

## Juan Luis Segundo and Australian Theology

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**Abstract:** This essay falls into two parts. In the first there is a brief discussion of the emergence of Liberation Theology in Latin America in 1960s and 1970s, and its challenge to the European and North American academic theology which has dominated the Christian world. The liberation theologians adopted a different methodology, which they saw to be required by the situations of massive injustice and poverty which they found around them. Juan Luis Segundo presented his understanding of the hermeneutical circle, and showed how commitment to the humanisation of the continent leads to new interpretations of Scripture. In the second part of the essay the application of this method to Australian theology is considered. The situation of Aboriginal people is taken as an example. The effect on Aboriginal people of the coming of white settlers raises challenging questions for Christian theology and biblical interpretation.

IN THIS ESSAY I wish to consider some aspects of the theological work of Juan Luis Segundo, especially his methodology; and then to examine, by way of example, how this methodology might be applied to the consideration of one issue facing Australian Christians today, namely the relationship between First World theology and Aboriginal religious traditions. My aim is to show that the work of liberation theologians should not be regarded as simply ephemeral, a passing fad, but rather that it has much to contribute to the theological enterprise as such. In order to put the discussion in context, it will be necessary first to reflect briefly on liberation theology itself.

Liberation theology emerged in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, and made quite an impact on the academic world. There was something fresh and striking about it. For so long, Europe, and then North America, had led the Christian theological field, with large academic institutions serving as the centres of research and exploration. This First World theological work reflected the Enlightenment emphasis on historical and literary criticism, and made use of all the tools of scholarship developed in Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The achievements of these theologians and

academic faculties were great, and brought about a profound rethinking of Christian theology. The way many educated Christians saw the world was shaped by, and reflected in, the various books and articles produced. Theological teachers in other nations, including those of Latin America, received the fruits of this scholarly work, and passed them on to their own people. Thus the theological views of the Christian world were largely determined by the theologians, exegetes, historians, and so on, of the academic centres of the First World.

But in the 1960s and 1970s something new began in Latin America. Here was a vast region that was traditionally Christian, but was in many ways underdeveloped economically and unstable politically. The countries of this region were, in general, characterised by great inequalities in wealth and massive poverty; moreover, their political institutions were often very oppressive, and at the same time unable to cope with the enormous problems that faced them. The theology that came from the more developed First World nations, for all its achievements, did not seem to meet the needs of their situation. Hence a new theology began to emerge. But this was not simply a new "school" of theology, which could be fitted neatly into the First World tradition. Rather it was a new way of doing theology – a radically different theological method. For liberation theologians, the starting-point was the massive injustice they experienced in their own countries: the grinding poverty of vast numbers of people, their exploitation by the privileged classes of society, and the great limitations on their freedom to live as human beings. This was seen to be clearly contrary to the Gospel message. Yet these nations were, by tradition, Christian. How could a theology be formulated which would express the needs, yearnings and legitimate hopes of these vast populations? The theology which began with the scholarly study of Scripture and tradition did not seem to reach a point where there was a real encounter with the gravity of their situation. What was required was that the theologian begin with the actual situation and then ask, with determination and realism, what light the Christian tradition might throw upon it. In this way a theology appropriate for Latin American countries might emerge.

#### JUAN LUIS SEGUNDO (1925-1996)

Segundo was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, entered the Society of Jesus in 1941, was ordained in 1955, studied for his licentiate in theology in Louvain and his doctorate in Paris, and then returned to his native Uruguay. In 1965 he founded in Montevideo a centre for the study of the faith in the context of Uruguayan society. (The centre was closed in 1976 because of the hostility of the government.) Segundo was one of the earliest of the liberation theologians, and wrote extensively on a variety of topics. The book that I will refer to especially is *The Liberation*

of *Theology*, in which he deals with the fundamental issue of theological methodology.<sup>1</sup>

The reactions of the scholarly world to Segundo – insofar as notice was taken of him – were mixed. For example, Alfred T. Hennelly, who became Professor of Theology at Fordham University, wrote very favourably of his work.<sup>2</sup> Paul E. Sigmund, Professor of Politics at Princeton University, was almost contemptuous of Segundo; some of the phrases he used were: “lack of analytical precision or systematic argument”, “the confused and impenetrable nature of his prose”, “blithe dismissal of a concern for human rights”, “his usual long-winded manner”.<sup>3</sup> Robert Kress, who became a teacher at Catholic University, Washington, wrote a review of *The Liberation of Theology* in which he bestows some praise on the book, but, in general, is witheringly critical. For example, he refers to what he calls Segundo’s “ecclesiological infantilism”.<sup>4</sup> Marsha Aileen Hewitt, teacher of social ethics and contemporary theology at Trinity College, Toronto, published a sympathetic and perceptive study of Segundo. It is the best book I have seen on his thought, even though I disagree with its main thesis (which, however, the author puts forward rather tentatively), namely that Segundo has reduced theology to social theory.<sup>5</sup> The reason for my disagreement will appear later in this paper.

Segundo is not an easy theologian to read. Although he might be classified, in the usual academic terms, as a “systematic theologian”, he is not at all a systematic thinker. He does not aim to elaborate a large structure of logical thought. He is, rather, a critical theologian, a theologian of insightful comments. Moreover these comments are *situated*, and need to be understood in the context in which they occur.<sup>6</sup> There is a fluidity in his use of terms; for example, the word “ideology” tends to have different meanings in different parts of his argument. One would have to admit also that there is, in Segundo, a certain conscious rejection of some of the proprieties and conventions of academic theology. In his Preface to Hennelly’s book, *Theologies in Conflict*, he criticises the kind of academic training which places emphasis on conveying information (with, for example, the provision of large bibliographies), and insists on the importance of enabling people to think theologically in their own situation. He writes: “It is a matter of urgent necessity that erudition be

1. Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberación de la teología* (Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé, 1975); E.T. *The Liberation of Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1976).

2. Alfred T. Hennelly, “The Challenge of Juan Luis Segundo”, *Theological Studies* 38 (1977), 125-35; *Theologies in Conflict* (New York: Orbis, 1979).

3. Paul E. Sigmund, *Liberation Theology at the Crossroads* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 63, 64, 77, 163.

4. Robert Kress, review in *Horizons* 4 (1977), 132-35.

5. Marsha Aileen Hewitt, *From Theology to Social Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990).

6. Marsha Hewitt’s book is particularly good in the way she takes care to interpret each statement – even the alarming ones! – in its proper context.

replaced by analysis." (p. xvii) Consequently he can come across as carelessly eclectic in his approach, making use of any ideas of others that he finds helpful for his thinking, without taking care to see whether his use of the ideas corresponds exactly with the meaning in the original author. What is important for Segundo is to analyse the matter in hand, rather than to give an exact interpretation of another author.

Hence the scholarly disdain of some academics of the North is not surprising. One might dismiss Segundo as a careless writer, unworthy of serious consideration. What then can be said in his favour? First, there is his profound – and indeed, passionate – commitment to the welfare of the exploited multitudes of Latin America, and, in general, to the humanisation of our world. This is the driving force behind his work – and, indeed, that of all the liberation theologians. Second, there is his keenly critical mind, which enables him so often to perceive the real issues involved in a situation, and to analyse what is going on in the theological enterprise. Further, he is ready to engage in dialogue with the influential intellectual movements of the time, such as Marxism, evolutionary theory, biblical exegesis, and is willing to accept the risks involved in such an enterprise. Finally, throughout all his work there is a fidelity to the essentials of the Christian tradition, and a desire to bring to bear on his situation the radical message of the Gospel.<sup>7</sup> He asks then: how does a Christian theologise in the reality of Latin America today, with all its massive economic, social and political problems? What method is appropriate for this large task?

In his Introduction to *The Liberation of Theology* Segundo mentions three negative tendencies which might threaten the future of liberation theology. The most dangerous of these is, he thinks, the disdain for this movement on the part of the great theological centres of the world. The real issue, as he sees it, is that of methodology, and he considers that the time has come to go on the offensive, and to challenge the theological methodology as practised in the major centres of learning. He remarked: "Every Latin American knows from experience that any attempt or struggle of this kind is a confrontation between pygmies and giants."<sup>8</sup> It is with this combative mood, and a sense of being the "underdog", that Segundo sets out on *The Liberation of Theology*.

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7. My own experience is that of gaining many illuminating insights from reading Segundo – just as, in the 1960s and 1970s, one learnt so much from reading Karl Rahner's articles, or, in the 1980s and 1990s, from reading works of feminist exegesis and theology, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* (London: SCM, 1983).

8. In the English version, the image of pygmies confronting giants was translated as, "a rematch of David against Goliath". One of my colleagues was much annoyed by this expression. It was only later, when I was able to consult the Spanish text, that I discovered that the translator had added the biblical reference. Segundo's original wording does not imply that God is on the side of the Latin Americans and that they will certainly win, but only that the struggle is an unequal one.

## THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

Segundo bases his theological methodology on his own version of the "hermeneutical circle". This term is especially associated with the exegetical work of Rudolf Bultmann, but Segundo distinguishes his use of the "circle" from that of Bultmann. There seem to me to be two fundamental points of difference. First, Bultmann, writing from the world of scholarship, is concerned with understanding the text in such a way as to grasp with the mind the meaning the author wishes to convey. Secondly, Bultmann the existentialist is concerned with the enrichment of the life of the individual who studies the text.<sup>9</sup> One can recognise that these are the interests of a scholar writing for the academic world. But Segundo, while having received his training in this academic world, identifies himself with the yearnings and hopes of Latin American nations which were struggling to find solutions to their economic, social and political problems. When he turns to the Scriptures, which express the Judaeo-Christian faith, he is not thinking simply of the enrichment of the lives of an educated élite, but of meeting the needs of impoverished multitudes; and he is not seeking simply an understanding of the meaning of the authors, but is asking how the faith that these Scriptures express can help people to change unjust societies and make them more like the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed.<sup>10</sup>

Segundo writes of the two preconditions that must be met if the "hermeneutic circle", as he understands it, is to be effective. He writes:

The first precondition is that questions rising out of the present be rich enough, general enough and basic enough to force us to change our customary conceptions of life, death, knowledge, society, politics, and the world in general (p. 8).

The second precondition is a willingness to change one's interpretation of Scripture in the light of the transforming experiences of the present, that is, the experiences which raise new and profound questions. If one is unwilling to allow these questions to change one's customary understanding of the Scriptures, the hermeneutical circle is terminated; the questions will either remain unanswered "or worse, they will receive old, conservative, unserviceable answers" (p. 9).

Bultmann, in his discussion of the hermeneutical task, the process of interpreting a text, makes a great deal of the significance of the prior understanding (*Vorverständnis*) which the interpreter brings to the task.

9. See "The Problem of Hermeneutics", in R. Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM, 1995) 234-61.

10. While Reformation theologians, as a consequence of the controversies of the sixteenth century, tend to emphasise the passive aspect of faith, Segundo, in accordance with the Catholic affirmation that human free choice has not been totally destroyed by sin, sees faith as essentially directed to action. Jas 2:14-26, teaching that faith without works is dead, is important to Segundo.

That is to say, the interpreter has some knowledge of the subject already, and on the basis of this knowledge has questions to put to the text. Without this prior understanding, no interpretation is possible.<sup>11</sup>

Segundo's first precondition is somewhat similar to this "prior understanding" but goes far beyond it. Here it is not simply a question of the scholar in his study seeking to enter the mind of an ancient author and discern the exact meaning of a text. Segundo, rather, is indicating someone whose whole understanding of the world and of Christian theology has been shaken. New questions of vital importance have arisen, and it is with these urgent questions in mind that this person seeks help from the Scriptures and the Christian tradition. The received understanding of Scripture and tradition, passed on by the theologians and scholars of the First World, seems totally inadequate to the reality of life in Latin America.

What is entailed by this "first precondition" seems to be no less than a real conversion experience.<sup>12</sup> It is important to analyse what is involved in this experience. Not everyone living in Latin America seems to be aware of the scandalous nature of the situation. Not everyone has a sense of the urgent need to do something about it. And not everyone has the commitment to become engaged in some way in the process of transformation. From a faith perspective, it seems to me, this awareness and the commitment must be regarded as the work of the Holy Spirit. That is, there is an encounter with God.

But then, one might ask, why does this situation come across as being scandalous?<sup>13</sup> Clearly certain criteria are being assumed, against which the current situation is being judged. Where do such criteria come from? Presumably, for the Christian, they come from Scripture and tradition. Certain fundamental values have been passed on, in some

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11. See, for example, *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, 239.

12. I am reminded of conversion experiences of theologians of the past, experiences which have resulted in new understandings of Scripture and tradition. The conversion of Paul is an obvious example, for example Gal 1:11-16. In the case of Augustine, I think not so much of the scene in the garden, but rather of his pastoral experiences as Bishop of Hippo, together with the continuing awareness of his own human weakness; these sent him back to the study of the Letter to the Romans, and produced his masterly responses to the questions of Simplician. Luther describes in dramatic fashion the solution to his inner turmoil when he finally came to understand the meaning of "the justice of God". It was the experience of the utter meaninglessness of the disaster of the First World War which made Karl Barth realise the inadequacy of liberal theology. Perhaps a more humdrum example is Karl Rahner's appreciation, throughout his life time, of the dignity and richness of being human, and consequently of the inadequacy of neo-scholastic theology. In all these examples there have been profound life experiences, which can be called encounters with God, and which produced new interpretations of Scripture and tradition.

13. I am thinking here of people in Latin America of Christian faith. Of course, many people who are not Christians have a keen sense of justice and injustice. Segundo often refers, in fact, to anthropological faith, of which religious faith is a specification. Like Tillich, he would see faith as part of being human, and not just restricted to those with a specific religious allegiance. But for the sake of simplicity and clarity I am considering in this article only Christians.

fashion, through the centuries, such as the dignity of the human person, the right of each person to live in a human manner and the supreme importance of love. There is also the fundamental biblical teaching that God is on the side of the poor, and opposes oppression by the rich and powerful. In the light of all this, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the present situation in Latin America can be seen to be scandalous.<sup>14</sup>

In this first precondition for Segundo's hermeneutic circle we learn that the rich and basic questions that arise from experience are sufficient "to force us to change our customary conceptions of life..." A little later in the chapter, when he begins to discuss Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*, Segundo quotes Karl Mannheim as saying that one of the requirements for the formulation of a problem is "an *act of will* on the part of the knower" (p. 10). And near the end of his discussion of Cox, Segundo writes:

A hermeneutic circle in theology always presupposes a profound human commitment, a *partiality* that is consciously accepted – not on the basis of theological criteria, of course, but on the basis of human criteria (p. 13).

These three quotations all seem to be referring to the same reality – a reality which can be summed up in the words of the third quotation: "a profound human commitment". Thus this encounter with God, this conversion experience, involves also the resolution to do something in order to change an unacceptable situation. To put it another way: the faith that is experienced through the encounter with God, that is, through the work of the Holy Spirit, includes essentially a commitment to action. This action will be directed towards the promotion in some way of a more human world, that is, in biblical terms, towards the realisation of the Reign of God.

Further comment is required on the third of the quotations just given. First, there is the word "partiality", which Segundo discusses in the next paragraph. He explains that any theological system is inevitably partial. The claim of objectivity, which may be made by some academic

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14. Segundo, unfortunately, does not emphasise the role of the Holy Spirit in the whole process. Such an emphasis is needed in order to give an adequate theological account of what is going on. Moreover, it is not just a matter of adding the words, "under the guidance of the Holy Spirit" simply as a formality. The Christian tradition is insistent on the need of God's grace for any thoughts, desires or actions which lead to salvation. In his earlier book, *Grace and the Human Condition* (New York: Orbis, 1973), Segundo writes of the relationship between grace and nature: "God's gift transforms human existence, providing it with new dimensions. Our purpose in this volume is to locate the grace of God, to give concrete content to this transformation, and to find it in our own lives." (p. 14) Later in the same book he writes of: "the recognition that *within* the human and the temporal there is operating God's own power and life" (p. 186). Hence one can presume that the radical change of mind and heart, which occurs when one recognises the scandal of the Latin American situation, takes place under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

theologians, simply cannot be sustained. Theology is written within history, and therefore inevitably reflects a partial view, even if the theologians involved are unaware of the fact. Segundo makes the significant comment: "Academic theology may well be unaware of its unconscious partiality, but the very fact that it poses as something impartial is a sign of its conservative partiality from the very start." Moreover there is another reason why, in Segundo's view, theology is necessarily partial. Theology reflects a faith-view of the world; faith is essentially directed to action; action has a particularity about it and aims at certain goals; theological reflection on this faith-directed action inevitably involves partiality.<sup>15</sup>

In the quotation above Segundo writes that the partiality is "of course" (*ciertamente*) based not on "theological criteria" but on "human criteria". Clearly, for Segundo, such partiality cannot be based on "theological criteria", since such partiality is actually a *presupposition* of the theological enterprise. What does he mean by "human criteria"? One might be tempted to interpret him as saying that the starting point for theology is an option taken for "merely human" reasons, that is, having nothing to do with faith. But this would be to fail to understand the richness of the concept of "human" for Segundo. He would see the coming of the Reign of God as involving the humanisation of the world.<sup>16</sup>

I wrote earlier in this essay about the criteria by which a Christian would judge the present Latin American situation to be scandalous. These criteria are largely "human" values, but the Christian has in fact come to an appreciation and acceptance of these values through the faith tradition which he or she has inherited. Thus, in this context, "human" is a faith word.

#### AN AUSTRALIAN ISSUE

Can Segundo's insights be brought to bear on the Australian situation? Australian society is very different from that of Latin America. Our histories show some similarity – in each case the present situation results from invasion and colonisation by European powers – yet, for the most part, the concerns of Australia today seem to be worlds away from those of Central and South America. The liberation theologians themselves would insist that their thinking arises out of their own particular context. Yet they would not want to say that their

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15. The "action" of course, may be simply to do nothing, that is, to accept the world as it is. Such "non-action" is conservative.

16. See Marilyn Sunderman, *Humanisation in the Christology of Juan Luis Segundo* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1996). See also Segundo's *The Historical Jesus of the Synoptics* (New York: Orbis, 1985) and *The Humanist Christology of Paul* (New York: Orbis, 1986).

theology is of no relevance to other parts of the world. The issues they deal with are not totally absent from First World countries, since even in wealthy and developed nations there are poor, oppressed and under privileged groups of people. Even more importantly, the *method* employed by liberation theologians is potentially of universal application, and can have a transforming effect on the whole theological enterprise. Let me consider briefly one issue important to Australia today, and see how the method of liberation theology – in particular as described by Segundo – may be applied to it.

The relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is, rightly, of great concern for Australia today, and there are many aspects of this complex issue. I wish to consider here only one, namely the relationship between, on the one hand, the Christianity brought by the European settlers, and, on the other hand, the religious and cultural traditions of the original inhabitants of this land. A simplified – but not, I think, simplistic – reading of the situation is the following. Over the last two hundred or so years the situation has been one of religious and cultural domination by the Europeans. At first the Aboriginal people were considered to have no religion, and virtually no culture. Then it gradually came to be recognised that their ancient culture was rich, and their religious beliefs were central to it. Nevertheless, white missionaries required that they should turn away from this culture, and reject their religious practices, if they were to become Christians. In more recent times, of course, there has been some change, but there still remains a heavy legacy of religious and cultural domination.<sup>17</sup>

This particular kind of domination needs to be seen in the wider context of the injustices Aboriginal people have suffered since the arrival of Europeans. The extent and depth of these injustices was powerfully expressed on 10 December 1992, by the then Prime Minister, Paul Keating, in his address on the occasion of the launch of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, (the "Redfern Address"). He strongly affirmed the need for non-Aboriginal people to acknowledge that they were the cause of the problem. In brief, stark sentences he described the effects on the Indigenous population:

Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing.

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17. Social scientists in the twentieth century have begun to make available to Europeans a much better understanding of the Aboriginal cultural and religious world-view. See, for example: W. E. H. Stanner, *On Aboriginal Religion* (Oceania Monograph 36, University of Sydney, 1989); M. J. Meggitt, *Gadjari among the Walbiri Aborigines of Central Australia* (Oceania Monograph 14, University of Sydney, 1966); Max Charlesworth and others (eds.), *Religion in Aboriginal Australia* (Queensland University Press, 1984); Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers* (Cambridge University Press, 1993); Diane Bell, *Ngarrindjeri Warruwarrin* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1998). From the Aboriginal side see, for example: Anne Pattel-Gray (ed.), *Aboriginal Spirituality* (Melbourne: HarperCollinsReligious, 1996); Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology* (Melbourne: HarperCollinsReligious, 1997).

We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life.  
 We brought the diseases. The alcohol.  
 We committed the murders.  
 We took the children from their mothers.  
 We practised discrimination and exclusion.  
 It was our ignorance and prejudice.  
 And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.  
 With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask – how would I feel if this were done to me.<sup>18</sup>

Paul Keating went on to point out that these injustices are not simply a matter of the past, but continue today. He said: “The Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody showed with devastating clarity that the past lives on in inequality, racism and injustice.”

Noel Pearson, the prominent Aboriginal leader who has focussed his attention on the situation of local Aboriginal communities, writes of the utterly tragic situation of so many of them. He points out the insidious effects of welfare dependence:

Passive welfare and grog and drugs are finally tearing our society apart. We were dispossessed and discriminated against before we were included in the Welfare State, but our Law – trust, respect and mutual help – was better honoured during those times of hardship and guardianship than it is today.<sup>19</sup>

He then declares that “ours is one of the most dysfunctional societies on the planet today”.

The Rainbow Spirit Elders write of the spiritual problem that underlies this dysfunctionality:

Behind the tragedy of many Aboriginal communities (poor health, high infant mortality, low life-expectancy, high unemployment, poor housing, alcoholism, malnutrition, deaths in custody – the list goes on) lies a deep spiritual crisis.<sup>20</sup>

They go on to say: “Our task now is to mould a new spirituality that will bring healing to our people....”

It is in this context, then, that I wish to look at the issue of the cultural and religious domination of Aboriginal people by Europeans.

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18. The text of this remarkable address is given in Joan Henriks and Gerry Hefferan (eds.), *A Spirituality of Catholic Aborigines and the Struggle for Justice* (Brisbane: Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane, 1993) 110-13.

19. Noel Pearson, *Our Right to Take Responsibility* (Cairns: Noel Pearson and Associates, 2000) 5.

20. *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, 4.

Segundo's first precondition for the hermeneutic circle is that "the questions rising out of the present be rich enough, general enough, and basic enough to force us to change our customary conceptions of life, death, knowledge, society, politics and the world in general". As I have explained, this precondition involves an experience of God, conversion of heart, and a commitment to change. How is this precondition fulfilled in the present case? Here I can only make suggestions from my own experience. In some way, either through personal contact, or by reading, or through some other form of communication, one has to be able to enter sympathetically into both the situation of extreme spiritual deprivation of Aboriginal people, and into the richness of the religious and cultural heritage of which they have been deprived. When one brings to this experience the human values that have been passed down in the Christian tradition, and begins to appreciate (with heart as well as mind) the extremity of the injustice that has been done, then this is indeed an experience of God, and calls for conversion and commitment.<sup>21</sup>

Segundo's second precondition is a willingness to reinterpret Scripture in response to the new questions arising from the present. How might this precondition be met by theologians in the situation I am addressing?

The liberation theologians of Latin America, who themselves belong to a privileged, professional class, have tried to identify with the needs, yearnings and sufferings of the great multitude of the poor in their own countries. They have tried to formulate the questions that the poor – if they had the necessary theological training – would put to the Scriptures and the Christian tradition. In the same way it is appropriate, in the Australian situation, for theologians trained in the academies of the First World, to try to formulate the questions that Aboriginal Christians might raise, and see whether the raising of these questions does in fact change the "received" interpretation of the Scriptures. Ideally, it is for Aboriginal Christians to formulate their own theology, in accordance with their own way of seeing the world. But while they are in the process of developing the capacity to do this, it seems to me that they can be helped by theologians of the First World who have felt deeply their cultural and religious oppression.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, it has been my experience that when one engages in this process, one's own theology and one's own understanding of Scripture is radically challenged. To take an obvious example, the notion of the

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21. I have found from experience that books like S. Rintoul's *The Wailing* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993) and *Bringing them Home* (Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, April 1993) provide abundant material for prayer and reflection.

22. An example of this is the assistance given by Robert Bos, Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst to the Aboriginal Elders in the production of the book, *Rainbow Spirit Theology*.

“Promised Land” becomes problematical, when one realises that, according to the Books of Deuteronomy and Joshua, God ordered the Israelites to take this land by conquest, adopting methods that today might be called genocide or ethnic cleansing. How does the Aboriginal experience in Australia affect one’s understanding of these biblical texts?<sup>23</sup>

Law is a central concept in Aboriginal culture and religion: the Law of the Dreaming is determinative for human life and for the order of the cosmos. Yet after Paul – and, indeed, in the light of many passages in the synoptic Gospels – religious law can be seen by First World theologians as an obstacle to Christian life and almost the antithesis of the Good News. Yet in Matt 5:17-19 Jesus seems to be speaking in support of the Mosaic Law. How might the Aboriginal experience affect one’s interpretation of this passage?<sup>24</sup>

Frank Fletcher, who has been working with Aboriginal people in Sydney for many years, has written on the importance of the “primal” in human life, and the West’s turning away from the “primal” under the influence of “modern” rationalism. Aboriginal spirituality, on the other hand, affirms the primal. He takes up the phrase, “the land is crying”, which was used by the Rainbow Spirit Elders, and points out that there are biblical parallels to this image; he indicates how such an image, which expresses in an especially apt way the anguish of Aboriginal people, may contribute to an understanding of the mystery of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

It was, in fact, when I was trying to respond to the question, “How might Aboriginal Christians formulate a Christology?” that I came to realise what a challenge Aboriginal culture is to a Western interpretation of the New Testament. So much of the imagery used in the biblical writings is foreign to a traditional Aboriginal way of life. These hunter-gatherer people did not have kings, or cities, or settled habitations, or farms, or flocks, or shepherds... Their world-view was based on what has come to be known as the Dreaming; and on the Law, land, places... Their kinship systems, so difficult for Europeans to understand, provided an essential framework to their lives. All this makes a Western-style Christology very alien. The attempt to formulate a

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23. See my article, “The Biblical Promised Land and Australian Aboriginal Peoples” *Australasian Catholic Record* 74 (1997) 86-98. See also R. Habel, “Conquest and Dispossession: Justice, Joshua and Land Rights”, *Pacifica* 4 (1991), 76-92.

24. For example, see my two articles on “Matthew 5.17-19 and Aboriginal Christians”, *Australasian Catholic Record* 77 (2000), 449-59; 78 (2001), 259-70.

25. Frank Fletcher, “Is Aboriginal Spirituality Relevant to the Mystery of Christ?”, *Australasian Catholic Record*, 78 (2001), 271-78.

genuinely Aboriginal Christology is a healthy challenge to European cultural and religious domination.<sup>26</sup>

Liberation theology emerged in response to the massive needs of the vast numbers of poor in the Latin American countries. It is thus situated there. But its theological methodology is applicable in any country where there is poverty and oppression affecting discernible groups of people. In this method, the starting point is the situation of need, seen in the light of those faith-inspired human values which have been passed on through Scripture and tradition. Under the action of the Spirit, a conversion of heart brings about a commitment to do something to bring about change. This leads to a reinterpretation of Scripture and a fresh understanding of the Christian tradition.

In the latter part of this essay, by taking one issue from Australian society, I have tried to point out the value of this methodology for doing theology in a country very different from those of Latin America.

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26. See my article, "Christology and Aboriginal Religious Traditions", *Australasian Catholic Record* 75 (1998), 184-94.