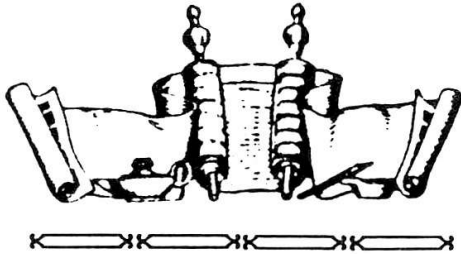


THE MATERIALIST READING OF THE BIBLE



by Robert Michiels and Herman Hendrickx

Background

The intention of the Materialist Reading of the Bible is to apply the marxist vision of society to the Scriptures, or in popular parlance, to read the Bible through the eyes of Marx. It's starting point is marxist theory, the marxist doctrine of historical materialism, as applied to the Bible. The MRB is meant to be, therefore, a "research model" - one that studies the Bible from the marxist conception of society. Theoretical marxism holds that the upper strata of society's structures, such as art, literature, law, morality, religion, etc., are epiphenomena, or phenomena produced by its sub-structure, i.e. its economic, social, and political base. Thus, economics, politics, and ideology form, shape or "model" reality. Given this starting point and applying it to the reading of the Bible, it means that the Scriptures are read and explained in view of the "material" circumstances from which the texts originated and were handed down, and it is in just this way that they should now be heard and allowed to continue to function.

The "materialist" reading of the Bible, as practised by Belo and Clevenot, is linked, then, with historical materialism. These authors read the Bible in historical perspective, but more particularly as a product of socio-economic, political, and ideological interests. Given this perspective, it does seem somewhat beside the point to interpret the words "materialist" and "marxist", as used in this context, to mean "atheistic" or rejecting of God. Many advocates of the MRB use the term "materialist": to distin-



is more materialistic than the very capitalism which they strive to combat. These prefer to speak in terms of a "political" or "liberating" reading of the Bible, and also of "Bible reading in solidarity."

Because the MRB also has as its intention to apply marxism as praxis to the Bible, it is a "reading model" as well as a "research model". It reads the Scriptures in view of a definite political and liberating praxis, a praxis which is related to the class struggle, i.e. the eradication of the class system in society and an end to the exploitation of people by people. On the socio-political level this praxis uses what has been called the "conflict model". This model is especially sensitive to inequalities which are brought about by social structures and which cannot be smoothed over by the mere token gestures of good will on the part of individuals within society. The Bible, then, is read and explained with the oppressed person in mind. And the fact remains that a great deal of biblical literature is indeed related to the movement to liberate the poor.

Representatives of the MRB also speak of the process of expropriation and appropriation of the Bible. What is meant here is that the Bible must be taken out of the hands of those who for centuries have claimed for themselves the right to give its only valid interpretation, an interpretation which they have imposed and continue to impose on the people. Correspondingly, the Scriptures should now be returned to those for whom they were originally intended, i.e. the people - especially the poor.

There can be no doubt that marxism, in its different forms, provides the background for the Materialist Reading of the Bible. This is clear from the writings of its leading advocates. The movement began in France, and the works of F. Belo and M. Clevenot serve as its charter. Belo, a Portuguese priest who emigrated to France and worked in Paris, is the author of a book called Lecture Materialiste de l'Evangile de Marc (1974: its English translation, which appeared in 1981, is entitled A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark). Both stimulating and original, it is much discussed but seldom read, because of its complexity. Belo attempts an almost impossible synthesis of critical, historical exegesis and Bultmannian demythologization, classical marxism and Althusser's ideological critique of marxism, as well as the modern linguistic studies of F. de Saussure, R. Barthes' French literary criticism and psychoanalytical theories as applied to the linguistic approach of J. Lacan.

It was M. Clevenot, a university chaplain and freelance journalist in Paris, who popularized the vision of Belo. Approches Materialistes de la Bible was published in 1976 and it became a best seller and one of the most discussed books in France. It has been translated into several languages since then, with the English version coming out in 1985 and entitled Materialist Approaches to the Bible. Clevenot situates the Bible in the social context of first century Palestine, with special stress on the "class struggle" of that period. He then proceeds to give a reading of Mark's Gospel as the narrative of the praxis of Jesus.

An Initial Evaluation

The Materialist Reading of the Bible contends that the classical tradition of historical exegesis is bourgeois

and idealistic; and, consequently, it is supportive only of the ruling class. This claim makes sense in so far as one holds all present-day practice of science and education to be bourgeois, that is to say, hampering rather than promoting the growth of man, and, consequently, promoting the alienation of man from himself, from others, and from society. However, the traditional approach of historical exegesis as such can hardly be avoided or dismissed. Given the very nature and history of the biblical writings, to reject a diachronic reading, one that attempts to determine the original meaning of the author at the time he wrote, would pave the way for a new form of obscurantism, and a clerical obscurantism at that. The exegetical method that seeks to establish the relative parts tradition and redaction play in a given text of the Gospel remains indispensable to preserving an historical and literal access to Jesus of Nazareth. And such a study of Jesus has definite relevance for the faith.

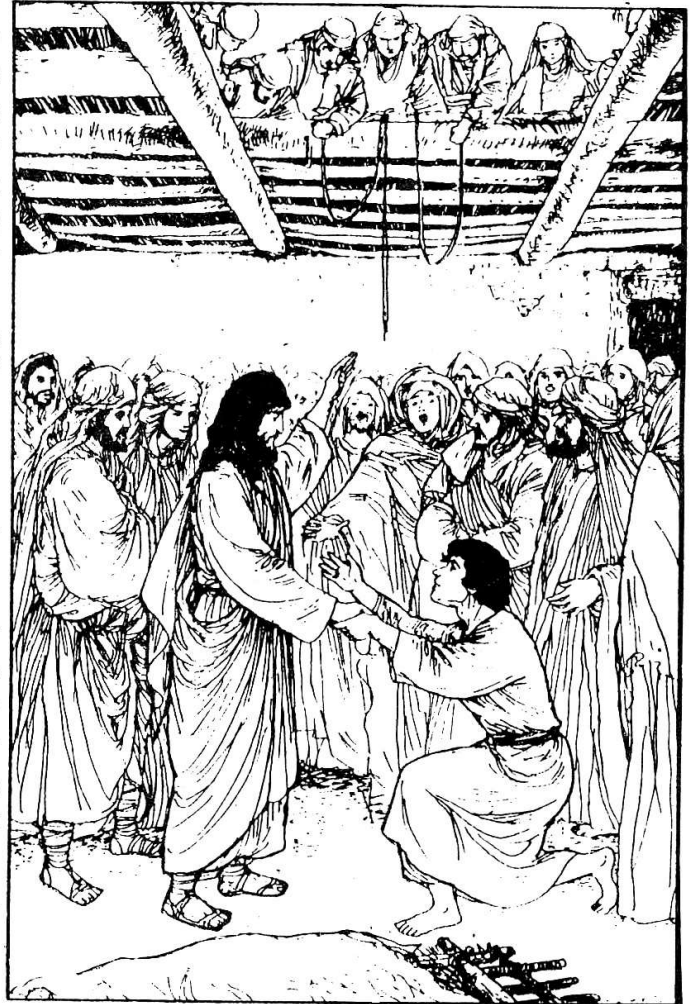
To acknowledge the importance of the Materialist Reading of the Bible is certainly not to raise it to an exclusive status. There seems to exist among practitioners of the MRB a monopolistic tendency, an insistence on exclusive rights - the very same accusation they level at other exegetical methods.

"Allow me right from the beginning to clear up a possible misunderstanding. Materialist exegesis does not intend to be a variant, one among other ways of reading the Scriptures. It claims exclusivity: not as if there would be no alternatives to materialist exegesis - for that you have only to look at any book of exegesis - but because it posits that it is the only valid way of reading the Scriptures. It is as simple as that" (S. van Tilborg, "De materialistische exegese als keuze," Tijdschrift voor Theologie 18 (1978,109; author's translation).

Is such an insistence really all that necessary? Why not just say that this method deals with a legitimate reading of the Bible from the particular viewpoint of social structures? And why not add to this that the Bible, as life

itself, possesses along with the socio-political an essentially personal and interpersonal aspect as well?

On the other hand, as far as most traditional exegetes are concerned, there is little need to advocate for the right to read the Bible in a new way. Even superficial contact with the pastoral scene has been enough to convince them that the Bible is hardly their own private hunting ground, and they themselves are hardly content with a biblical text that is explained only according to classical exegetical methodology. They will point out, however, that the "new" ways of reading the Bible, be they structuralist, psychoanalytic, or materialist, are not entirely new, and that they should be incorporated into the traditional approaches to Bible reading without further ado. It is precisely in this way that they hope to arrive at a deeper understanding of the Bible and a more complete insight into the character, person, and imitation of Jesus, a truly inexhaustible study.



As a research model, the MRB complements the traditional historical exegesis considerably by doing full justice to the basic sociological principle of classical Form Criticism - sitz im leben. This principle of "situation in life" is in urgent need of expansion so that it might include the socio-economic and political spheres. As a reading model also, the MRB appears to be eminently suitable to the task of forming an evangelical-political attitude to life, one that takes up the cudgels for a Church and a world in which there will no longer be either rich or poor. The accumulation of riches - be it

through means of private or state capitalism - is not only an exercise in oppression but it also points to the bankruptcy of Christian love, for in our present world one becomes rich at the expense of the poor, and also at the expense of future generations.

The fact that the MRB makes use of marxist social analysis as a tool, is not in itself an insurmountable obstacle, provided the future bears out that it does not preclude a faith choice - something that up to now has yet to be made clear - for the question still remains: what kind of socialism and what kind of Christianity one will opt for on the basis of the gospel? It also remains to be seen what critique the Bible itself contains and will bring to bear on the marxist notion of liberation as well as the traditional concept of redemption. Thus it may also become clear that what the MRB postulates is the problematic of the marxist-christian dialogue, and the MRB could well play an important role in this dialogue, not only for the benefit of Christianity but for marxism itself.

Method and Procedure

What the MRB proposes is a new method for reading the Bible, a reading that is based on three fundamental principles: marxist literary theory, language structuralism, and social function. Of the three, marxist literary theory and language structuralism are more closely related. Marxist literary theory looks at a text as the product of a socio-economic process - the product of an historical situation with its economic, social and political structures, with these structures becoming the prime focus of the MRB's attention. Language structuralism views the text as a body of language signs whose significance can only be revealed by unveiling their inter-relationships. The hypothesis here is that a text is a composite of signs which are ordered in such a way so as to give up their meaning of and by themselves. The biblical text might be compared to a weaver's fabric made up of many interlacing threads. One must first search out the individual threads (which are called by the MRB the "codes" of the text). But having done this, it is still not enough to arrive at the full meaning; for just as the threads themselves are connected to a complex system of spools and needles, not to mention the weaver

himself, so too is the biblical text related to the social, political and economic context as a product to the totality of its component parts. The true meaning of the biblical text, then, is to be found not only in the literary mesh-work but also connected with the societal situation. Hence, the task the MRB has set for itself is nothing short of unraveling the whole literary and social fabric.

Standing along side of, and essential to, the literary and structural principles is the principle of social function. Just as the psychoanalytic reading of the Bible seeks to help people solve personal problems and emotional difficulties, the MRB wants to put the Bible at the service of society, or, more specifically, to serve the cause of social, economic, and cultural liberation of people and nations. Thus the Scriptures are committed to the eradication of class distinctions in society and to the active promotion of equality among its members. According to this view, this is their proper function, one that is mandated by faith in and the imitation of Jesus Christ, and is to serve as the principle mission of Christianity and Christian faith. Social commitment, or even further, the commitment to socialism, is, then, an integral part of the MRB, and without it one cannot hope to arrive at its proper understanding. The MRB is not meant to be a neutral or uncommitted exercise in exegesis. On the contrary, it presupposes solidarity with the poor and the oppressed of the world through a personal choice and fundamental attitude which is based on the Bible itself. If one were to approach this reading of the Bible without this social and political commitment based on personal conviction and internal readiness, one would be overlooking something essential to this engagement, namely, the spiritual element so necessary to solidify and maintain fidelity to such a commitment.

The above three principles constitute the starting point for the Materialist Reading of the Bible, but this reading can only be realized through means of what has been called the "decoding of the text". The method of the MRB, then, is to read the biblical text by means of a number of keys or "codes". Sometimes these codes are divided into two basic groups: dramatic and cultural codes. The dramatic codes are directly related to the action, and include codes of activity, strategy and analysis, as well as topography

and chronology, none of which require the assistance of any specialized expertise. Cultural codes, which include social, symbolic, and mythological codes, do require the expertise of scholars, especially biblical scholars. More often than not, however, the codes are divided into three rather than two groups, each a series of codes which allows for a threefold analysis or decoding of the text. First in the series is functional or sequential analysis which, by means of the codes of place (TOP) and time(CHRON), studies the transformation of the account and thus is able to uncover the narrative structure of the text. Second in the series is action or actantial analysis which studies the activities of the persons acting or the actants. This series of codes includes the code of action (ACT) which studies the transformation of the account in its transition from its initial situation through one or more changes to its final situation, the code of analysis (ANAL) which asks how the actants live, analyze and judge the situation, and the code of strategy (STR) which deals with the way the actants act. The third and final series in this set is cultural analysis. Cultural analysis evaluates activities within the context of their societal and ideological situation, and it includes the social code (SOC) which contains all references to the social or societal order, the symbolic code (SYMB) which includes all references to the ideological order, and the mythological code (MYTH) which is a variant of the symbolic code with special reference to the heaven-earth relationship.

Concrete Application

Belo and Clevenot apply the above three principles and the codes to the reading of the Gospel of St. Mark in the following way. First they situate this gospel in the political, socio-economic and ideological context of Jesus' time. They then proceed



to explain it from the concrete historical circumstances, namely and to wit, the existing opposition between the ruling classes and the oppressed classes. Lining up with the former are kings, priests or sadducees, the pharisees and scribes; those on the side of the oppressed include the prophets and Jesus who reacted against the dominating power of riches and prestige and took the side of the oppressed and the victims of social discrimination. Reading Mark's Gospel by means of the codes provides an image of Jesus that while incomplete is none the less striking. This Jesus acts; the good news is not doctrinal teaching but rather the account of a praxis. Jesus acts and his action is subversive. But his praxis is not revolutionary in the manner of the Zealots. Here Belo speaks of

"a strategic confrontation between Jesus and the Zealots which runs as a fine thread throughout the narrative, and which also involves the disciples. Mark, writing after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, compares the two failures (the failure of the cross and the uprising in 70 AD) to the advantage of Jesus, who has been proclaimed risen and about to come in the glory of a realized eschatology" (F. Belo, "Why a Materialist Reading?" Concilium n. 138 (October 1980), 20).

The action of Jesus is, however, subversion. It subverts the establishment and, notably, the economic establishment which is founded on the power of riches. It implies the overthrow of the political-ideological system that maintains the power of the former, something which the adversaries of Jesus see most clearly. Jesus' praxis is also subversive of that religious system of legal purity which is the ideological base of the group in power. By driving the vendors from the Temple, by healing lepers in order that the "impure" might be reinstated in society, and by challenging the sabbatical prohibitions, Jesus is revolting against a system which supports a class of people who exercise power in the name of God solely for their own benefit.

While the praxis of Jesus is subversive, it is also positive: he opposes the system by assembling a new kind of community. While trying to escape from the ambiguities of the Zealot mentality which weighs heavily upon his own

activity - a mentality rife among the masses and shared even by his own disciples - Jesus constructs around him a new way for human beings to relate, a new style of human relationship which breaks with the dominant social mores that have perverted human reciprocity and the proper use of created things. His is a praxis of giving, an invitation to create an economy based on sharing and opposed to the rule of money, to create a society based on the relationship of friendship to replace the repressive hierarchy of the class system. Mark in his Gospel is, then, dealing with the liberating praxis of Jesus and the recognition of this praxis as messianic. The Messiah feeds the hungry masses; the messianic praxis consists of the sharing of one's bread! Thus it is that in Mark all attention is given to demolishing the ancient Jewish order of "purity" and "impurity" and to establishing a new order of giving that is based on fraternal sharing and finds its completion in the Last Supper.

Appreciation and Evaluation of the MRB

The MRB is possibly the most important of all the new methods for reading the Bible. It teaches the exegete from a diachronic background to take seriously into account and study more profoundly the socio-economic, political and ideological situation of Jesus' time as well as the times in which the gospel traditions and texts originated. The sociological principle of Form Criticism, the Sitz im Leben, which traditionally included only the religious, literary, and historical situation of the text, urgently needs to be expanded to include the socio-political and economic sectors of life as well. When this happens, it is possible to arrive at a wider and deeper understanding of redemption as it comes from Jesus. Classical tradition teaches that we are redeemed by the death of Jesus. Such an emphasis can often cause the life of Jesus, including his resurrection, to recede into the background. A renewed doctrine of redemption emphasizes the redeeming value of his entire life, and, therefore, the societal vision of this redemption as well. Here the proclamation of Jesus' life, suffering, death, and resurrection becomes the proclamation of a new historical principle: oppression and death do not have the last word in a history that is orientated to a new future. What once seemed historically impos-

sible now becomes possible: God has chosen the oppressed of the world and the marginal members of society to be His instruments of liberation for all peoples. We shall be saved only through saving others.

Jesus stands with the poor and the oppressed, effectively taking up the cudgels for their liberation. Jesus, himself, is their liberator in word and deed. He becomes involved in the "class struggle" of his day, chooses new leaders from unlikely social groups, calls forth blessings on the poor and calls down woes upon the rich. But his struggle in favour of the poor is a constructive struggle, harbouring neither bitterness nor hatred, as he restores people to their full humanity. The new social dynamic which he champions is a love that is universal and must embrace even ones enemies, for it proclaims that only those who themselves are liberated from all alienating forces are able to become the authentic instruments of liberation for others.

In this manner the MRB tries to understand the life of Jesus in a new way. The words and deeds of Jesus are placed in bold relief which gives them a clear socio-political impact. It would be unfair to dismiss this reading as merely an attempt to transform Christianity into a social or socialist instrument in the cause for liberating the oppressed. To do so would be to forget how necessary it is for Christianity to integrate into its doctrine of salvation the gospel's social and political orientation. One should, then, appreciate the MRB as an effort to express the Christian message of salvation in contemporary terms. Because of its sensitivity to the problem of suffering and injustice brought about by social structures, the MRB has been able to discover new and unexpected dimensions of a salvation that is human, christian, and divine.

The gospel is an account of a person who believed not in death and destruction but in the victory of life over both. His resurrection is not simply a victory over death, but first and foremost a confirmation of his life - the way of life of Jesus Christ. It is both "insurrection" and "resurrection". Insurrection means to rise up to build a better future here on earth for each and every person by following the standard of Jesus' life; resurrection means

to prepare for and initiate mankind's definitive future in accordance with his way and no other.

Thus understood the resurrection of Jesus is not primarily a doctrine about the hereafter or a theory of what will take place after death. It is first and foremost a vision of history, a vision of our personal and common history which we ourselves make and for which we ourselves are responsible. It is to the merit of the MRB that it attempts with resolute determination to test this insurrection/resurrection faith by means of a fleshing out of the redeeming life and death of Jesus.

On the other hand, the socio-economic and political angle of incidence from which the MRB studies the gospel text seems to be too narrow and too limited. This reading confines the Bible to being a collection of ideological products that belong to a social praxis. It strives to situate the biblical text according to this societal setting. When this is done what happens is that the texts speak directly to the problems of structural intercourse among people but only speak indirectly about our relationship to Jesus and to God. In other words, this reading of necessity is more interested in the question of what economic, social and political circumstances gave rise to this ideological product than it is in the religious and theological content of the text themselves. While one must hasten to add here that the authentic religious content of a given biblical text can only be "approximated" by any form of biblical methodology, still, it cannot be ignored that there exist other methods which are more directly concerned with the faith meaning and the faith language of the biblical texts.

Among exegetes today - leaving aside the accusation that their more traditional formation in historical exegesis has made them biased - there are many who think that Form Criticism, Source Criticism and Redaction Criticism offer a much more well-rounded approach to the study of biblical tradition. Form Criticism studies the origin of the gospel tradition. It examines how it first took shape in the oral traditions of the infant Church. In this "pre-literary" phase, there was no question yet of any literary formation. What did exist was a sociological faith milieu, that is to say, a concrete faith and life situation within a com-

munity that had various functions, the most notable of which was the apostolic proclamation. (We pointed out earlier how the MRB can do much to widen this perspective.) It was from out of this faith milieu - the "pre-literary" phase - that the first gospel literature originated by means of small literary units, random sayings, loose accounts and literary language forms, which are usually called "literary genres". What Source Criticism does is to continue to observe the development of the gospel tradition by examining these literary genres, studying how they were bundled or



collected, first in brief, written documents called fragmentary sources, then in longer ones, which are referred to as real sources. These were afterwards used by the various evangelists in the composition of their gospels. It is the task of Redaction Criticism to study in depth final, definitive redaction of the gospel tradition. Its focus is on the gospel writer as the final editor of the materials that have been handed down, audit attempts to describe his human, literary and theological personality. Obviously, these three approaches, Form, Source and Redaction Criticism, are very much attuned to the literary genres as testimonies of faith and to the gospels themselves as documents of faith, with

Redaction Criticism bringing strong concentration to bear on the different theologies expressed in each individual gospel. Because of this, all three are of great importance to the foundation of Christian faith; but not in the sense that any literary, historical and critical research can of itself give faith in Jesus Christ, rather in the sense that were such research able to prove unmistakably that there was a definite break between the Jesus of history and the Christ proclaimed, it could remove this foundation of faith. Given the MRB's point of origin, its methodology

and its procedure, it seems that this reading of the Bible involves itself in the religious and theological content of a biblical text from only one particular point of view, be that angle of incidence ever so important. In this reading, textural interpretation is seen not so much as an attempt to bring out the full religious meaning of a text as it is an effort to discover and reformulate how the text was produced. Process here supercedes content. The purpose of the reading is primarily to find the economic, political and ideological factors that have given rise to the text and continue to make it function. Reading here means to opt for a socio-political praxis. In all of this there seems to be a strong tendency to make of the "text" a "pre-text", that is to say, to read the text not so much for what it has to offer in and of itself, but rather to attribute to it a function with reference to the societal situation. Here the danger is that use and function pre-empt meaning and content. All the weight is shifted to the pragmatic aspect of the biblical texts with the result that each and every text is asked to bear the burden of containing a socio-political praxis and a call to such a praxis as well.

In such a reading the clear distinction between "believing" and "non-believing" disappears. Indeed, among marxist authors today, there are many who do pay heed to the significance of Jesus, seeing in the man a model for full human existence and in his message and ministry a leaven for the transformation of society and human history. Perhaps the omission of the distinction noted above has a certain advantage: unbelievers can search for elements of a basic socialism in this cultural-historical product, while, at the same time, believers can formulate a critique of social structures (more specifically the power structures of society) in this book of faith. The question, however, still remains that in the blurring of this distinction does not the Bible lose some of its value as a religious book? And does not every book have a right to be read in accordance with its own nature, intention and content, which, in this case, happens to be primarily religious?

The MRB's exclusive concentration of our attention on the social, political and economic function of the biblical texts seems to result in a two-fold reduction of

the texts: historical and religious. An historical reduction takes place when the complex historical nature of the text, which always contains several historical layers, is reduced to its socio-economic aspect. And certainly there is a religious reduction when the meaning of the text, especially the religious meaning, is restricted to its situation in the social context.

Further questions may also be raised in this reading concerning the possible one-sided interpretation of the MRB codes, especially the symbolic, mythological, and basileic (BAS) codes. (The basileic code is Jesus' own code, one that deals with the expectation and realization of the kingdom of God in his own person).

The gospel texts themselves have much more to say about the new "symbolic" order which Jesus inaugurated, as well as about his person, his messianic activity and identity, his power and authority, than is forthcoming from the MRB. And the study of contemporary linguistics, philosophy and theology allows us to say much more about the conceptual content of "myth" and "mythological" than the mythological code seems to permit. Myth has a necessary function in the faith discourse on God, which is essentially a discourse on historical reality. The so-called mythological code refers to an event which takes place in our world but is not controlled by the world; it is a special form for interpreting reality which is useful to faith and theology, more particularly to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Finally, more can be said about the nature of salvation and liberation, about the powers of evil and their defeat. The gospel speaks in terms which suggest that liberation and salvation are wider and go deeper, touch and heal and make whole again the entire person, and are, therefore, ultimately the business of God. The believer, then, will focus his attention not only on self-liberation but also on the liberation that is given, given now as well as in the final fulfillment. The whole of human religious history is a struggle with the question of St. Paul: does justification come through faith in God or through observance of the law? Is our liberation, our salvation, ultimately in our own hands or in the hands of the living God? Can we liberate ourselves entirely, or are we in our deepest being dependent on God for our total liberation?

With regard to the basileic code, how can one reduce Jesus' own code of God's rule in Christ over people and the world, past, present and future, to a set of social, symbolic and mythological codes? The kingdom of God cannot be identified with any one thing or any one person, or with any one societal or ecclesial order, because, while it is in the world, it is not of the world. In the end, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God and his call for repentance and conversion cannot be decoded. We are dealing here with a typically kerygmatic style, i.e. the proclamation of a divine, saving event in Jesus, and a summons not to pass it up carelessly. Thus, according to Moltmann, God's kingdom can well be socialism (and, we would add, democracy, humanism, etc.), but socialism (and democracy, humanism, etc.) is not yet the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

The principles and codes of the MRB do not do full justice to the total content of religious discourse and activity that can be found in the biblical texts; nor do they do justice to what is specific to the act and language of faith. Religious language is religious experience as expressed by people; the language of faith serves to open up earthly reality to explore its foundational mystery. The principles and codes of the MRB tend to oversimplify the gospel and sometimes seem to turn it into little more than a "workbook for socio-political study". To achieve that purpose, the gospel narratives are too easily placed in a pre-pascal category, while the sayings or discourses are labeled post-pascal. This is an unwarranted equating of the narrative with the historical, and theology and Christology with the redactional.

The MRB has not succeeded, nor will it ever succeed, in presenting a total picture of Jesus. Its angle of incidence and, therefore, the limitations of its method prevent this. But such can be said of all exegetical methods, for the figure of Christ and his imitation are truly inexhaustible and no one method alone can give a complete picture of him. The question of faith or the question of Bible as a religious work which we have here addressed to the MRB should be addressed also to all readings and methods. We must content ourselves, therefore, with having at present, just as we have had in the past, a variety of different methods for reading the Sacred Scriptures.