

Foreword

It is a pleasure to include Néstor Míguez's creative monograph on 1 Thessalonians in the Paul in Critical Contexts series and a personal honor to be asked by the author to contribute this foreword.

For North American scholars who have become interested in the political and ideological-critical interpretation of Paul's letters over the last twenty years, certain themes and interpretive maneuvers have by now become familiar and certain genealogies of the field have been well rehearsed. One effect for such readers of Professor Míguez's careful work may be the opening of windows onto another, broader vista, that of Latin American biblical scholarship and thereby a different set of genealogies on many of the same questions.

The kernel of this work was completed in 1988, which means that it was finished at the same time as a German academic seminar on "theocracy was under way," from which issued Dieter Georgi's *Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology*, a seminal work for North Atlantic scholarship.¹ But Professor Míguez's work begins from points of reference: Ferdinand Belo's materialist exegesis and Antonio Gramsci's and Pierre Bourdieu's reflections on the possibility of resistance to ideological hegemony. Here are topics that have recently become familiar in U.S. and European scholarship, for example the political connotations of terms like *ekklēsia*, the echo of imperial propaganda in the reference to "peace and security" (1 Thess. 5:3), Paul's perception of manual labor, and questions of the economic class from which the Pauline assemblies drew their members. These questions have sometimes been posed, within narrowly functionalist models, as simple dichotomies: if Paul did not come from the values of the urban poor, he must have shared the values of the elite; if he did not advocate anti-Roman violence, he must have encouraged an ethic of quietism (for which 1 Thessalonians, and especially 4:11-12, have been taken as proof). Posed in this way, such questions yield too easily to argument by proof texting. For Professor Míguez, however, they are structural elements in a much broader and more sustained methodological project, a counterhegemonic strategy for engaging the biblical text for emancipatory praxis. "Hope" is here not wistfulness for a better "elsewhere," but the revolutionary "anticipation" that is always a necessary accompaniment to resistance.

In North Atlantic scholarship, talk of "resistance" to "Empire" sometimes rings hollow and is sometimes scoffed at for its disconnection from rigorous analysis or organic rootedness in communities of struggle. Precisely because of the context from which he writes, just these connections are always in focus in Professor Míguez's treatment. One consequence is that his characterization of Paul as an organic

intellectual within a counter-hegemonic movement involves less rhetorical flourish than a methodologically rich thick description of the necessary conditions for resistance in a hegemonic context. Another consequence is that on aspects of economic, political, and military hegemony in our own day is never far from sight—a reality more candidly assessed alongside communities of the poor in Argentina than it usually has been in metropolises in the global north.

Northern scholars of “Paul and politics” may also be surprised how readily in these pages the author writes out of self-conscious identification with the Pauline communities and addresses his readers in similar fashion. In the United States, many biblical scholars are more accustomed to a certain reticence about expressing our personal religious views (for so we have been trained to regard them) in our scholarship. To regard this difference as a measure of religiosity is a mistake. The continuity Professor Míguez wishes to evoke is a continuity of praxis—of practices of “resistance and anticipation,” which are not always the hallmark of North American church life. The hope held out at last here is as much a challenge to the churches as an exhortation. The point is not to lionize Paul as a lone revolutionary genius but to understand the social project in which he sought to enlist others as he himself had been enlisted.

Decades ago, one of the men Professor Míguez describes as his theological teacher, his father, José Míguez Bonino, described the vocation of “doing theology in a revolutionary situation.”² Years later, Carter Heyward described the challenge faced by politically engaged scholars working in Reagan’s United States as that of “doing theology in a counterrevolutionary situation.”³ While it is easy enough for U.S. scholars to look back on such strident phrases as relics of a now distant past, Ivan Petrella reminds us that the context in which theologians work today is the material poverty of the majority of the world’s people, and the failure of liberation theology—at least as practiced in North American academy life—to give sustained and central attention to poverty in the midst of plenty.⁴ Néstor Míguez’s work may help not only to show new possibilities for understanding the radicality of the movement in which Paul played a part but to renew and revive the vocation of engaged theology in our own place and time. For that we are in his debt.

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