

**An Interview with Gregory Baum
“Faith, Community, & Liberation”***Adam S. Miller*

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JPS: In order to find a place to begin, perhaps we could open our conversation about philosophy and scripture with a very general question about the relationship of scripture to the Christian community. In your view, what role does the church play in the interpretation of scripture and, conversely, what role does scripture play in shaping the church?

GB: Well, these are, of course, huge questions. The scriptures were collected by the church, the canon was constituted by the church, and the scriptures are read within the context of a believing community. If you were to give Christian scripture to people outside of the believing community, they could come to very different conclusions about their meaning. When the scriptures are read within the believing community they tend to be interpreted within a liturgical context. And these believing communities have lived in many different cultures and in many different historical moments, therefore they read these scripture differently. The result is that you have a whole history of interpretation. So I think that the church and scripture belong very much together. When I say church I do not necessarily mean church authority at the moment, but just the believing community. The community reads scripture, and the creativity of God’s word is then revealed in the never-completed meaning communicated to the believing community throughout the ages. When the church finds itself in a new situation it re-reads the scriptures and, because it hears God’s word addressing the new situation, it hears what its ancestors did not hear.

Sometimes the scriptures confirm what the church is doing. But sometimes they criticize what the church is doing. So there must be a willingness to listen, to be judged and be confirmed. This interests me particularly because in modernity we are confronted with all kinds of new questions that the ancients didn’t have, and we trust that we are not without wisdom regarding these new questions because we read our scriptures, and we hear in scripture what our ancestors didn’t hear. Gadamer says that classic texts never stop speaking to us: they have surplus meaning. To give an example, in the Catholic church we rejected modernity, we rejected human rights and personal liberties, because we thought that Christ wanted us to proclaim the truth in order to rescue people from error. So we did not approve of religious liberty because it made room for people in error. This was our position in the nineteenth century. It was thought at the time that this was being obedient to Jesus and to certain biblical texts. Later, Pope John XXIII was impressed by the universal declaration of human rights of the UN, published after World War II with its endless killing and its endless humiliation of humans. So he decided to re-read the scriptures and found biblical texts that affirm the high dignity of the human being, both as image of God in the creation story in Genesis and as summoned by God according to the Pauline doctrine that in Jesus God acted on behalf of all humanity. The high dignity of humans is therefore grounded in the orders of creation and redemption, This convinced John XXIII that this high dignity must be respected by the authorities of governments and organizations. So he found a theological foundation for human rights, not by compromise with the modern world, but by re-reading scripture.

JPS: I’m interested in the connection that you made between the reading scripture and the issue of authority. As you see it, on some occasions scripture works to give the church the authority needed to make the kind of proclamations you’ve just

indicated, but at other times scripture operates in such a way as to criticize the church's claims or beliefs?

GB: Yes, I think that's right. I think that often the church is not obedient to scripture. Take for instance the text in which Jesus says, "Call no man your father, because God is your father" (see Matt. 23: 9). The Catholic church has never really reflected on this text. We speak about the Pope as holy father, we call priests father—all without really wrestling with this text, even though it stands over us in judgment. There are many other biblical texts that challenge us. Some theologians are willing to be challenged, but the community as a whole often refuses to take a second look. The texts of the NT on poverty and the exercise of powers have not received the attention they deserve.

JPS: Many contemporary continental philosophers tend to locate what is religious precisely in an experience of being challenged and contested, so that the moment of contestation appears as the religious experience par excellence.

GB: This sounds very Protestant to me. Protestants have always emphasized God's word as judging us, while Catholics have seen God's word as both judgment and new life. Religious experience is an experience of being challenged, but it is also an experience of being made fully alive in loving one's neighbor, in escaping resentment and becoming generous, in escaping arrogance and becoming humble, in escaping self-concern and becoming concerned about others. Personal transformations of this kind are not the work of flesh and blood; they are gifts of grace. God judges us, this is true; we are again and again challenged by God's word, but God is also the new life in us, the Spirit poured forth in our hearts, the divine empowerment to do good. It is possible for Catholics to put the emphasis on good works and forget they are rendered possible by God's grace. That is why we are grateful for the Protestant corrective, reminding us of the gratuity at the center of our existence. As a Catholic in

the Augustinian tradition, I am keenly aware of the gratuity of all that is good in my life. That is why I prefer to think of religious experience as involving both challenge and new life, both repentance and freedom.

JPS: In your view, is it beneficial to read scripture in light of philosophy?

GB: Almost certainly, yes. We are human beings, and I don't see how we could *not* reflect in some systematic way on scripture. In different periods Christians have used different philosophical traditions. For the ancients it was Hellenistic philosophy. Many Protestants and a few Catholics put great emphasis on the difference between Jerusalem and Athens. They see Jerusalem as source of divine truth and Athens as source of philosophical reflection distorting divine truth. I think that that is unacceptable. Hellenism has influenced the writing of the Bible itself. Parts of the Old Testament like Proverbs were influenced by Hellenistic thought. Hellenistic thought influenced the writing of the New Testament, very strongly in the Fourth Gospel. One of the fascinating things about the New Testament is that it is a book of transition from one culture to another. In other words, the passage from one culture to another and the translation of the biblical message into a new language are part of divine revelation. I think that we have not explored sufficiently the transitional dimension of the New Testament.

Dialogue with philosophy is necessary. I think it belongs to the essence of the Christian proclamation to engage in dialogue with people, to take their culture seriously and respect their wisdom tradition. God is graciously at work in people's search for truth and goodness, long before the Church get there to proclaim the Gospel. That is why we want to listen to people's wisdom—critically listen to it, making appropriate distinctions. Karl Barth wanted to reject all philosophy. When he saw that the majority of great German thinkers supported the war of the Kaiser, he thought that there must be something deeply wrong about their ideas. He wanted to leave

philosophy behind, but the readers of his brilliant theology are not convinced that he did so. They find traces of Kierkegaard in his thought. Since we cannot escape philosophical ideas, it is better to become conscious of them and critically clarify them.

But there are also times when philosophy takes over and biblical revelation simply functions as a starting point. Then the intellectual effort of conceptualization produced a rational theological system. I think that this happened in Scholasticism. When I was a student at the University of Fribourg, I was trained in Thomism. It is possible to adopt a narrow reading of Thomas by focusing on the first question of the *Summa* where he defines theology as a science based on the articles of faith—somewhat as optics is based on the principles of geometry. Yet such a reading produces a caricature of Thomism. Built into the *Summa* are self-corrective principles and explosive insights that undermine any effort to reduce Thomas' theology to a closed system. This was actually done in the production of Neo-Thomism in the 19th century—called by us 'Peeping-Thomisms'—which was marked by the dominant rationalism of that century. Reacting against Neo-Scholasticism, some Catholic thinkers have lost faith in philosophy. They prefer to reflect on the scriptures, the liturgy and people's religious experiences. This is admirable, but I don't think that they are able to escape philosophy altogether. In my own work as a theologian, dialogue with sociology, especially the sociology of knowledge, has been of primary importance to me.

JPS: But just as there are many people who are anxious to keep Athens out of Jerusalem, there are plenty of people anxious to keep Jerusalem out of Athens.

GB: I am not sure if I understand your question correctly. Let me reply by saying that I am constantly impressed by God's gracious action in non-believers. I am a person of the left, I am surrounded by left-wing social and political scientists, and I am

in touch with active members of left-wing political parties in Canada and Quebec. What amazes me is the profound ethical commitment of my friends, their selflessness, their concern for others, their generosity and their compassion with the disadvantaged and marginalized. Yet when I ask them where their values come from, they don't know. They have no language for articulating what takes place spiritually in their hearts and minds. Christians have a language for this because they belong to a religious tradition. My amazement before the ethical commitment of my secular friends obliges me to interpret what goes on in them in theological terms: they are touched by God's grace. According to a patristic teaching, the church can be defined as humanity-as-touched-by-God's-grace, *Ecclesia ab Abel*, the church from Abel on, including all who have been transformed by divine grace. That the term, *Ecclesia ab Abel*, was taken up by Vatican Council II made me very happy.

Let me add that the messianic longing of my friends and their inability to be reconciled with the injustices of the world are, in my mind, an inheritance from the Bible. There are in fact (non-believing) sociologists, like Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch, who acknowledge that the messianic yearning for justice in the western revolutionary tradition is an echo of the biblical promises. Why, then, are these people totally uninterested in Christianity? I think they associate Christianity with conservative and even reactionary political forces, today deeply identified with capitalism, the rule of money and a society of winners and losers.

JPS: One of the questions we might ask is whether or not it is possible for a biblically grounded messianic yearning to undergo a kind of secular purification without losing something essential along the way.

GB: Yes, I think so. This has been a theological preoccupation of mine. I have argued that Christians should take seriously the radical critiques of religion offered by

Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. Some Christians fear that these critiques spell the end of religion. In my mind, these critiques can be “grafted onto” the prophetic literature—the expression is David Tracy’s—and lead to a purification and clarification of the Gospel. I have defended this position in my book, *Religion and Alienation*. While Marx believed that all of religion was an ideology legitimating the existing society, subsequent sociologists have shown that in addition to ideological currents, there are in religion also emancipatory impulses. And while Freud regarded religion as a collective neurosis that made people sick, subsequent psychologists have shown that in addition to the pathogenic currents in religion, there are also therapeutic ones. It is the task of the churches, helped by theologically-sensitive Christians, especially pastors, to preach the Gospel as a message of human rescue and liberation from the many prisons people—we—have created for themselves.

JPS: But do you think that it is possible to become wholly secular, to come out on the other side of the critique and abandon religion all together, without having lost something essential?

GB: Let me introduce the term “the dark night of the soul” used in the mystical tradition. The mystics claim that in the process of opening themselves to God, there comes a time—sometimes a long time—when they are so much aware of the obstacles to God in their heart, so much aware of their inner fragmentation and outer superficiality, that God seems to have disappeared altogether for them, so much so that they wondered if they had become atheists. They called this the dark night of the soul. But they also say that you have to wait patiently in the night for it will end through the opening of a new and surprising window. Today, I have the impression, many Christians pass through a different dark night of the soul. They are deeply disturbed by the suffering in the world, the cruelly unjust maldistribution of wealth and power, and the indifference of the official churches to this scandalous situation that they find it

increasingly difficult to believe in divine providence. They feel that they are becoming atheists. Some Christians—friends of mine among them—have never left the dark night. They became non-believers because they were unconsolable. They became agnostics for theological reasons—for which God will reward them. Yet other Christians pass through this night and eventually come out of it. They learn that God is in solidarity with the victims of history. A Jewish rabbi once wrote that the Holocaust has brought the end of “untroubled theism.” The more we believe that God is love, the more difficult it is to believe that God exists. We don’t want a faith that does not raise uncomfortable questions. We long for a faith that is both serene and troubled.

JPS: To emerge from the dark night of the soul, is it sufficient to maintain a passionately secular hope for justice, or does this messianic yearning need to take an explicitly religious form?

GB: Sociologists like to distinguish different kinds of hope. There is a secular, materialist dream of the future which is nourished by advertising on television recommending the right clothes for you, the right house with a garden and beautiful furniture, the right car and so forth. We have here a messianic dream that has problematic personal and political consequences. Sociologists call future dreams ideological if they sustain the present order and make the victims of society invisible, and they call future dreams utopian if they de-legitimize the existing order and create the yearning for a more just society. Of course, utopian dreams could become dangerous. Ernst Bloch became more specific when he defined “a concrete utopia” as the image of an alternative society that is close enough to the unrealized potential of the present to sustain a realistic historical project.

To dream of an alternative society where peace and justice reigns is a good thing, even if it is not a concrete utopia. St. Augustine’s famous distinction between the city of Man (the proud city) and the city of

God (the humble city) provided a utopian dream. He thought that the great society, the empire, created by love of wealth and power, could not be reformed, it was doomed; but small communities defined by love of God and neighbor, created by co-operation and commitment to the common good, could anticipate God's glorious reign. The church has been inspired by a utopia. But because it has called itself holy, the bride of Christ or his mystical body, the church found it increasingly difficult to come to self-knowledge. The church fathers still had a realistic view of the church: they spoke about it in paradoxical terms, calling it, for instance, *casta meretrix* (the chaste whore). Still, the Augustinian dream remains valid: yearning for a community of love and co-operation is nourished by the Gospel. I think that today's counter-cultural movements have inherited this dream. Like Augustine, they do not believe that the great society, the empire, can be reformed, but they try to create on a small scale a community defined by principles at odds with empire.

The modern, liberal dream of industrial capitalism produced by hard work and reliance on techno-scientific reason produced a certain faith in necessary progress. Yet this dream had many dark sides. Max Weber studied several of them. One of them was, according to Weber (though I am not sure if he was serious), that death had become more anguishing in modernity. People work so hard, spend all their energy on getting ahead, don't take time to live and reflect, and forever postpone their happiness—so that at the time of their death, they recognize how foolish they have been and feel that they have been cheated. In other cultures, Weber thought, people lived more deeply, had more joy and more suffering, and when the end came, they were quite ready to begin the long sleep. The modern anxiety over death has marked even the philosophers: it was central for Heidegger and even influenced sociologists like Alfred Schutz and Peter Berger.

What is President Bush's vision of the future? An important government document, 'The National Security Strategy of the

United States of America,' published in September 2002, sees the US as a power of unparalleled military strength and economic and political influence, set in a world where liberty is threatened by terror. The document says that the US government will not allow other nations to acquire power equal to its own, and if the US government detects preparations in other countries for attacks against the US, it will wage pre-emptive war—violating international law. Since the future of our civilization depends on oil, since the shrinking resources of oil are largely located in the Middle East, and since the substitutes for oil are not promising, military intervention in the Middle East is important, even if the provocation is fictitious. I will not develop the scenario in detail. The point I am making is that the dream of the future, in this case President Bush's dream, has political and social consequences.

JPS: It occurs to me that one of the ways in which philosophy may prove itself useful to a reading of scripture is, precisely, in the political arena. Insofar as religion wants to step outside of itself and offer a publicly accessible political position, might not philosophy be especially useful to the extent that it enables religion to step outside of its narrative particularity and formulate a more universal position?

GB: Philosophy is useful both for incarnating religion in a particular culture and in making its message understandable. While I have problems with Existentialism for political reasons, I have to admit that it has provided many Christians with a language for speaking about the meaning of their faith. Humans are not simply givens, they are not substances, for the crucial decisions they make, including the act of faith, constitute them as historical beings. Philosophy can help us to incarnate faith in a particular culture and, secondly, as you suggest, it can also help us to articulate the universal dimension of religion. I strongly believe in the universal message implicit in the Gospel. The churches are meant to

contribute the reconciliation of the deeply divided humanity in justice, forgiveness and peace. I have Jewish and Muslim friends who interpret their own religious mission in the same way, as contributing to the pacification of humankind. Philosophical reflection helps us to draw from the stories we regard as divine revelation messages that have universal significance.

Dialogue with Plato in the early century and dialogue with Aristotle in the middle ages have been of enormous importance to Christians. You couldn't imagine Roman Catholicism without them. This is really one significant difference between Catholicism and Protestantism. Catholicism was shaped by the culture of the Mediterranean as the creative and original fusion of biblical dreams and aspirations with the piety and the philosophical ideas of the Mediterranean world. This fusion, I believe, does not necessarily betray the biblical inspiration. I think there is a humanism implicit in every great religion. This is demonstrated today in the World Conference for Religions for Peace, an inter-religious council, meeting at regular intervals. At these meetings, the representatives of the world religions confess that, in the past, their religion has often blessed injustices, violence and wars, but that the deepest aspirations of their religious tradition support justice and peace. In many such cases, philosophy has enabled religious people to clarify these universal ideas.

JPS: So you think that philosophy may contribute to inter-faith dialogue as well?

GB: I think that the notion of dialogue is really a modern idea. The willingness to put yourself into the shoes of the others, to listen to what they have to say, and to interpret what they say not from one's own point of view but from theirs—is something new. Philosophers were the first to write about dialogue: Franz Brentano, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel. In the past, conversations among theologians and philosophers were always about what is right and what is wrong. In dialogue, you begin by bracketing the truth issue: you start

by trying to understand what the other has to say from his or her point of view. Mutual understanding is the aim of dialogue, a process that changes all partners. The ecumenical movement of the Fifties was for me the great experience of dialogue. I discovered that dialogue is a form of love because you are willing to shut up, put your convictions into parentheses, and listen carefully to what the other has to say. In dialogue God is digging a new ear into the participants that allows them to learn and be transformed. Philosophy and theology are able to clarify the experience of dialogue.

Philosophy can also be a source of useless intelligence. There are philosophy departments where linguistic analysis and philosophy of science are used to persuade students that the deep questions about human existence are meaningless. I find that sociologists are sometimes more concerned about the great questions than philosophers. I have also quarrels with the "linguistic turn" in postmodern thought. You cannot eat words! The linguistic turn corresponds to middle class preoccupations: it is of interest to people who have never suffered from hunger and thus makes the material basis of human existence invisible. Unemployment is not a purely linguistic issue either. I regret that so many philosophers are unwilling to ask themselves how their thought is related to their social location and what the social implications of their discourse are.

Karl Manheim in *Ideology and Utopia* says that we cannot fully understand a sentence unless its social context has been clarified. A sentence by itself has no clear meaning. You must know on what occasion it is said, to whom, and under what conditions. When I teach this, I always give the example of the German anthem, "Germany, Germany Above All." In 1848, this was the song of the German revolution, and it meant: Germany above all the feudal structures. After Germany became an empire in 1871, the same song acquired an aggressive political message. "We shall overcome" was the song of the powerless who hoped that justice would prevail: if the police department adopted this song, its meaning would be quite different. Thought

is always related to a social base. Philosophers sometimes think that thought floats above history and above the economic order, but this is not true. In a context marked by grave inequalities and patterns of exclusion, thought either questions the existing order or contributes to its stability.

JPS: I think that you are right to say that something remarkable has happened insofar as genuine dialogue has become possible. But perhaps we can say, having opened the possibility of dialogue, our task is now to repose, within that context, the question of truth?

GB: Dialogue is carried on only by a minority of people. It is wonderful to hear of their experiences, but they do not represent what is going on in the world as a whole. We are a deeply divided humanity, each part making caricatures of all the others. I am influenced by the Frankfurt School which, in the 1920's, saw the early Enlightenment as a marvelous movement possessing rich resources of creative reason—including substantive reason dealing with ends and instrumental reason dealing with means. Substantive reason reflects on values and purposes, and instrumental reason generates science and technology. The Frankfurt School argued that in the middle of the nineteenth century, scientific positivism began to take over. Under the weight of the industrial capitalism, Enlightenment reason collapsed and was reduced simply to instrumental reason. The only rationality left to us is about means. As a result, the Enlightenment has become an obstacle to human liberation. We have become individualists and utilitarians. We can no longer deal with questions about ends. Our civilization is in crisis.

Yet the Frankfurt School differed from postmodern thought of the 1980s. While the Frankfurt School denounced what the Enlightenment had become, they did not reject it. The Frankfurt philosophers opposed conservatives, existentialist and fascists of their day who rejected the Enlightenment and its great achievements, democracy and human rights. The Frankfurt

School negated the Enlightenment 'dialectically,' which meant that they wanted to retrieve the substantive reason of the original Enlightenment. They called for a cultural conversion to solidarity. But since the moral resources of society were so limited, the Frankfurt School was near despair. Still, their passionate wish to recover universal solidarity makes them totally different from postmodern thinkers who repudiates the Enlightenment 'non-dialectically,' giving up justice and emancipation for the excluded as a dangerous modern illusion. Yet the conversion to universal solidarity is not absent from among us. The movements for an alternative globalization, meeting regularly at the World Social Forum, are haunted by this dream. And so are the world religions. Hans Küng has argued that a new paradigm is emerging in the world religions making them see their sacred mission as a commitment to foster the reconciliation and pacification of humankind.

Because of this, to return to our original point, I see dialogue as going on among a minority, as something that runs counter to the mainstream. I have a dark interpretation of what is presently going on in the world. What does philosophy have to do? I don't know, I'm not a philosopher. But I think that philosophy must unmask what is taking place, and postmodernism doesn't do this. Americans are too shy to pronounce the word 'capitalism.' They shy away from taking seriously the impact of the unregulated market on culture, values and religion. It seems strange to an outsider that the highly moralistic evangelicals in the US never explore the impact of the capitalist market on cultural values and human behavior. I have the impression that for Americans capitalism is something sacred: therefore to question it is taboo. And philosophers often plays along with this. There are, of course, important exceptions.

JPS: Part of what I had in mind with the previous question has precisely to do with postmodernism. It seems to me that part of the virtue of postmodernism is the way in which it exposes itself to the other, to

that which is not the self. The difficulty is that postmodernism fails to ever return to the question of truth.

GB: Well, I think that postmodernism misses the importance of ‘the other.’ I just read a passage from Derrida in which he argues that not only is God wholly other, but that every other person is wholly other. I find this frightening. This works against dialogue. In fact, Jean-François Lyotard, who began the postmodern wave in 1980s, called dialogue “the illusion of modernity.” Why? Because dialogue presupposes—so that communication can take place—that we share something with the other, some form of reason. For Lyotard, this precisely is the modern illusion. If others are totally other, dialogue is not possible. More than that, after the experience of fascism, to insist on the otherness of others sounds politically dangerous and frightens me personally. The French postmodernists were embarrassed when Jean-Marie Le Pen with his party, le Front National, promoted hostility to immigrants, especially Muslims, arguing that they were totally different—the postmodern slogan—and hence could never be integrated into French society. Of course, the postmodern thinkers wanted the differences between peoples to be respected, but they could not say this, for then “respect for otherness” would be a universal virtue, which they had so dramatically rejected. Some of them, including Derrida, began to counter Le Pen by advocating hospitality.

In the present situation dominated by many structures of exclusion, I argue that every sentence that recognizes the otherness of others should be followed by a sentence that recognizes their similarity. Postmodern ideas in an empire are particularly dangerous! Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilisation” is based on the false idea that the world religions are bearers of

incompatible values and that, for this reason, the civilizations to which they gave birth will clash and war is almost inevitable. This is dangerous non-sense. A multitude of inter-religious councils and institutions have demonstrated empirically that this is not true: religions are living traditions capable of reacting creatively to new historical situations and engaging in fruitful dialogue with one another. The postmodern thinkers are quite wrong when they think that others are totally others—but they don’t recognize the political danger of their discourse. We want to respect the otherness of Native peoples, but also celebrate our common humanity.

JPS: But insofar as we are concerned with returning to the question of truth, of restoring a substantive, end-oriented notion of reason, then you see religion and scripture as having a particularly positive role to play in that project?

GB: I don’t have a ready answer for this question. The Frankfurt School has argued that an inquiry can discover the truth only if it is preceded by an emancipatory commitment. If not, the result of the inquiry will simply stabilize the status quo with its oppressive features. Inquiry must begin with negation—negating the awful things that are happening. This reminds me of biblical prophecy which pronounces God’s judgement before it offers the divine promises. It also reminds me of the refusal of the church fathers to separate knowledge and love. Scholasticism did not sufficiently protect this great tradition. What is truth? What truth do I share with the President Bush who says Jesus is Lord and what truth do I share with non-believers who are consumed by universal solidarity? If truth is ultimately related to love, then in a sinful world truth is an eschatological promise.