

THE PRINCIPAL TASK

OF THEOLOGY TODAY:

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE
THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

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Many of our theologies of liberation are guilty of making "short circuits" in the Gospels. They are often based on defective Christologies and ecclesiologies. They try strenuously to domesticate the Gospels within history, lacking sufficient sensitivity to the transcendental dimensions of both history and salvation. This is precisely where such theologies should be revised: they should take seriously the rejection by Jesus of searching for the path of mere political revolution, organizing the populace for armed struggle against tyranny, imperialism and exploitation of Rome. His path was not one of mere political insurrection, but rather that of death and resurrection. If Latin American theologies are to be taken into account seriously they must struggle for the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection in a deeper manner than what is implied by the fact that Jesus questioned the existing structures of the Church and society. It is not enough to state that He was partial to poor and marginalized people. An appropriate ecclesiology can be constructed only if the theologies of liberation make themselves profoundly Christian.

As a Christian I would like to present a different approach to many of the theologies of liberation. Asians frequently encounter in these theologies a mere echo of European culture. They often seem to have a basically Spanish-Portuguese orientation. They have tried - most inadequately - to place themselves above the ancient pre-Colombian cultures of the Americas. Millions of poor people in the Americas are "latinos" or "Americans" only superficially. They are still "Indians." Their cultural background is Mayan, Aztec, Incan, Cherokee and African. A theology of liberation lacking roots in these cultures must be foreign to the poor of this continent.

It is absolutely essential to have an understanding of and a sensitivity to the anthropology - including art, symbols, psychology and the forms of communication - of any people before endeavoring to carry liberation to them. This is particularly true as one approaches the "masses of the continent."

The most important key to liberation is vigilance lest indigenous cultures develop cosmologies or sociologies which are overly abstract or rational. Rather, a cosmology or sociology must express an understanding of the reality of a given people. It must touch their unconfessed aspirations, as seen in their folk symbols, music, etc. These may be at the same time cultural, religious and socio-economic. Due to their continuity and their persistence, our theologies of liberation must impress the indigenous American masses as dry and sterile. Religion must always be expressed by symbols, rituals and art forms which communicate more deeply than our abstract thinking and the rational "central categories" imported from the European Renaissance.

Last year I was greatly impressed by the crowds in the Basilica of Guadalupe, in Mexico. They were not people on whom our theologies of liberation would have much effect. I remember particularly a youth, fervent in his piety, making his genuflects before Our Lady of Guadalupe. He was wearing a shirt bearing the image of Che Guevara. This is the combination found worldwide among the poor - a fervent revolutionary surrender united with an equally fervent devotion to the transcendental, expressed not by intellectual faith but through symbols and rituals which penetrate deeply into the subconscious.

Latin American theologies of liberation must take into consideration these fundamentals of continental consciousness in their message to the poor. They must learn to use something more than intellectual conceptions. The conceptual formulation of the theology should provide space for the trans-conceptual expression of the deepest aspirations of human beings. We must go beyond the pseudo-Marxist interpretations of the Gospels, which are neither Christian nor Marxist. I am posing polemics at this international meeting in order to provoke discussions. The urge to arrange a marriage between Christianity and Marxism impresses me as something artificial and unconvincing. Not only at its initiation must a theology of liberation be Christian. There is no

obstacle in learning something from Marxist scientific sociology and economics - provided that these elements are assimilated and thoroughly integrated. An understanding of modern science and their theology, a deep understanding of the historic role of worldwide capitalist imperialism and the struggle against it by the oppressed and exploited of the world, must be integrated with the Christian vision of the dynamic process of creation-redemption in Jesus Christ. This appears to be the task which we still must assume adequately and carry out rigorously, not merely in terms of Renaissance rationality and European cultural insularity.

A Christian theology of liberation should be rooted in a community which lives for the mysteries of the incarnation, death and resurrection of our Lord, and not merely in a sharing of poverty or readings about poverty in the Gospels. There is no necessity for reducing the Gospels to these elements. It is sufficiently fruitful to provide full understanding of the dignity and the liberty of humanity, created in the image of God, and at the same time to augment the categories of participation in the struggle for the emancipation of humanity, without resorting to such dubious diminishment of the Gospels.

A Genuinely Christian Theology of Human Totality

I recall sitting next to a distinguished Marxist intellectual at the only Christian-Marxist dialogue organized by the World Council of Churches in 1938. After some of our Christian theologians had made their presentations, he turned to me and said, "You Christians are kind, recognizing all the baggage which we Marxists have been writing about for fifteen years and giving it back to us as Christian theology. Have you no harvest of your own to give us?" I think we made a mistake in trying to mix Marxism and Christianity. What we need is a theology which starts out with an understanding by Christians of creation, redemption and eschatological totality, and which places the struggle for socio-economic and political liberation within the context of that totality. We cannot begin with certain parts of the Gospels, arbitrarily chosen, such as those of identification with the poor. The faith of the Christian Church offers a prospect of reality far deeper than what would fit into a concept such as identification with the poor, or Jesus the revolutionary. We

need not abandon our faith in Christ as the Incarnate Son of God, His death and resurrection and continuous labors for human redemption in order to be participants in the revolutionary struggle for the emancipation of humanity from its oppressive socio-economic and political structures. We do not need to identify the Kingdom of God with the Church in order to be faithful to the Gospels. What we need to do is to give ourselves a deeply Christian perspective which includes salvation for the non-believer, baptism and faith, of a Christology, spirituality and eschatology which places justice amidst the greatness of a dynamic creation advancing towards its totality. Such a Christology, spirituality and eschatology can be faithful to traditions and related to the emancipation and redemption of not only the totality of humanity, but of the entire universe. However, at the same time, it cannot be wholly rational or intellectual. We must make use of symbols, rituals and other trans-conceptual devices.

The Integration of Politics and Economics in such a Theology

I am allergic to the concept of evangelization as an "all inclusive" category in which our political, economic and social worries are integrated. These can be integrated properly only within a Christian containment of creation and redemption in Jesus Christ as understood to consist of a cosmic phenomenon within the movement by which creation advances. The class struggle, the development of human organization through slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism, the present role of imperialist capitalism and the present status of the struggle against its structures - all this can be contained within the broad movement of creation towards its totality. This should require an understanding and inclusion of the person and the works of Christ, of the Holy Spirit and of the Church. This needs to be oriented towards the redemption of all creation, not merely of Christians. Such is the great task of modern theology, and one can note an element which is disloyal to the traditional, the authentic, the classical positions of the Church. This task of modern theology will obviously be of a different strain than the majority of the theological currents most frequent in both the West and the East. Politics and economics do not necessarily lie outside of this theology.

Christian theology ought to provide not only a coherent

tentative sketch of reality. But Christian theology should also demonstrate how this reality can be changed.

Humankind is situated at the head of creative activity. This should be understood for what it constitutes not only because of this work but also because of the use it makes of its liberty for changing its status. In this the authentic tradition insists upon five points:

1) That humanity is an integral part of creation as long as it is able to transcend and modify creation;

2) That hand in hand, theory and practice, the individual and society, reflection and action, spiritual growth and the development of solid justice, must be coordinated;

3) That Jesus Christ, present in the Spirit of the Church, in society and in the cosmos in different ways, is active, as we are by this work. Jesus Christ is maintaining and nourishing this intuition in the life of the Church through the Eucharist and other symbols, as well as through instruction. Furthermore, affirmation of the hope that Christ and goodness will triumph over evil which will vanish, will be maintained by the Church;

4) That throughout history the final separation of good from evil can be made only partially, but that the final eschatological reality of the good, purged of evil, and ever growing to new dimensions, ought to exist in history as far as possible; and

5) That redemption in Christ must be made effective not only for humanity, but also for the totality of creation, even though this be effective in three different ways - politically, economically and socially - which cannot be understood as alien to Christian interests.

Some Specific Tasks for Christians Today

It would be superficial to assume that the Church as a whole will be faithful to the totality of its vocation. The official Church is constantly complying with some of its tasks while disdaining others, and frequently is on the path to genuine liberation and social justice. Thus the Church should often be called to the orders of believers, but one's critique of the Church could be too slow and too unproductive. Some of its tasks can be undertaken by only certain individuals or groups within the totality of the Church.

Let us give several examples of this.

1) The Church has a pastoral role to play in the revolutionary process. Revolutionaries need the support of the Church even when it does not share in their activities. Frequently this task may be performed successfully by small groups within the Church;

2) The Church should lose all its fear of interpreting political, economic and social realities. But often the Church is impeded from seeing reality because of its own created interests and therefore it does an inadequate job of interpretation. Again, unofficial groups in the Church will have to undertake this task;

3) The Church has the role of "giving names to the forces of evil" and practicing exorcism over them. This might force the Church to be crucified and the official Church is often afraid of the cross. Small groups will have to face those wicked powers and carry the cross in the name of the whole Church and all of humanity;

4) The Church should be free, since faith and hope will help us to see the role which certain interests play, and which impede us from facing reality. Frequently in many such situations the Church is so involved with its own interests and egotistical institutional efforts that it offers only a negative testimony. Small groups can make it clear to Christians how it is that they are really bound to their interests and therefore incapable of seeing reality as it is. Small groups can denounce the ideological chains which imprison believers;

5) The Church should help humankind challenge the questionable attainments of science and the propagandistic claims of much that passes for science, for example, in the fields of sociology, political science and economics. But the institutionalized Church many lack the courage to defy the status quo. Small groups must undertake the task of denouncing, for example, questionable economic concepts such as those of Walt Rostaw (stages of economic development), John Kenneth Galbraith (works on industrial society) or Vassily Leontieff (economics of computers); and

6) The Church itself might fear supporting revolutionary movements or parties, or to offer them their favor. It can therefore be the task of small groups in the Church to evaluate these movements and parties in a just manner. Then support and encouragement can be offered.