Intellectus Amoris, Liberationis

From Jon Sobrino's reconceptualization of theology to tripartite diaconal action research

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Abstract:
This article revisits liberation theologian Jon Sobrino's suggestive reconceptualization of theology and theological method as 'intellectus amoris', and as a practical and liberative 'mystagogy'. Sobrino's theological approach is held together with the recent renewal of action research in search for an improvement of the current models and methods of diaconal research, making it not only research 'on' diaconal practice, but furthermore, or rather, research 'as' diaconia, i.e. research or systematic and transformative processes of learning from within diaconal practices. This way, the potentially diaconal character of action research itself can come to the fore.

In the broad field of theological studies, we continue to search for better ways of coming to terms with the challenges of concrete human experience. We continuously look for better ways to integrate our theological endeavour with people's struggles for life and well-being in conflictual everyday contexts – locally and globally. I suggest that in the recent (re-)turn to practice in theology, there are still untapped resources in the legacy of liberation theology. Here, I shall particularly revisit Jon Sobrino's suggestion of seeing theology as an *intellectus amoris,* an understanding emerging from within a praxis of radical and liberating love, and as a *mystagogy*, an experiential introduction to mystery. I wish to show how this may contribute to a more participatory and practice-oriented approach in diaconal research in particular. The renewed interest in action research in practical theology is relevant here (Watkins, 2015). Action research "... focuses on research *in* action, rather than research *about* action" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, 5). One of the roots of action research is clearly planted in Latin American soil, in Paulo Freire's at the time ground-breaking renewal of pedagogical method (Freire 1972). It is therefore not surprising that liberation theology and action research have much in common. This is an interrelationship that should be developed further today. Given the practical and committed character *diaconia* the influences of both liberation theology and action research are significant. These sources, I will argue, are still very much relevant in the search for developing more participatory and effective methods in the day-to-day diaconal practice, as well as in diaconal research.

Seeing diaconal research as part of the diaconal practice itself is very much called for in

troubled times. Perhaps the most troubling sign of the present times is refugees and migrants struggling for survival and seeking safety while welfare societies seem to be most concerned about finding better ways of limiting their access. This situation reveals the need for more effective diaconal practices in solidarity with persons in precarious life situations, as well as research that is more relevant for that purpose.

Liberation theology, *intellectus amoris* and mystagogy

Europe has experienced an 'irruption' of refugees and migrants lately.[1] Liberation theology originates with and responds to the 'irruption of the poor' in history (Gutiérrez, 1983). For nearly fifty years now, the Basque-Salvadorian Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino (b. 1938), has done theology amidst poverty, persecution, violence and martyrdom.[2] Sobrino insists that this 'irruption', this abrupt, disturbing and challenging presence of suffering and oppression, is the 'major fact of reality'. It is the fact that represents reality in the most truthful manner today (Sobrino, 1992, 49)[3], and should therefore shape theology all the way through.

Thus, Sobrino and liberation theology holds that this major fact, the most significant 'sign of the times', also has to be *the* point of departure for doing theology. It should not merely be seen as a context or circumstance, an '*ubi*'. It is rather a '*quid*' – a substantial reality that theology is confronted with, and must face responsibly, for the sake of humans as well as for the sake of God (Sobrino, 1992, 48). This major fact does not only define the task of theology. It must also have decisive impact on its *shape and character,* its *configuration*, including its method. This point of departure rests, Sobrino admits, on a 'pre-theological option'. Other facts could be chosen as more relevant points of departure for theology. Theologies have often parted from the (negative) experiences of human guilt, finitude, fear of death and damnation, etc., and started its interpretative work with the sources of faith and revelation as well as the 'sign of the times' in history and society from one or several of these hermeneutical pre-comprehensions (Sobrino, 1989). Making the irruption of the poor *the* founding experience of theology is thus a novelty of liberation theology. Sobrino sees it as an expression of a theological 'conversion' in a certain sense, a conversion to making the reality and suffering of others more important than one's own, personal quest for salvation or well-being.

Making unjust poverty in a suffering world the most decisive reality, the question arises of how to *respond* to this reality. The relevant human and Christian response to others' suffering is mercy (Sobrino, 1992, 31-45). This, Sobrino claims, is a human, almost pre-reflective, assumption, a gut reaction, as well as a well-testified biblical tenet. Mercy means seeking to remove the suffering of the other with no other reason than the existence of that suffering, and with no other aim than to make it diminish or disappear. Importantly, it is not to be understood as a paternalistic, one-way, harmonic or sentimental individual act of charity. To underline this, Sobrino borrows Ernst Blochs' famous 'prinzip' in *Prinzip Hoffnung,* and speaks of the "principle of mercy". By this, he understands a "...specific type of love which is at the origins of a process, but which also remains present and active during this process, giving it a determined direction and shaping its different elements" (Sobrino, 1992, 32).

According to this view then, the theological endeavour should also *in itself* be directed towards the *aim* of resisting, reducing or removing suffering. And it should be *shaped by* the mercy-principle. This means that it must be integrally and by necessity a *practical* endeavour. Therefore, Sobrino suggests rephrasing the classical definition of theology. Invited to speak about the relevance of theology in 'a suffering world' at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles in 1988 (Sobrino, 1988, and 1992, 47-80) Sobrino suggested to define (liberation) theology as *intellectus amoris* ('the understanding emerging from the practice of love/mercy', or 'practicing love/mercy so that I may understand') in a suffering world.[4]

This proposal could appear surprising. Liberation theologians would generally be wary of the universalizing and hence harmonizing danger of such a general concept as 'love.' Likewise, 'mercy' and 'charity' are concepts easily misused

for de-politicization and paternalization. Paulo Freire famously warned against 'false charity' in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (originally published in Portuguese in 1968). Oppressors often seek to 'soften' their unjust use power by showing apparent generosity. But the charity of oppressors is dependent on their perpetuation of injustice. Freire contrasts such false charity with 'true generosity', which "... consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity" (Freire, 1972, 21). False charity obliges poor people to "extend their trembling hands", begging for benevolence. By contrast,

> ... real generosity lies in striving so that those hands – whether of individuals or entire peoples – need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work, and by working, transform the world (Freire, 1972, 21–22).

In a similar manner Sobrino's interpretation of theology as *intellectus amoris* distances itself from any conception of love or mercy that would have to be considered 'false charity'. It retains its critical edge in at least three ways:

Firstly, it defines love as intimately related to justice and liberation in historical and political processes. The life of the Christian and the practice of the church should be marked by no less than a 'political holiness', (cf. Sobrino, 1988). In this, there is no room for abstract and alienating spiritualization of Christian love and service.

Secondly, *intellectus amoris* gives priority to poor people and victims as the primary addressees of the Christian message. The poor are not merely the primary target groups for Christian action for the transformation of the world, but also the main *agents* in this transformation. This echoes Freire's bold formulation of the "... great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well" (Freire, 1972, 21).

And thirdly, Sobrino contrasts this *intellectus amoris* (to which he also adds: *liberationis, misericordiae, iustitiae*), with the traditional concept, *intellectus fidei*. Understanding theology as merely an 'intellectus fidei' has led to "the historical alienation and irrelevance of theology" (Sobrino, 1992, 75). It has contributed to redrawing theology and the church from what to Sobrino is its primary task: "embracing God" by "being shaped by" God and "*making historically real* the transcendent reality of this God" (Sobrino, 1992, 73, my emphasis).

Seeing theology in this way primarily as a practice of love/mercy, an *intellectus amoris*, is thus not a smooth adaptation to (post-)modern times. It does not aim to make theology more acceptable, or less provocative. On the contrary, when taking into account the concrete realities of suffering and oppression in today's world it is rather making theology more questionable, and more challenging. To Sobrino, the rationale and importance of defining theology as an *intellectus amoris* is that it can uphold and hold together the historical relevance and Christian identity of theology. But this happens exactly through putting them to their most critical test:

> It is in the practice of love-justice that the most radical questioning of the truth of God and God's kingdom appears: the poor, who are innocent and privileged by God, are nonetheless victims of the anti-kingdom, and the idols of death appear to be more powerful than the God of life (Sobrino, 1992, 75).

Furthermore, Sobrino holds that this *intellectus amoris,* the process of gaining Christian knowledge through a practice of committed love, should be seen as a 'mystagogy' (literally 'an introduction into mystery'). Whereas his critique and reformulation of *intellectus fide*i is inspired by Jürgen Moltmann, his use of mystagogy is indebted to Karl Rahner. Despite Rahner's extremely high level of abstraction and theorization, he held that 'theology without mystagogy will never clarify anything', Sobrino recalls. Mystagogy, more than a pure theoretical clarification, represents a process in which illumination or knowledge is obtained through "contact with the reality of mystery itself" (Sobrino, 1992, 78). Seeing theology as *intellectus amoris* suggests the way of love as the primary way of mystagogy, since this is how an 'affinity with God' can be sought. And, importantly, it is based on such affinity that we may assess whether or not faith in God in a suffering world is meaningful (cf. Sobrino, 2008).

Sorbino's proposal of seeing theology as an *intellectus amoris* and a mystagogy is thought-pro-

voking. It invites concretization and actualization in different times and contexts. To this task I now turn, first by relating it to recent trends in theological debate, and then by drawing on some insights from action research within the context of theology in general and diaconal practice in particular.

Recent trends: Love, politics and practice in theology

Sobrino's conceptualization provides a critical challenge to our contemporary debates about theological reflection and ecclesiological and diaconal practice in times of turbulence. Interestingly, the concept of love has received new attention in both political theory (cf. e.g. Nussbaum, 2013) and theology. In Werner Jeanrond's magisterial systematic exploration of a theology of love, e.g., he addresses 'love as praxis' (Jeanrond, 2010, 160-171), and provides elements for a transformative 'politics of love' (Jeanrond, 2010, 205-237). He stresses that the Christian vision of love "... is both emancipatory and political by nature" (Jeanrond, 2010, 230. Like Freire and Sobrino, Jeanrond is convinced that love and justice must be held together: "Charity must not be a way of bypassing justice" (Jeanrond, 2010, 236.) And yet Jeanrond's approach could benefit from a further concretization and radicalization of what such praxis and politics would entail in conflictual situations. To what extent and in what ways does the incarnation of Christian love in our contemporary history require provocation, opposition, partisanship and resistance? Werner Jeanrond's profound 'theology of love' can thus, fruitfully and critically, be complemented by Jon Sobrino's prophetic 'principle of mercy.'

In general, we experience a practical and political 'turn' in theological work. This trend is not completely new, though. Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke University Luke Bretherton is right to point out that: "The relationship between how we think about politics and act politically is a perennially fraught one" (Bretherton, 2012, 168). This is true also in theology. The political theologies of J. B. Metz and J. Moltmann were pioneering in taking up the necessity of an interrelation of theology and critical political practice after the genocidal catastrophe of the Holocaust/Shoah (Metz, 1980; Moltmann, 1967, 1974). Latin American liberation theology were inspired by their European colleagues. But they also disagreed. In particular the Latin American theologians criticized what they saw as a certain lack of concreteness and (committed political) praxis in the works of European theologians (See e.g. Boff, 1980; Míguez Bonino, 1975; Segundo, 1976). The praxis-orientation of Latin American liberation theology has in its turn received differentiated criticism, both internal and external (See McGovern, 1989; cf. Stålsett, 2016). In its forming phase, it lacked a critical reflection of oppression based on gender (see e.g. Althaus-Reid, 2006; Vuola, 1997), ethnic diversity, and, to a certain extent, culture. It was held to be too political (See e.g. Chow, 1992), or not sufficiently political (e.g. Petrella, 2006). John Milbank famously blamed it for making itself too dependent on the atheistic/agnostic premises of social science (Milbank, 1993, 206–255). Although paying tribute to the legacy of liberation theology Bretherton seems to rather follow Milbank, William T. Cavanaugh and Stanley Hauerwas and others in both radical orthodoxy and postliberal theologies in their approaches to interrelating practice and theology (Bretherton, 2010). His own search is directed towards ethnographical methods, and in particular the extended case study (Bretherton, 2012, 182ff).

It is here that the recent turn to action research in my view provides a more promising way of meeting the demands of integrating practice and theory in various disciplines of theology. Theology and diaconia understood as *intellectus amoris* can benefit from the methodological tenets of action research.

Action research and theology

Action research is a research method which is committed to social justice and takes responsibility for helping to resolve issues and promote changes to reach that goal (Adams, 2010).

> Inherent in action research is the goal of producing practical knowledge that will enhance the well-being of people economically, politically, psychologically, educationally, and spiri-

> tually, and thereby contribute to the flourishing of people and communities (Pine, 2008, 71).

It is a way of "supporting local, context-sensitive change" (Willis & Edwards, 2014, 11.) "In action research, 'reality' is investigated in order to transform it" (Pine, 2008, 75). This means that the relationships between researcher and study participants need to be "more complex and less hierarchical" (Adams, 2010, 4). Equal participation in the selection of which problems to solve, how to solve them, and in the agency of carrying change through, is basic to this form of research. The Jewish European intellectual Kurt Lewin is often considered to be the founder of this method through his classic article "Action Research and Minority Problems" from 1946. Lewin's action research, "... research which will help the practitioner" (Lewin, 1946, 34), was above all presented as a method to help groups identify a problem and then seek tentative solutions together. In Latin America this was developed further as Participatory Action Research, adding also the goal of taking political and social action (cf. Pine, 2008, 53). Here the work of Paulo Freire was ground-breaking, and as mentioned, the link between liberation theology and action research becomes clear. Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his classic *Teologia de la liberación* from 1971, refers approvingly to Freire's work (Gutiérrez, 1971, 122-123; 298-307).

Clare Watkins has been central in developing a *theological* action research (Cameron, 2010; Watkins, 2015; Watkins & Shepherd, 2014). Here, the participatory dimension is underlined in the distinguishing of four 'voices' of theology. These are (1) the 'operant' (which is expressed through practices); (2) the 'espoused' (which is the practitioners' own explicit expressions of theology); (3) the 'normative' (which are the theological expressions accepted by the practitioners as normative); and finally (4) the 'formal' (which is, by and large, the theological expressions of the academy). These distinctions prove helpful to safeguard both the equal worth and the distinct qualities of different participants in a joint research project – or church action. Yet theological action research as developed by Watkins and others can be seen as quite timid – so far – when it comes to raising issues of justice and partisan commitment. Here again, the legacy of liberation theology and Jon Sobrino's *intellectus amoris* seems to me to be an important critical supplement.

Towards three-partite diaconal action research

Deacons in the Church of Norway and diaconal institutions in Europe are carrying out different kinds of social work, from advocacy of the rights of undocumented migrants to care for poor, drug addicts, and elderly people.[5] Their work may be seen as challenging any conceptualization of theology or Christian faith as 'love' that ends up at a comfortable distance from political implications or practical dilemmas. So, what could it mean to interpret diaconal practices and research in this situation as an expression of intellectus *amoris, liberationis,* i.e. a mystagogy into the salvific mystery of liberating love?

In the context of the Church City Mission in Oslo concerns similar to those referred to in theological action research above, namely to involve different participants in developing knowledge and doing research in and on their ongoing practice for transformation, has led to fresh developments in the organization's diaconal methodology.[6] As in liberation theology and participatory action research, there is a priority given to the role of those who are most immediately and directly concerned and affected. This is the option for the 'poor' in a general and wide, yet critical sense. At the same time, the distinguishing of the active role of the 'practitioners' (the 'professionals' in the diaconal work) and the researcher(s) is underlined. Diaconal research is thus framed as a research not merely *on* diaconal work, but furthermore as an ongoing research *in and through* diaconal work. It is – ideally – research as diaconal practice.[7]

One way of framing the basic issue here is to ask: what is 'diaconal' about diaconal research? The question may of course seem off target. Research on health does not have to be healthy. Yet, research on diaconal practice, whatever one understands such practice to be, may be undertaken at such a distance that it does not reflect the values or presuppositions embedded in that

practice. Many may even see such distance as a requirement, or at least an advantage, as they see it in harmony with certain ideals of detachment and objectivity. Diaconal research thus would mean simply research *on* diaconal practice.

And still, it is well established that no research is value-free or neutral. It is therefore relevant to ask if the research on diaconia is sufficiently open to or tuned into the value-basis of diaconal praxis, to fully or adequately grasp its character and criticize its shortcomings. Furthermore, diaconal research is often undertaken within institutions that understand themselves to be 'diaconal', i.e., in some way infused by the values or preunderstandings that diaconal praxis adheres to. The question thus arises: Is there something in the character of diaconia that must be reflected in the ways in which diaconal *research* is undertaken?

As seen, then, three actors are relevant to explore in diaconal research. Firstly, and most importantly, the person or groups that diaconal praxis is 'for', i.e., aimed at supporting, empowering, or helping. Secondly, we have the principal practitioners, those 'doing diaconia'. These may be e.g. individuals (volunteers or professionals) institutions, organizations or congregations. Thirdly, there is the researchers – students, professors, research institutes and academic institutions.

Diaconal research should aim at including the active involvement and due consideration of *all* of these three groups, with their (potential and actual) diverse perspectives or interests. This is what we may call a 'tripartite diaconal research'. Taking seriously the differences in perspectives and interests in any research project, and particular in research on social challenges such as 'minority problems' (Lewin) or the 'refugee crisis', this model may facilitate the critical awareness of such differences and tensions: To whom is the findings of this research beneficial or 'valid'? Whose questions are raised, what solutions are favoured, and why? For diaconal research such questions are crucial, as they reflect the diaconal identity.

Strengths, shortcomings, dilemmas

Tripartite diaconal research, then, is not a research on diaconia but rather a research *in* diaconia – from within diaconal practices. It ideally becomes an integral part of diaconal practice in order to understand, criticize and improve that diaconal practice in ways concordant with the diaconal sources and values. Such a diaconal research asks itself critically *in whose interest* the research is undertaken. Even when the full and equal participation of all groups is not feasible or advisable, the *perspectives* of all three groups should be considered. And, when it is necessary, there is an ethical and theological obligation to give preference to the perspective of the first one among these. The 'target groups' or 'addressees' of diaconal work must primarily be seen as subjects or agents in this undertaking.

This participatory and theologically grounded (as diaconal) action research has many qualities that it shares with action research in general. Among these are e.g., the systematic exchange of views and interpretations across status and formal roles; the commitment and ability to make changes and correct deficiencies in practice as it develops (not having to wait months and years for the publishing of the scientific report or article); the promotion of a culture of collaboration, empowerment and self-esteem; and the cross-disciplinary and multi-methodological approach (cf. Adams, 2010, 9).

At the same time a tripartite diaconal research also shares some of the dilemmas and possible limitations of action research in general, for instance about standard requirements or expectations of reliability and validity, as well as the sometimes contentious issue of normativity. More critically, it can run the risk of becoming another, perhaps subtler, form of domination, in which the powerful (researchers, practitioners, clergy, deacons) dominate the participants and/or recipients, target groups, primary concerned, exactly by blurring distinctions that as a matter of fact *do* distribute power (cf. Pine, 2008, 77–78).

What would the further development of this tripartite diaconal research require? Relevant questions to be asked in improving this method are, firstly, at the level of *principle and theory:*

What are the arguments for tripartite collaborative research? What are possible arguments against such research methodologies? What, if any, dilemmas or contradictions may arise?

Secondly, at a more pragmatic level of contemporary social and *political context,* one should ask what the actual possibilities for collaborative tripartite research endeavours seem to be. What are prevailing incentives and disincentives? In this, relevant factors may be the political climate in different contexts, the dominant regimes or philosophies of knowledge and research, the degree of user organization and the degree and character of involvement in social programs and research, as well as available incentives in the form of funding opportunities.

Thirdly, at the level of *concrete methodologies of research,* one should develop further what different collaborative models for tripartite research may look like, how they may be organized, with what methodological designs or set-ups, etc. This is the level of concrete research practice. It asks how research can be organized and conducted to facilitate and promote action and participation, exploring the benefits and pitfalls of different research methods, and considering practical and ethical methodological barriers and dilemmas that may arise, as well as putting forward suggestions for how such barriers may be overcome.[8]

Whereas much remains to be explored further such a tripartite approach, fully or partially applied, is yielding results in the work of the Church City Mission, and beyond. It has i.e. resulted in experience-based reports that are important for advocacy, policymaking and forging more critical and relevant diaconal and social action, both nationally and trans-nationally (Bymisjon, 2013, 2016). The 2013 Report on "Undocumented Migration, Human Trafficking and the Roma" (Bymisjon, 2013) was prepared by the Church City Mission Oslo in collaboration with the *Lancet – University of Oslo Commission on Global Governance for Health*. It formed one important basis for the final publication of the findings of that commission in the prestigious academic review within health, *The Lancet* (Ottersen, 2014).

I find this action research-inspired methodological approach to be promising in the field of diaconia: It can be seen as concretizing and contextualizing Jon Sobrino's suggestive re-conceptualization of theology as *intellectus amoris* and as *mystagogy*, in a way that situates diaconal practices at the core of what it means to be church – even outside of concrete ecclesial contexts. It can help identify and operationalize the inner link between transformational practices and faith in the God of life. And it gives an indication that even the sometimes dry and abstract work of reflecting on theological and diaconal methods can become a small but significant expression of the principle of mercy – and even of "revolutionary love."[9]

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1 It has become conventional to speak of a 'refugee crisis' in Europe, and Norway, since 2015. This designation is highly politicized however, and ambivalent: Is this really a 'crisis', and if so, to whom – migrants or 'Europe'? See e.g. Schmiedel & Smith, 2018. See also Stålsett, 2017.
2 Sobrino's most significant contributions are in the field of Christology (Sobrino, 1978, 1982, 1993a, 2001 cf. Stålsett, 2003), but he has also written important works in ecclesiology (Sobrino, 1987), spirituality (Sobrino, 1988) and fundamental theology (Sobrino, 1994, cf. Sobrino, 1993b).
3 I quote from the original Spanish text, and provide my own translation. The English version of this collection of essays is Sobrino, 1994.
4 Cf. the classical formulations of Augustin of Hippo (*crede, ut intelligas, cf. Tract. Ev. Jo.*, 29.6) and later Anselm of Canterbury (*credo ut intelligam, cf. Proslogion,* 1).
5 See for instance the overview presented by Eurodiaconia, https://www.eurodiaconia.org/.
6 I served as the General Secretary of the Church City Mission from 2006 to 2013. The development of this methodology within the context of the organization is more than anything the work of my distinguished ex-colleagues there, Arnhild Taksdal and Per Kristian Hilden.
7 See Stålsett, S. J. and Hilden, Taksdal (2018): "Research as Diaconia: Commitment, Action and Participation" (Forthcoming).
8 These questions were raised and discussed in the session: "Diaconal research: In whose interest? Exploring research and practice in diaconia as tripartite collaboration: rationale, models, methods and barriers", during the *Research and Practice in Diaconia Working Group Meeting* in Heidelberg, Germany 17-18 March 2015. The meeting was convened by *Eurodiaconia* and *ReDi* (The International Society for the Research and Study of Diaconia and Christian Social Practice) at the Diakoniewissenschaftliches Institut, University of Heidelberg. Per Kristian Hilden and myself prepared and led the discussion.
9 "Revolutionary love" was the main theme of American Academy of Religion (AAR) in San Antonio 2016, where the first version of this text was presented.

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