have received' (1960b:378).

The core of the tradition in the passive sense are the facts, symbols, ideas, meanings which cluster around the historical person Jesus of Nazareth and the early Christian community's understanding of him. But we do not escape here the general law of transmission. Christian tradition is not a mechanical handing down of the original traditions, but a constant reconception and reinterpretation in the changing conditions of human history and the history of the community (1960b:378-379).

Each epoch and each culture has its basic approaches. Consequently, 'the Church receives and transmits the *traditions* in the context of its own internal development but also in that of its relations with this surrounding world' (1960b:379).

The historical character of God's revelation in Christ makes necessary that the knowledge of him be transmitted, handed over and handed down. This process takes place in the community, so that again the revelatory event constitutes a community and this community transmits the event (1960b:261).

This whole process is fraught with danger. Míguez Bonino proposes that mutual accountability should be applied at both international and ecumenical levels in the context of a 'disciplined, continuous and committed conversation at each level of life and thought in the worldwide Christian community' (1997:90). There should be accountability in three areas; 'our hermeneutical approach and our understanding of the authority of scripture' (1989:169-170; cf. 1997:90), the way theology is related to the 'manifold tradition of the church,' and in interpretation of reality 'as an economically, socially and politically structured system' (1989:169).

7. From Praxis back to Praxis

Míguez Bonino's theological process moves from Christian obedience, through analysis and reflection, and to obedience; it starts with action and leads to action; it is the journey from praxis to praxis. This practical phase is the final stage in faith's search for effectiveness but forms the basis for the beginning of the next phase of the hermeneutical circulation.

The practical phase, although its focus is upon strategies, options, possibilities, dangers, and consequences, remains for Míguez Bonino a wholly theological task. The main theological work done at this point is to define how theology's reflection upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the salvation God has wrought, relates to concrete action. Or as Míguez Bonino poses it: 'how do the original events (or the 'germinal' events as it would be more accurate to call them), namely, God's dealings with Israel, the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the hope of the kingdom—how are they determinative in this single, syncretical fact that we call historical praxis of a Christian?' (1975b:98).

Míguez Bonino believes that in order to ensure that theological reflection leads to effective praxis, the Christian must opt for some type of already existing praxis. For the Christian, these options are what Míguez Bonino calls 'historical projects'. An historical project is a limited, measurable attempt at a model of political and economic organization in obedience to God.

The effectiveness that faith seeks in historical projects is not the cheapest, quickest, and easiest way to achieve a previously decided goal, but rather it is a genuine search for the best means and methods, in order to achieve the goals of God's kingdom in the concrete situation in which the Christian church finds itself. It is 'a prophetic word of discernment received in faith' (1975b:103). Therefore, it is

not a planning meeting that could be carried out by executives but rather a deeply spiritual and theological exercise carried out by committed Christians.-

Míguez Bonino warns that 'an intelligent and responsible action demands that we distinguish between levels of action for the Christian' (1972a:99). Not all action takes place on the same social level. He identifies three levels of action. The level of *personal action* relates to work, neighbourhood, family, recreation, education, etc. Here, each Christian must make personal decisions about concrete situations. Then there is the level of *organized action*. This takes place in institutional frameworks such as clubs, unions, school organizations, political and cultural organizations. These institutions are not established simply "to be a good witness" but rather to truly work for justice and peace from within those organizations. The final level of action is that of *the Christian community*. The church acts as a whole to transform reality with its commitment to justice. It cannot stand back and try to be 'neutral'.

In his address to the 15th World Council of the YMCA he mentions four important questions that all those committed to involvement in the world must consider:

what are the most important needs?--the critical points which demand immediate action and the further development to advance the process of change; (ii) what are the resources that at individual and institutional level are available to us to respond to these needs-and I mean resources at the level of people, abilities, spaces that are possibly open to our work, economic and infrastructure to respond to the needs in the immediate situations that we face and in the continuation of these initial actions; (iii) where can we be more useful and efficient-if we spread our work too much we will probably have only a 'token' presence: is this an area which we know? Is it likely to be open to our work? Do we have enough leadership and can we enlist our memberships in the task? And iv) what kind of concrete programs can we define and organize? (2002).

All these questions and their careful and analytical consideration are not 'a fool-proof key to Christian obedience but a significant framework for it' (1975b:105).

8. Contemporary Challenge and Relevance

How do we, therefore, assess the challenge and relevance of Míguez Bonino's theology? Nancy Bedford in an article in *Christian Century* said that Latin American theologians still read the liberationist classics Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Luis Segundo, Leonardo Boff and of course José Míguez Bonino because of the importance of some of their core insights. The study of liberation theology remains important to Bedford, but she points out that 'one must think in terms of a dialectical process in which the core insights are taken up into the consideration of new problems, new situations and new questions' (Bedford 2008).

What are these core insights that Míguez Bonino's theology shares with us and which can be taken up into such a dialectical process? In this article, I suggest that José Míguez Bonino's theology can be understood as faith seeking effectiveness. Within this framework I suggest that his methodology can suggest four core insights that can aid churches struggling in a post-colonial world. His theology is praxis driven, contextually orientated, ecumenically realised ('confessionally', geographically and historically) and biblically rooted.

José Míguez Bonino's theology is praxis driven in at least three ways. Firstly, it is driven by the aim of improved praxis in mission. Faith is seeking for effectiveness in mission obedience. This effectiveness is unashamedly pragmatic. His theology takes as its point of departure the ethical and missionary question: 'what should I as a Christian or we as a Church do?' or more specifically: 'what should I as a Christian or we as a Church do in this context?' He does not aim to achieve intellectual understanding of reality, but rather effectiveness in changing it.

Theology done for interest or as a guard against heterodoxy is a luxury that we cannot afford in mission. Mission theology is not a neutral discipline; it does not attempt to come to intellectually satisfying conclusions at the end of a well balanced dialogue but seeks effectiveness in missionary praxis. This does not mean that Míguez Bonino's theology or mission theology in general is intellectually biased but, recognising its own purpose, it pursues it, with an open mind. We will mention some guards against the dominance of purpose later in this section.

Additionally, José Míguez Bonino's methodology is driven because it believes praxis to be the first step of missionary theology. Practice does not only emerge from theory but is also the product of it. Because all theologians or hermeneutical communities begin theologising from an already existing set of beliefs and actions, it is important that it recognises this fact and assumes into its own exegesis of both context and text and moment of hermeneutical suspicion. The question must be asked as to whether my own already existing praxis or set of assumptions are defining my reading of the Bible and search for effectiveness.

A further reason why the theological methodology of José Míguez Bonino is praxis driven is because it begins with an analysis of an already existing praxis of the church. Many analyses of reality done by missionaries when planning a project, fail to take into account the role of the church in the reality they are studying. Míguez Bonino has insisted on the importance of this stage. The church, the mission society or mission team is not an 'innocent bystander' in any reality; much less in one of injustice and poverty. How we position ourselves is vital to take into account.

Stephen B. Bevans 'praxis model' (Bevans 2002:70-87) is helpful in understanding Míguez Bonino's theology. Bevans says that there are theologies that employ the praxis model without assuming the liberationist emphasis on socio-political issues.

As has already been stated, Míguez Bonino's interest is not only in social and political issues but also in cultural, ecclesial, and religious ones. Bevans asserts that, 'the praxis model gives ample room for cultural expressions of faith, while providing exciting new understandings of the scriptural and older theological witness' (Bevans 2002:78). Bevans calls the praxis model 'faith seeking intelligent action,' (Bevans 2002:73) which broadly corresponds with 'faith seeking effectiveness.' A good term for Míguez Bonino's theology is 'a praxis driven missionary theology.'

A second insight is the contextual orientation of Míguez Bonino's theology and methodology. It is generally accepted today that all theology is contextual, i.e. written from within a given context and, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by the concerns of that context. His theology, however, takes a further step: it is not only aware of the influence of the context but is consciously responding to it: it is not only *contextual* but also *consciously contextualized*.

This has led to the fact that Míguez Bonino's theology is occasional rather than systematic. He says in an article written in 1980:

'Like most theologians from the so-called Third World, I have never set out to develop a theological program or to articulate an all-encompassing system. Rather I have spoken or written as questions came up, as issues were pressed upon me by circumstances or requests. Consistency or logical development has never been a conscious objective. (1980:1154).

In an interview with the author in 1997 he said:

I felt that I was challenged, or invited, or called by things that were happening which I had to respond to. If there is any coherence it has to do with the things that happened. Maybe I have tried to respond with a certain approach to life, faith and the Bible but not with a sort of fixed purpose (Interview 1997).

In an autobiographical chapter in a book written in honour of his eightieth birthday he explains how he felt like Martin Luther (1483-1546). 'God took me wherever he wanted like a donkey with blinkers' (2004:429). He didn't know exactly where he was going but felt accompanied on the journey by God. Orlando E. Costas could have been thinking of Míguez Bonino's theology when he commented that missiology in Latin America is a reflection "done on the road", as it were, promoted by a significant event or specific issue' (Costas 1977:91).

Another consequence of Míguez Bonino's consciously contextualised approach is that his missionary theology is provisional and should never be considered to be a completed product. He comments on his own theology as follows:

An American doctoral student announced that he identified three distinct stages in my theological development, moving from a church-centred to a world-centred theology. Perhaps he is right! An erstwhile colleague used to tell me that the decisive break in my thought occurred in 1968, at the time of the popular uprisings in Argentina against the military dictatorship of Onganía. Even more precisely, he timed it with the death in Rosario of a student killed by the police. He contended that my theology had since become more militant and political, that it had broken away from the captivity of a self-contained theological universe and had accepted the challenge of historicity. I had never intended to live in a purely theological universe—but, again, perhaps he is right! My wife—who is usually right—tells me that what I have consistently tried to do is simply to reread and explain the Bible: “Questions, issues and challenges have changed,” she says, “but at bottom you remain what you have always been: a preacher bound to his text.” I hope she is right this time! (1980:1154).

My doctoral thesis on José Míguez Bonino’s theology bears this out. For much of his career the two major themes of his theological reflection were the kingdom of God and the church, in the last few years the Trinity has been much more prevalent.

As Bosch notes, there is never anything except ‘missiology in draft’ (Bosch 1991:489). It should be said that Míguez Bonino’s mission theology is always and purposely theology in draft. He is loath to give definitive answers to missionary or ethical questions, even after a thorough theological treatment. His reflections are always in the way of ‘soundings’ or ‘musings’, or what he once called ‘ruminations’ (1995:112). He sees these soundings or musings as the beginning of a theological dialogue rather than the end of a theological argument. In his theology, one encounters more tentative questions than authoritative answers. Even the answers that are given are more as suggestions presented for discussion than as dictates. Samuel Escobar once commented to me that Míguez Bonino was a teacher who ‘opens pathways.’

Mission theology must be, by definition, consciously contextualised. Missiologies that claim some sort of universal relevance must be suspected. Míguez Bonino’s epistemology disavows the possibility of a universal theology. Mission theologies can only be truly written from the perspective of the micro rather than the macro. This does not mean that universal missiological statements cannot be made but that really useful missiological reflection can only be made at the micro level.

A third insight we can draw from the way Míguez Bonino carried out his theology is that it was done in an ecumenical context. Míguez Bonino’s ecumenism is conceived in confessional, geographical and historical terms. His deep involvement in the ecumenical movement and his dialogue with Christian traditions other than

his own show a deep sympathy with a wide range of traditions. He has made many contributions to the study of the phenomenon of Latin American Protestantism and has written several articles on how this phenomenon should be interpreted. For Míguez Bonino it is impossible to do theology without reference to how the Church relates to society and how it is already a part of that society.

He also did theology internationally. This is a particular challenge to Western theologians who have assumed that systematic theology done in Europe and North America is the measure of how other do theology. If we accept that all theology is contextual then the realisation that theology done in an international context is richer will follow naturally. His concept of 'mutual accountability' is helpful in this regard.

Míguez Bonino's theology is also historically rooted. It has been as essential for him to discuss theological issues with "the fathers and mothers" as well as with "the brothers and sisters". Ever since he studied historical theology at Emory University, he has considered it vital to reflect on all issues from an historical perspective. Church history and especially the history of theology is very much part of the context in which he has done theology.

Mission theologies cannot and should not be isolationist. Missiology cannot be sectarian and mission carried out as some kind of religious battle ground. At the very least insights from Christian traditions other than our own should be studied in order to help us with our missiological reflection. As an evangelical, I have found the greatest joy in reading ecumenical, Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology and learning from them. This means that our missionary training and missiological study should use the widest bibliography possible.

Míguez Bonino's 'historical ecumenism' also teaches us that a clear historical perspective is important for missiological reflection. We are not the first to have tried to understand our mission in this world and we can gain a great deal from the insights of those who have gone before. Furthermore as Rubem Alves put it,

The historian is someone who recovers forgotten memories and disseminates them as a sacrament to those who have lost the memory. Indeed, what finer community sacrament is there than the memories of a common past, punctuated by the existence of pain, of sacrifice and of hope? To recover in order to disseminate. The historian is not an archaeologist of memories. The historian is a sower of visions and hopes (Alves 1981:363).

A final insight is the fact that Míguez Bonino's methodology is biblical. Following a broadly Barthian approach to the Bible, it charts a line between a liberal and fundamentalist biblical interpretation. Unlike classical liberal theology, religion is not

humanity's aspiration for the divine but something that God has revealed in Jesus Christ. Theology must reflect upon that revelation recorded in the Bible in order to achieve effectiveness in its missionary task. Míguez Bonino is not interested in a descriptive analysis of biblical religion or a social understanding of the text he is interested in the prescriptive ethical and missionary challenge of the text.

Míguez Bonino also avoids a fundamentalist biblical interpretation. This is done in two ways. As in the case of Barth and Bonhoeffer, Míguez Bonino is not afraid to use the tools of higher biblical criticism. However, he only employs them as a means to access that revelation of God in Christ behind the text. By doing this, he is saved from simplistic interpretations and applications of Scripture. He also uses sociological tools. Through his epistemology and sociological studies, he is aware that his interpretation of God's revelation in Christ is not all embracing and final.

9. Conclusion

It is my firm belief that missiology can benefit greatly by re-examining the theological output of Latin American, African and Asian theologians, not pigeon-holing them into our own categories but allowing them to speak for themselves. In post-Christian Europe, perhaps it will be the Majority-World theologians who can give us insights into the new problems, new situations and new questions facing the Christian and the church today.

References

José Míguez Bonino (Ordered Chronologically)

- 1960a 'Escritura y Tradición: un antiguo problema en una nueva perspectiva', *Cuadernos Teológicos*, 9:2, pp. 94-107.
- 1960b 'A Study of Some Recent Roman Catholic and Protestant Thought on the Relation of Scripture and Tradition', Th. D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, New York, EE.UU.
- 1960c 'La secularización de la iglesia, Reflexiones sobre Estrasburgo, 1960', *Testimonium*, 7:3, pp. 51-55.
- 1961 'Obedience and Freedom in Christian Theology', *International Review of Missions*, 50:1, pp. 90-93.
- 1967a 'An Approach to the Discussion of Tradition in a Heilsgeschichtliche Frame of Reference', in F. Christ, (ed.) *Oikonomia; Heilsgeschichte als Thema der Theologie; O. Cullmann zum 65. Geburtstag gewidmet* (Hamburg:Herbert Reich.), pp. 295-301.
- 1967b *Concilio abierto, Una interpretación protestante del Concilio Vaticano II*, Buenos Aires: La Aurora.
- 1969 'El camino del teólogo protestante latinoamericano', *Cuadernos de Marcha*, 29, pp. 59-67.
- 1972a *Ama y haz lo que quieras, Hacia una ética del hombre nuevo*, Buenos Aires: La Aurora.

- 1972b 'Nuevas perspectivas teológicas' in Assmann, Hugo (ed.), *Pueblo oprimido, Señor de la historia*, Montevideo: Tierra Nueva, pp. 197-212.
- 1972c 'How does God Act in History' in George Vicedom, *Christ and the Younger Churches; Theological Contributions from Asia, Africa and Latin America*, London: S.P.C.U.
- 1975a *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, Philadelphia: Fortress.
- 1975b *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age*, London: SPCK. English Edition of 1975a
- 1975c *Espacio para ser hombres, Una interpretación del mensaje de la Biblia para nuestro tiempo*, Buenos Aires: Tierra Nueva.
1976. *Christians and Marxists. The Mutual Challenge to Revolution*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1976.
- 1977 *La fe en busca de eficacia, Una interpretación de la reflexión teológica latinoamericana de liberación* Salamanca: Sígueme. Translation and extension of 1975a.
- 1979 *Room to Be People, An Interpretation of the Message of the Bible for Today's World* Philadelphia: Fortress. Translated by from 1975a.
- 1980 'For Life and Against Death. A Theology that Take Sides', *The Christian Century*, 17:38, pp. 1154-1158.
- 1983 *Towards a Christian Political Ethics*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- 1989 'The Concern for a Vital and Coherent Theology', *The Ecumenical Review*, 41, pp. 160-176.
- 1995 *Rostros del protestantismo latinoamericano*, Buenos Aires: Nueva Creación.
- 1997 'Universalidad y contextualidad en teología', *Cuadernos de Teología*, 16:1-2, pp. 87-97.
- 2002 'Building Community: Transforming the World', keynote speech given at the 15th World Council of YMCAs – 15 to 20 July, 2002, Oaxtepec, Mexico. www.ymca.int/world_councils/WC2002/speeches.htm. (Accessed 02/10/2003).
- 2004 'Un silbo apacible y suave...' (1 Reyes 19:12) Notas autobiográficas de un recorrido pastoral y teológico, in Guillermo Hansen (ed.), *El Silbo ecumenico del Espiritu: Homenaje a JMB en sus 80 anos*. Buenos Aires: ISEDET, 2004.

Other Literature

- Alves, Rubem. 1981. 'Las ideas teológicas y sus caminos por los surcos institucionales del Protestantismo brasileño', in *Materiales para una historia de la teología en América Latina*, ed. Pablo Richard, pp. 363ff
- Barth, Karl. 1933. *Epistle to the Romans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bedford, Nancy. 2008. 'Whatever Happened to Liberation Theology?', <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=820> (accessed 07-05-2008).
- Bevans, Stephen. 2002. *Models of Contextual Theology*.
- Boff, Clodovis. 1993. 'Methodology of the Theology of Liberation', in J. Sobrino, I. Ellacuría, *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*. Marykoll: Orbis Books. pp. 1-21.
- Bosch, David J. 1991. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Costas, Orlando E. 1976. *Theology of the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America: Missiology in Mainline Protestantism: 1969-1974*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi.

_____. 1977. 'Missiology in Contemporary Latin America: A Survey' *Missiology* (5:1). pp. 89-114.

Hoekendijk Johannes C. 1967. *Kirche und Volk in der deutschen Missionsswissenschaft*. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag.

Jongeneel, J.A.B. and van engelen, J.M. 1995. 'Contemporary Currents in Missiology' in Verstraeten et. Al., *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. pp. 442-3.

Jongeneel, J.A.B. 1995. *Philosophy, Science, and Theology of Mission in the 19th and 20th Centuries: a missiological encyclopedia*, part 1. New York : P. Lang.

_____. 1997. *Philosophy, Science, and Theology of Mission in the 19th and 20th Centuries: a missiological encyclopedia*, part 2. New York : P. Lang.

Newbigin, J.E. Lesslie. 1958. *One Body, One Gospel, One World*, London and New York: International Missionary Council.