

## Some Issues of Major Concern in Theological Education in Cuba, the Caribbean, and the U.S.

For many years we here in Cuba have debated whether Cuban theology is or is not a theology of liberation. Therefore we have referred to our Cuban theology in different ways—a theology in revolution, a theology of hope, and by many other names.

I think that Cuban theology is similar to the theology of liberation in the rest of Latin America, but it has a different context because of the political, economic and social situation of Cuba. Thus our emphasis is in accord with the Cuban situation. Because most Latin American and Caribbean countries are politically oppressed, their emphasis is on political liberation. Here in Cuba we have been a little confused in that regard. Some of us sometimes have said in the past that Cuban theology is liberated or, because we are living in a context of liberation, our country is completely liberated from all the situations of oppression, etc.

But I think that what is true in the Cuban context is that we are *politically* liberated. However, our revolution is the struggle to complete entirely the liberation of this country. This means the recognition that oppression is not only a will to oppress the other, but that it expresses itself in a social structure. So the old social structure in Cuba has prolonged itself in the new society. Thus economically we can't say that we are completely liberated, because we have many problems of that kind to deal with, and we have also some social problems. So Cuban theology needs to deal with such matters of liberation in our society. These do not result from the new government willing them or from the Cuban revolution, but I believe they are a holdover from the past that has not been overcome in our society.

Cuban theology also considers not only the Cuban social context but also the Caribbean and the Latin American context, because we can't live isolated in this world despite the evil many have caused since the revolution by seeking to isolate our people and our country. So we have a

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common link with the rest of the Caribbean, a cultural link with which theology must deal.

Furthermore, the revolution as a social phenomenon has had a very big impact on Cuban theology and the Cuban church. In many ways, but especially ideologically and culturally, the revolution has had an impact. For instance, I think Cuban theology has become more aware of itself and other institutions as social phenomena. In various ways the Cuban people were not prepared for socialism but have been growing into the new socialist structure.

The church, for example, remained linked to the past, ignoring or having no capacity to understand adequately how its structure, life, and theology relate to the new historical event which is taking place in Cuba. On the other hand, theology of liberation in Cuba is characterized by an intention to respond to the Cuban social context, that is, to consider all the different phases of Cuban life.

The Cuban church has also been influenced in another way. The Cuban revolution is a cultural event also. And in that way it responds to most, if not to all, of the main preoccupations of the Cubans as human persons. So one issue for Cuban theology has been to deal with the new ideology which is leading the new Cuban society. In some cases we have been successful in understanding our comrades and neighbors who are not Christian but who are working for the welfare of this country. Yet in other ways we have become confused due to being unclear about our Christian identity. Sometimes we have used non-biblical categories to understand social events, and we have interpreted them only in terms of political categories. I am not saying that this is true of everybody in Cuba, because we have had theologians, especially the most progressive ones, who are very clear in their biblical understanding of the revolution. But some others have not understood this very well biblically; so the result has been some confusion. For example, we have sometimes stressed that only through Marxist analysis can a Christian understand our socio-economic and political situation. Marxism, I suppose, scientifically speaking, is the best instrument that we have to analyze the situation of oppression or the new direction of the society.

However, there are other categories we are not using at all. For instance, if a poor person's pocket is empty that person does not need a Marxist or a Christian to say your pocket is empty. S/He knows that very well because of her/his experience. Or, poor people have no food on their table to eat at lunch time; thus, there is no need to elaborate a system of thinking to say: "You have no food on your table at lunch time."

So what I mean is that we have a Christian sensibility toward Cuban problems that we have not used as much as we could have in the past. This has sometimes been one of our problems in doing theology. The



revolutionary and Marxist ideology is not a threat to theology, but it is a challenge and impetus to the development of Cuban theology.

Therefore, we have formulated some ideas and concepts very well because of our social context since the revolution. I mention only two of these: the concept of work and the concept of the new person in our society; because there are many, many common themes between these revolutionary and Marxist conceptions and Christian theology which has a very deep biblical base. For us in our society to be a Christian and a Communist remains also a goal to be reached. In that sense one can't graduate as a Christian, and one can't graduate as a Communist. Moreover, we Christians are similar to Communists, because we have a similar utopian goal for society. So, as a Christian one is like a Communist and vice versa in our society. However, we Cubans have sometimes been confused in that we have said we are Marxist when we want to say that we are like Communists, since we have similar goals in the society for liberation of the poor and oppressed, to give food to the hungry, clothes to the naked, etc.

Most of my comments so far are ideas to provoke discussion or exchange of thinking. I wish to mention now some other struggles in making theology feel at home in Cuba in the churches, especially the traditional Cuban churches which preach a dualism dividing work between the sacred world, the profane world, the good and the bad, the holy, etc. This dualistic thinking is present in many churches, and it is very deep-rooted there. Because of that, biblical fundamentalism, similar dogmas or preconceived doctrines are deep-rooted in the common people of the churches. We need to take into account that situation if we are going to do theology, not for theologians, but for the people, since theology in the best instances comes from the people. It's not something that theologians should do to impose it, or merely teach people; but it is a common task in the church. Everybody is a theologian in a way.

However, the churches as institutional structures have created walls between the theologians, the church or the believers and the rest of the people who are not in the church. That is one problem which must be solved not only by theologians but by the church if both are to have credibility among the people. There are also those who claim that the church, theology, and the Bible are not political. But politicism is a way of being rightist in the church in this society. One can find in the Cuban churches also many old values which are not good for our Cuban society. For instance, individualistic ethics, supported by the church hierarchy, is sometimes and in some places alive also. These are, though, features which do not characterize Cuban theology but the problems which Cuban theology must deal with. Cuban theology is progressive, a theology of liberation, very well informed about what is happening not only in Cuba but in our Caribbean and Latin American context and the rest of



the whole world. I wish to make this clear so you don't think I am characterizing Cuban theology, for I am characterizing what is bad in the churches in the Cuban context.

Furthermore, misunderstanding of the Bible is another problem for doing theology in Cuba. For instance, many times the Bible content is viewed as a legalistic document in the churches. Thus there is a tendency to emphasize what is written in the Bible word by word without taking into consideration the historical or social contexts of the Bible and our own present context.

If, on the contrary, we affirm the Bible as a document produced at the hand of the people, then it must come alive in the way that it becomes God's word for people. Let me give an example of that. For instance, you can take the parable of the poor man and the rich man. The rich man had a very splendid life in this world, and the poor man came to him to get something to feed himself. He was very poor here, and the other man was very rich. Both of them died. The rich man went to hell, and the poor man to heaven. You know the dialogue between the two persons.

Legalism and fundamentalism claim that this is a past historical event. However, this creates a problem, for it was not an historical fact. It is a symbol, i.e., narrative. To insist that this is the literal history of two men, the rich one and the poor one, rather than a symbolic account is to support the belief that poor people will be saved only after death. But this is not the word of God for people in that way. Moreover, if when you read in the Bible "there was a rich man and there was another—a poor man," you can also understand this in the sense that there are rich nations and there are exploited nations, not poor, but exploited, since it is not a matter of merely bringing the past into the present but of making present to the people the interpretation Jesus made of what it means to be rich and to be poor. In that way the Bible becomes again a symbol for the people, becomes alive again, this word of God comes back for people.

Another thing we must deal with is the Student Christian Movement and the Study Center of the Ecumenical Council of Cuba. Since Sergio Arce, the director of the Study Center, has a program called "The Bible and Us Today," it, as far as I know, has been the only effort in Cuba to make the Bible the Word of God for people. This was a new way, as Israel Batista has said, the correct way to read the Bible for the people. So we must retrieve the Bible's value for theology, also.

Another problem we must deal with is Afro-Cuban religion here in Cuba. For instance, here in our seminary when we speak about comparative religion we have been thinking about how we should deal in a course like that with Islam or Buddhism or something like that, but three or four blocks from here we have the Temple of Ife which is a cultural center of Afro-Cuban religion. Nevertheless, we do not have a course about dialogue with Afro-Cuban religions in our seminary.



Also, we must deal with the different official attitudes of the churches which are very jealous about the curriculum of the seminary. They search sometimes to discover what we are going to include in our curriculum, because they do not want it changed in a manner which is not good for the kind of pastors they want to have in the churches. On the other hand, we must recognize that the pastor is not merely for the institutional church, but for the people. Thus we must change the curriculum and a lot of things in theological education in order to keep before us that which prepares our pastors and theologians not solely for the church as an institution but for the people. We know that the Cuban people need pastors and priests; therefore, we must not be afraid in what we say and do that we are training pastors, not solely for the churches, but for the people. This has involved a controversy, an historical controversy not well understood, because it is underground. Yet it is happening.

I think that the richness of Cuban theology, apart from its inception in the Cuban society in the main socio-political and economical issues of our society, is also that our theology is an ecumenical one. That is not an issue, but that is a success in Cuban theology. For instance, the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba approved the first confession of faith made by the church in a socialist country. This confession is distinctive in that it is not merely a denominational one. It includes what many Christians in the Cuban ecumenical community had discussed for some time. The merit of the Presbyterians is that they had the courage to sign it.

These, then, are some of the issues of major concern which we are, now or hope to be, addressing in our Cuban theological education. I share them with you now for our mutual discussion.