

A Theologian's Reflection: The Church And The Cuban Revolution

A group of theologians, pastors and laity, was invited by the Ecumenical Council of Cuba to participate in a week-long seminar, June 22-29, 1984. We focused on the theme, "Theological Homage in Memory of Martin Luther King, Jr." The Ecumenical Council extended the invitation through the Black Theology Project, a group of black theologians, pastors and laity who are committed to reflection on the black religious experience as the point of departure for talk about God, people and the world. Local participants at this seminar were the Baptist Student Council which represents over two hundred Baptist churches in Cuba, the Evangelical Theological Seminary at Matanzas, the Methodist, the Presbyterian, the Episcopal and Pentecostal churches. Although the Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church attended a worship service in homage to Martin Luther King, Jr., in which he was embraced by Fidel Castro, the Roman Catholic Church did not actively participate in the seminar.

Dr. Paul Fernandez, the President of the Ecumenical Council of Cuba, pointed out during the opening session of the seminar, that it was the hope of the Council that the seminar would aid in the renewal of the church in Cuba. He felt that the presence of Christians from the United States of America would facilitate the process for church renewal in Cuba. The economic blockade which was imposed by the government of the United States against the Cuban government had the effect of severing communications between the church in Cuba and the church in the United States. According to Fernandez, the people of Cuba have not only suffered from an economic blockade for twenty-four years from the most powerful country in the world just ninety miles away, but the Cuban church has suffered from a blockade of ideas concerning God and his work in the world. The lifting of the blockade would also mean the opening of dialogue between the churches in both countries. The Ecumenical Council wanted the church in the United States and in the rest of the world to understand that the God of Biblical Faith is alive and

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active in Cuba. Any God who could not survive with his people during the change of one political structure for another would not be the God of Biblical Faith, and hence not worthy of worship. The Council affirmed that the God of Biblical Faith is involved in Cuba's history. This God is not limited to any political system or structure, but actively calls all political structures into question.

The delegation from the United States was quick to question, "Why has the church in Cuba aligned itself to the Communist revolution?" Why didn't the Cuban Church pattern the leader of another revolution, Martin Luther King, Jr., and in non-violent protest, make its demands known to the leaders of the Cuban revolution? The Ecumenical Council indicated that it was not possible for the church in Cuba to learn from the church in the United States, since the people of Cuba are completely cut off from the United States. The only political structure the Cuban church had to relate to was a Socialist one. During the revolution, the people of Cuba were left alone by all other nations except Canada and Mexico.

Our Christian brothers and sisters in Cuba pointed out that Christians in other countries should be cautious in their attempt to criticize the Cuban church and people. If criticism is to be more than catharsis, it should emerge out of solidarity with the Cuban church and people in their attempt to build a more just and human society. According to the Council, the one who criticizes should do so from within the struggle, being fully aware of the history and practice of the colonial church, prior to the revolution and the goals of the revolution. But, since we were among Christians, I asked if there were any sins that the Cuban state needed to confess. The Council responded that before the state confessed its sins, the church should first confess its sins. The church could only call the state to confession after it had repented for its apathy and accepted the goals of the revolution; justice for the victims of society, the search for peace, human dignity and solidarity with the poor.

Prior to the revolution, the church contributed to the oppression of people in that it failed to create new space for the humanization of the Cuban people. According to the Ecumenical Council, the social institutions of the country inflicted heavy burdens on the people, by distorting their understanding as human beings, and diminishing their humanity. The church often condoned, through silence and complicity, the destruction of the poor as it sided with those who exploited the poor. Therefore, the revolution which was aimed at the humanization of Cuban society through the destruction of unjust structures, was a challenge and correction to church practice. Hence, the revolution was the criticism of church practice. A free humanity and not church practice was the vision and goal of the revolution. But, what of the church's vision of a free humanity? we asked. Granted that the church's practice is out-of-step with its

faith claims and its vision of free humanity, should repentance by the church not signal a return of the church to the vision of the kingdom of God, presented in God's word? Can the church be the church if it takes over and endorses the vision of the state? The church can only be a servant church, free to serve her Lord in the world, when she has affirmed her identity as the people of God.

These observations led participants in the Ecumenical Council to point out that pastors and Christians who fled Cuba during the revolution did not do so because of persecution due to the practice of their faith, but because of their unwillingness to help build a more just and humane society. The Christians of Cuba reminded us that many people speak of the Cuban revolution as unchristian because it is anti-American. To be American is not the same as to be Christian. The church must not only critically question the vision of humanity as it is articulated by the Socialists but it must also question whether or not the church is true to its own vision of the kingdom of God. A church's identity must be informed by its vision of the kingdom. It means joining with God in solidarity with the oppressed to make the abundant life a reality on earth. The church is not called to accompany the people, but to be with the people, to be the people in the struggle to forge a more just and more humane society. Theology as the liberating praxis of the revolution must aim at a break with the oppressive history in which people are celebrated as sons and daughters of God.

It was providential that, while Christians from the United States were in conversation with the Cuban Church in exploring the connection between humanization and revolution, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, one of the torch bearers of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. would come to Cuba to free prisoners, both American and Cuban. In his own words, Jackson stated that he had come to Cuba and Central America to launch a moral offensive aimed at the removal of the blockade between the peoples of Cuba and United States of America. He called on the world powers to practice war no more and allow peace to be a reality in Cuba and Central America. At the end of negotiations, and while still at Fidel Castro's official residence, Rev. Jackson asked for prayer. We joined hands together in a circle, church leaders, Fidel Castro and leaders of the revolution, as Rev. Jesse Jackson called on God to bring peace in that part of the hemisphere.

The following day, at an ecumenical service in honor of the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr., with over thirty Christian denominations represented, and to the surprise of most of the people, Fidel Castro attended the worship service in Carey Methodist Church in Havana. As Rev. Jackson preached on "The Importance of a Mind Made Up for God," many church leaders wept openly, declaring that the presence of

the Cuban leader in church moved a situation of tension and doubt to one of hope for a closer relationship between church and revolution.