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LIBERATION THEOLOGIES: A CRITICAL ESSAY

Within the last few years there has arisen a cluster of theological programs with a focus on human liberation. This movement is ecumenical, ethical and universal. It is, however, strongest in the so-called Third World. There is no universal agreement among the advocates concerning method or the particular focus of these theologies; but the formula of liberation from oppression radiates throughout all of them. All are concerned with “human rights” or making life more human, especially for the masses of oppressed people in each case. There is Black Theology, Latin American Theology, German Political Theology, Feminist Theology, African and Asian Theologies. In some cases we are talking about broad categories which must be sub-divided. But these titles provide us with a working list.

THE SITUATION

There is freedom ferment in our world. The occasion for this varies from continent to continent and from nation to nation. In some cases we have a revolt against racism—i.e., the United States and Southern Africa. In other cases we have a response to colonialism—i.e., most of the Third World. Presently we have a reaction to imperialism in the form of economic exploitation of the masses. Not only are Western countries involved, but multi-national corporations are greatly involved.

A new consciousness has developed amongst the oppressed against their unjust treatment. The basis of protest is generally based upon race, class or sex. Any classification of these matters is too simplistic, but we are attempting merely to provide a handle for discussion of a complicated network of oppressions that have

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given rise to this vigorous theological reflection around the globe.

It seems to me that a distinction needs to be made between various forms of oppressions. Oppressions based upon race and class involves the wholesale suffering of an entire people. Sexism, on the other hand, is a form of oppression which is internal or in-group suffering, exploitation or privation. In Latin America the masses of poor people suffer oppression at the hands of the privileged minority and from Western imperial powers which support those who exploit their own people. But because of the patriarchal and machismo characteristic of these societies, women are experiencing severe forms of oppression based upon sex. Racism and sexism differ from classism because they are clearly rooted in creation. If a society allows for upward mobility one may overcome his/her economic status and improve one's plight. But we are stuck with our race or sex. I am aware that one can physically alter one's skin-color as well as one's sex, but this is often too costly on psychological grounds.

My real concern is to clarify the issues in order that we may see clearly what is involved here. Racism in the United States cannot be toned down by any comparison with any other form of oppression. It is the oppression of a whole people over hundreds of years. This includes men, women and children. Therefore, Blacks must be concerned with building stronger families. This does not mean that black women do not need to be liberated; for they suffer from both race and sex discrimination. Black male-female problems are Black family problems and not merely male-female problems.

White middle class men are oppressed. And white-middle-class women are oppressed. Many white men miss a wholesome relationship with their families because they are trying to be successful in their field whether they want to or not. In some sense success is their failure. Many live empty and lonely lives flying from city to city trying to make money to provide security for their families.

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White middle class women are oppressed because they are often homebodies who build their lives around their husbands and children. There is more wife-beating in plush white suburbs than there is in the Black ghetto. There is often more alcoholism and suicide there. Affluence has its alienation and ills as well as poverty. When a white middle class man asked me how Black theology related to him, my response was: “Try to understand the way in which you are oppressed and how God speaks to you in your condition and this will help you to understand mine.” Thus we must particularize the Gospel as it addresses us in our own condition and then reach out to others. The weakness of most white theologians, who are mainly male, is that they try to take on all these oppressions—if they are interested in the subject matter at all. In a real sense, only those who are aware of their oppression and God’s liberating word to them in the midst of their oppression can write a theology of liberation.

CONTEXTUALIZING IN LIBERATION THEOLOGIES

It is because we move from practice to reflection in liberation theology that we must move from the particular to the universal. Without a particular, concrete experience, the universal is abstract. It is by involvement in the experience of oppression—it is by developing solidarity with the oppressed that we understand the meaning of liberation.

In some cases as in Black Theology, Asian and African Theologies, the context is both positive and negative. These are culture-based as well as political in orientation. There is an affirmation of a heritage as well as protest against injustices. The Latin American liberation theologians have paid little attention thus far to popular religiosity and culture. This is the basis for Moltmann’s “open letter” to Latin American Theologians.

All liberation theologies, except Feminist theology, give little attention to sexism. Feminist theology, thus far, represents mainly highly intellectual middle class interest. It is also mainly Western in orientation and is limited to the intellectual-linguistic tools of the very males being criticized. It is primarily Euro-

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American and its scope is the North Atlantic community. Its strongest advocates are, to my knowledge, within this country. Most essays or books by Feminist theologians are not easy reading for seminary trained ministers. The writers seem to be writing mainly for the approval of the very male chauvinists they are criticizing. If their writings were more for consciousness raising and the involvement of women, even highly intelligent women who are not philosophically or theologically trained, their language and ideas will need to be simplified.

I have just read an essay by Pauli Murray, the first Black woman priest in the January 1978, *Anglican Theological Review*. She is an outstanding attorney, having graduated from Yale and taught at Brandeis. She also was a student of mine in Black Theology for a term. Thus she requested my response to her article. She did a critical review of Daly, Reuther and Russell. My greatest disappointment was that she did not have much to say about the peculiar experience of Black women on sexism and racism. Other Black female lawyers have frankly stated their problems with these oppressions. I have challenged Pauli to do so. But, I urged her to speak for her underprivileged sisters. If she will not speak for them, she should not expect the white feminist theologians to do so. Furthermore, I have assured her that my future writings will consciously deal with this problem. But, I will be concerned with all Black women in the setting of the Black family.

The context of African Theology is the traditional religions and the emerging nationalisms. But, as the Africans themselves have well said, in fact, there is one African people, whether in Africa, the Caribbean or the United States. This unity is, however, a unity in diversity. The Asians have a more complex situation. There are massive sub-continent in Asia with varied cultural and religious traditions. A contextual theology for India is vastly different from a Japanese program.

QUEST FOR A THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Much Western theology is attempting to ignore the challenge of political theologies at home and these contextual theologies in the Third World. There seems to be a contest among German theologians to see who can develop the most “scientific” system of theology. These theologians seek respectability in the academy; they have little interest in the church.

In our country the trends are mainly those initiated in Germany with some modifications by local flavor. Process theology seems to be the exception. It is Anglo-American, having developed mainly in this country. It is highly metaphysical and is beamed primarily toward the dialogue between theology and natural science. It has much to offer toward a theology of ecology. But when we take up the questions of oppressions and liberation in human relationships, its voice seems rather weak. Its terminology is too impersonal to comfort those that mourn. Its God is too weak to deal with ethnic suffering. It does bring a holistic perspective to reality and, therefore, can contribute to a real appreciation for the value of all creation and the inter-relationships between all existent realities. But when groups of humans of long-suffering look to the growing God of process theology they do not find succor. This God is caught up in a struggle between, as it were, an eternal crucifixion and Easter. A weak and powerless people need a strong God. When the foundations are shaking we need a Rock to cling to. Enough! I am sure these impressions will be challenged. Indeed, I welcome this!

Whereas classical theology has relied very heavily upon philosophy as its main interpretative instrument, the theologies of liberation must, I believe, turn increasingly to the social sciences and the humanities for help. A well rounded program of liberation theology must be holistic—it must be at once priestly and prophetic. Unfortunately, some programs are one sided. Much Latin American liberation theology, most German political theology and some Black Theology (i.e., Cone) is mainly prophetic in the sense of external protest. There is little inner-directed

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prophecy; God's judgment is always against somebody else. Much of Feminist theology is preoccupied with the gender of language rather than radical social transformation. Exceptions, to my knowledge, would be Reuther and Solle. We need an existential-political approach that would provide a means of applying the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole person and all of life. We need, for example, to be able to combine the insights of Kierkegaard, Freud and Marx to the insights of biblical faith and Christian theological history to provide a theological perspective on human hope.

Because liberation theologies provide the most significant ecumenical thrust for the latter 20th century, they have a cross-cultural frame of reference. Being existential, cultural and political in context, cultural anthropology as well as history of religions are useful tools for these theologians. In our effort in interdisciplinary study, we discover fresh insights and ways of thinking which enrich our understanding of the Christian Gospel and the worship and life-style which flows from such an understanding. One example is that the "either-or" way of thinking is supplemented by a "both-and" way of thinking. Asians and Africans seem to share in various shades of meaning along this broader view. We overcome the secular-sacred dichotomy and we discover a rich type of communalism. Many of these things have affinity with the biblical faith which has been confused or overshadowed by the impact of Greek and Teutonic thought.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have attempted to describe the situation that has given rise to liberation theologies—the network of oppressions and the new political consciousness. Then, we explored the contexts in which these theologies are emerging—class, sex; race, as well as traditional religions/cultures of the Third World. And, finally we discussed methodology. We looked at a possible poly-methodical approach to the doing of theology. Beyond this we have suggested an open dialogue with Third World theologians in which Western theologians would be good listeners and learners. This last suggestion will be most difficult for Western theologians who have

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been the makers and transplanters of theological systems. But it is most important that this path be pursued—it appears to be the best way forward.