

BEVERLY WILDUNG HARRISON\*

## An Overview of Basic Issues in Theological Education in the United States of North America Today

### *Introduction*

Those of us who come from the United States of North America to Matanzas for the *encuentro* on theological education are mindful of the generosity expressed by our Cuban brothers and sisters in welcoming us and taking precious time and energy to join us in conversations about what it means to set our work in a global and cross cultural context. The Christian community in Cuba has lived, since the Revolution, in relative isolation from the United States of North America (USNA) Christian communities — an isolation imposed by our government. Theological educators in Cuba are overextended, seeking to serve their churches and their people in myriad ways, with few resources. That so many are willing to meet with us to engage our theme bespeaks the reality of ongoing Cuban openness to us, an openness especially remarkable, given our nation's refusal to respect the integrity of Cuba's post-revolutionary struggles and accomplishments.

The sort of questions focusing our conversations together at Matanzas are questions well asked in a Cuban setting precisely because USNA policy toward Cuba seeks to prevent Cubans from expressing solidarity with peoples who, like themselves, take the struggle of the poor and disempowered for a better life as the foundational theological issue. "What does it mean to do theological education in a way genuinely expressive of global solidarity?" "How do we, in the context of our work, avoid isolation and provinciality and at the same time avoid specious universalism that further spreads the spiritual infection of cultural imperialism?" Our setting in Matanzas serves as a continuous reminder that human solidarity and cross-cultural dialogue cannot be realized in the absence of the struggle for political and economic justice, and that our own nation is a

---

\* Dr. Harrison is the Carolyn Williams Beaird Professor of Christian Ethics, Union Theological Seminary, New York.

major barrier to such solidarity.

An interpretation of the current situation of theological education in North America simply is not possible to do. Looked at from the standpoint of post-capitalist Cuba, theological education in the United States indeed appears to be, in a capitalist vernacular, very "big business." At the outset, it is necessary to observe that the over 250 accredited theological schools in the United States represent resources, human and financial, all but inconceivable to those who live in Cuba. Nor can an overview of so diverse a panoply of institutions be offered. For our purposes, it is wiser to focus upon the sorts of theological institutions that we North Americans at the *encuentro* represent. We come from two university-based theological faculties, an independent university-related theological faculty, an independent university-related theological school, a seminary that is the largest black theological consortium in the United States, and seven other denominational schools.<sup>1</sup> Within the bewildering array of US theological education facilities, the schools we represent would surely be counted amongst the overall minority of institutions that are clearly identified with "liberal" or "progressive" theological education in the United States. (Here I mean "liberal" in the broad sense of faculties that accept historical-critical methods of scholarship, and that define theological study as, in principle, an open process of inquiry in which norms of scriptural inerrancy or conformity to theological doctrine are not to be imposed from the outside.) Ironically, many of the seminaries and theological schools from which the USNA participants come have had an historically antagonistic relationship to some of the more conservative seminaries in our nation that sent missionaries to Cuba prior to the revolution! Each of our faculties thinks of itself as exemplifying critical scholarship, openness to the ecumenical movement, and openness to cross-cultural dialogue. Some have recently moved to reshape curriculum in view of a greater need for such dialogue, given the pluralistic character of our world.

All US participants in the Matanzas *encuentro* identify our own work broadly with modes of "liberation theology." We are seeking, with others, an authentic liberation theology for the USNA. It would be an error to imagine, however, that our unanimity on this point implies that "liberation theology" has won a major beachhead within the traditionally liberal sectors of US theological education. To the contrary, "liberation theology" is largely perceived, in such US seminaries either as a

---

<sup>1</sup> Respectively, Harvard and Yale, Union Theological Seminary in New York, the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Andover Newton Theological School, Chicago Lutheran Theological School, Chicago Theological Seminary, Episcopal Divinity School, Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, San Francisco Seminary, and the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities.

passing "fad" or one contemporary "school" of Christian theology amongst many, that has its base in minority racial-ethnic communities in the US and is relevant chiefly to those "minority communities."<sup>2</sup> Most of us at Matanzas, then, represent minority views within our theological faculties, the more so because nine of the twelve of us are self-identified "feminist theologians," speaking out of and in accountability to that majority of the species and of the churches—women—who are still very much in a minority on theological faculties and in church leadership.

In spite of appearances to the contrary at Matanzas, feminist theologians are, in fact, quite "rare birds" on theological faculties in the US. As the number of women on theological faculties increases, some seminaries make it a point to avoid hiring "feminists," preferring instead women who will not raise, in any substantive or methodological way, questions about the male monopoly in theological definition and discourse. We (feminist theologians) aim to forge a hermeneutic of justice adequate to the complex socio-cultural reality of people, especially women, in our rich and powerful nation. The marginalization we sometimes experience within our own faculties takes the form of perceived threats to "scholarly excellence." Not infrequently, we are denied the degree of institutional support that others receive. Why, in the most "progressive" sectors of US theological education, is this the case?

*The Ideological Climate of Theological Education in the USNA in Relation to Dominant Trends in the Wider Society*

As our well-informed hosts are aware, the decade of the 1980s has brought bitter ideological struggle to Christian churches in the USNA. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, as did his re-election in 1984, solidified powerful trends at work in the United States, trends that had been taking shape for several decades. As is well-known, the early portion of the decade of the 1960s had been a period of great ferment for social change. The Civil Rights movement, led by a broad-based coalition of Afro-Americans, had resulted in limited but nevertheless important efforts to redress some of the structural evils of racism so complacently cultivated by elites and by local, state and national government since the end of the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> However, the political leaders who began, ever so slowly, to respond affirmatively to calls for racial justice and to a modest social agenda aimed at mitigating deplorable poverty, also

---

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, in the US, the term "minority" is used for persons whose place of origin is not Central or Northern European. This is confusing to non-US peoples aware that, in this world, those whose nation of origin is Europe are themselves the tiniest minority of racial ethnic peoples.

<sup>3</sup> David Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1981).

redirected US foreign policy toward a global definition of the proper US "sphere of interest." Anti-Communism, already established as *the* "correct" ideological posture, now became the overriding single presupposition of all US foreign policy. United States military intervention in Southeast Asia marked the triumph of a mind-set of rational "world-tending" inimical to the historical ideology of isolationism so strong in our national past. The high costs of the Vietnam War, in lives and money, brought powerful and well-organized opposition at home. While anti-war forces were successful in the short-term, the long-term result was to teach pro-militarist factions in the United States more clever ways to offset internal opposition. US imperium ideology and ideological control at home became ever stronger and more subtle. By the 1970s, militarization of US society accelerated, carried out under newer, subtler Pentagon techniques of "low-visibility warfare." Uncontrolled defense spending wreaked havoc with the US domestic economy. Inflation, unemployment, and the collateral rolling back of the domestic "social justice" agenda became the order of the day, accompanied by a successful ideological stratagem that refocused all public policy debate between the historical right and center of the US political spectrum. Pro-capitalist ideology had long functioned in the United States as the litmus test of political "responsibility," but now memory of genuinely progressive radical political movements was all but expunged from the collective social memory.

Much is made of "the failure of the left" in US political history, but until the post-World War II period, genuine progressives had had much impact, and some success, in keeping social justice—especially for working people and the poor—on the national agenda in spite of red-baiting. By the advent of the Nixon presidency, the traditional "center" of the United States political spectrum had become identified as the left, and the conservative forces, seeking US global imperium and inveighing against any criticism that challenged capitalist economic hegemony, began to portray themselves as the "center" or "mainstream" of US political life. The media was manipulated to sustain this "image politics." During this same period, it became fashionable to caricature the 1960s as a period of "mindless activism" which accomplished little or worse, "proved" that you cannot solve problems of justice through politics. Particularly in educational institutions in the United States, where white male academics had been enraged by radicals' insistence that academic institutions and intellectuals should serve the well-being of the wider society and especially the victims of injustice, the backlash was intense. The communitarian politics of the 1960s were portrayed as chaotic, ill-advised democracy run wild, resulting in a politicization of matters that ought *not* to be political. Slowly but surely, the ethos of the quietistic 1950s was re-established.

Reagan's "counter-revolution" should be perceived as a further solidification of these trends, and the successful mobilization of forces designed to prevent future successful opposition to government and corporation policy at home or abroad. From a theological standpoint, the most distinctive feature of Reagan's program of "genteel" political repression and his securing of the National Security State, was his (and his right-wing followers') unprecedented success in forging an active coalition with right-wing institutional religion, previously "a-political" in its theological vision. Sectors of old Protestant Fundamentalism, joined with the new media-preachers, have moved to political activism in search of "a Christian America." Denominations with roots in pietism and evangelicalism have also been heavily mobilized to join the Crusade of the "righteous empire." In 1978 the political right had already moved toward a total mobilization of conservative Christian church leadership in securing Reagan's proposed agenda.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the plans used for Right-Wing mobilization were patterned on those developed by religious anti-war forces during the Vietnam War. Furthermore, every major "liberal" (i.e., accepting of biblical criticism) Christian denomination in the United States also experienced the active mobilization of right-wing theological groups from within. These groups—Good News or Biblical Concerned Groups<sup>5</sup>—have sought to mute the voices of other Christians critical of US domestic and foreign policy. They have actively sought to relegate social justice agendas in the churches to the status of "benign neglect"<sup>6</sup> while stifling any adequate agenda for justice for women and mobilizing homophobia against gay men and lesbians.

The volatile issue of legal abortion was also used to mobilize resistance to justice for women<sup>7</sup> and, more and more, spokesmen for the Right and the media portray women who are feminists as "anti-family," "uppity" and contemptuous of traditional "feminine" values. A rising climate of violence against Afro-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, against gay men and lesbians, and against all women, now prevails. "Rambo America" is all but taken for granted and voices of dissent portrayed as the "real danger." Here, as elsewhere, the rallying cry of the secular, political and religious New Right has been "strengthening the family" (read: male-dominated, patriarchal family) and "traditional values" (read: those that

---

<sup>4</sup> A further surprising source of documentation for this merging of political right structure with fundamentalist religion is an informative essay by Johnny Greene, "The Astonishing Wrongs of the New Moral Right," *Playboy*, January 1981, 117-118, 248-260.

<sup>5</sup> "Good News" is a group within the United Methodist Church, and "Biblical Concerned Groups" are within several denominations, including the Presbyterian Church.

<sup>6</sup> "Benign neglect" is a term coined during the Nixon era as the appropriate policy in response to demands of Afro-Americans and others for racial justice.

<sup>7</sup> See Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Our Right to Choose: Toward a New Ethic of Abortion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

support a-political spirituality). More recently, former theological liberals have become explicit in providing an active theological legitimation of capitalism as a proper article of twentieth century Christian faith.<sup>8</sup> Conservative theological think-tanks such as the Institute for Religion and Democracy have been founded to monitor and discredit theological dissent. So "self-evident" has the *moral and religious* superiority of capitalism become to most theological liberals that critical questions regarding capitalism are treated as *prima facie* evidence of inadequate theological education in most sectors of US theological education.<sup>9</sup> It is in this broader social climate that the "old liberal" theological schools live out their vocation. The ambivalence they express toward liberation theologies is part and parcel of their entrapment in these wider dynamics.

### *Dynamics in the Seminaries*

While generalization is precarious, most of us from the United States at the *encuentro* observe remarkably similar trends at work in the "liberal" sectors of US theological education where we live out our lives. There is, in liberal theology and education, a fear of the widespread social conflict within US society. Inability to work through conflict, and to address the issues that generate them directly, appears to be a most pervasive liberal sociopathology in the United States. As a result, genuine innovation in approach or even address to basic questions of social justice is perceived as dangerous boat-rocking, as divisive, or as a matter of "reducing religion to politics." At a time when new departures in theological education that link our work closer to congregations and parishes is called for, the preoccupations of many in the seminaries is ever more narrowly focused on the proper "professionalization" of individual clergy and on "spiritual" formation privatistically understood. Resources for serious address to white privilege and racism go undeveloped, and class and gender dynamics now transforming the lives of nearly everyone in USNA society pass unnoticed. The central and growing preoccupation of many in the seminaries is for the "recovery" of a deeply individualized "piety" and a "spiritual discipline" that effectively renders the growing suffering of persons and communities invisible.

The desire to avoid the ideological conflict widespread in the wider society is so pervasive in many seminaries that belligerence is directed at any proposal aiming to focus our work toward solidarity with marginated

---

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism: Moral Clarity in a New Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981). Also Richard Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Beverly Wildung Harrison, "The Role of Social Theory in Religious Social Ethics: Reconsidering the Case for Marxian Political Economy," in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 54-80.

and suffering people. Even within theological schools that continue to boast of their critical biblical scholarship and social gospel heritage, the trend is to a stance of distanced neutrality—a pox on the houses of right and left-wing Christians as “extremists” who obscure some better “via media” that is truly Christian. The characteristic theological emphasis here is on reconciliation—even before the profoundly unjust power realities that make appeals to reconciliation so dubious are acknowledged.

In the seminaries from which we come, the “theological” figures so much celebrated in an earlier theological generation—Barth, Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr, Tillich—are invariably used against those of us who press for a theological praxis that is not neutral with respect to justice. A “quasi-neo-orthodoxy” prevails in which any talk about God and Christ is held always to be “profound” because it is traditional; while efforts at “social analysis” are viewed as dangerous and even heretical, not the business of “serious theology.” In the prevailing atmosphere the critical questions that Afro-American, Hispanic, and Asian-Americans are asking about Euro-centered theology, are perceived as a nuisance, and the theological “giants” are used—especially against feminists, of whatever color, to prove that we are the threat to “excellent theology.”

In such an ethos, even hard-won commitment to critical-historical approaches to scripture are usually construed as requiring political neutrality. The “spirit” of prevailing liberalism has now become a subtle form of scientific positivism in which questions which arise from the lived-world experience of struggling people are seen as “subjectivistic,” not fit for serious “scientific” theological address. Accompanying these reactions is a strong trend to reassert traditional faculty prerogatives over against students, and a hardening of disciplinary lines at a time when all adequate theological work needs to be interdisciplinary and cross cultural.

As the basic stagflation of the non-military sectors of the United States’ economy deepens, and public funding for human services is rolled back, financial pressures threaten all educational and ecclesiastical institutions that do not dance to the beat of the dominant drummer. To assure economic survival, theological schools cater more and more to the pressures from their parent ecclesiastical bodies, demanding even greater obeisance to prevailing norms of “successful ministry.” A corporate-managerial-bureaucratic style of organizing seminary life has permeated many theological schools, often driving out more informal or pastoral modes of community organization.

Where churches have launched witch-hunts against political dissent or against alternative sexual life styles, many seminaries have followed suit, purging gay men and lesbians, or at least demanding no public address to the questions of human sexuality urgent in US society. More and

more, ecumenism means listening to, and refusing to upset, the sensibilities of conservative Christians—whether the Pope, or the prelates of the Orthodox churches, or the conservative coalitions within the Protestant churches. The victims of this violation of genuine *oikumene* are invariably women and men of marginated cultures or classes.

Even the very critical concern that brought us all to Matanzas—the urgency of making theological education genuinely cross-cultural and global in focus—is often used in the United States to *avoid* a justice agenda. The theological schools in the US that have claimed the most for their cross-cultural efforts are often precisely those faculties whose membership least reflects inter-cultural reality. The highest value in the pantheon of liberal values is “pluralism,” an appeal that always masks a denial of the realities of power currently in place. What many of us have learned in the struggles within liberal Christianity, is that the virtue of pluralism is always invoked to avoid the claims of justice and participation for marginated peoples. It has become clear to us that when white male elites image cross-cultural reality, they all but invariably envision polite conversation between select groups of male scholars involving those from other cultures most like themselves, elites in their respective societies. The profoundly inter-cultural reality of existing US life is ignored, as is the already present cross-cultural reality of liberal seminaries. Women’s cultural reality within every community also remains invisible to these academics. That every cultural configuration differs markedly across lines of gender, class, race and caste is denied. Academic cross-cultural dialogue is, by definition, almost a nostalgic indulgence in “high culture,” a conversation about religion that does not even begin to touch the profound realities of cultural clash and conflict rending our existing world.

### *Signs of Hope in the Midst of Ideological Captivity*

In light of all of this, it should be clear that the dynamics and trends in theological education in the United States are not genuinely conducive to the authentic concerns that animate our conversations at Matanzas. While many in the (formerly) liberal mainstream of theological education flow with these dominant currents, however, there are a not inconsiderable number of teachers and an even larger number of students in the places where we live and work who have moved beyond liberal neutralism to a more fundamentally radical grasp of the meaning of our theological task. These groups represent a counter-trend that is a serious sign of hope, reminding us that a genuine liberation theology process in the USNA is not only our deepest need but an emergent reality. I will close by observing a few of the resources emerging that keep many of us empowered as we find ways to resist the dominant trends.

Many of us have learned not only that conflict is the intrinsic reality of our society, but we now view our situation as margined and as oppressed people see it. We recognize that our ideological captivity requires ongoing collective struggle and resistance. We have ceased to imagine that the interstructured oppressions from which growing millions of us suffer can be corrected without a deeper, broader coalition than liberal party politics affords. The hold of individualism upon us has been broken, and we now understand solidarity with each other and with margined people to be necessary not only for our own survival, but for our flourishing. "Divide and conquer" tactics that were used, for example, to divide Black men and white feminists in theological education only a few years ago no longer work so well. More and more of us are beginning to recognize that an intricate interstructuring of racism, classism, male supremacy and compulsory heterosexuality sustains the status quo of global monopoly capitalism in the United States and will continue to do so, unless all of us target all these oppressions and work actively against them. Liberal one-issue politics now appears to us, in Audre Lorde's felicitous phrase, to be a misguided attempt to "use the Master's tools to bring down the Master's house."<sup>10</sup> As she reminds us, the Master's House does not fall that way.

Those of us who have embraced an active strategy of resistance to oppression and are learning new forms of coalition-building to sustain resistance do not, of course, possess the wealth and power that our opponents have at their command, but we do have an abundance of resources, human and intellectual, to sustain us. We also have the incredible authentic diversity and pluralism of USNA culture, including the pluralism of Christian communities, to draw upon as we work to make cross-cultural experience normative for theological education. Many of us who have come here have worked to make the entry point of all theological education the study of our lives in a community of authentic diversity.<sup>11</sup> We can do this because US society is suffused with communities and groups of people that are engaged in resistance to the pervasive dehumanization going on in our nation. More and more of us are finding ways to interface the life of Christian communities, clergy and laity alike, with these efforts. We are as yet a long way from forging the national political alliances needed to generate serious political alternatives in the US. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition is a beginning, but much remains to be done regionally and locally before a serious challenge can be sus-

---

<sup>10</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider*, ed. Audre Lorde (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984), 110-113.

<sup>11</sup> The Mud Flower Collective, *God's Fierce Whimsy: Christian Feminism and Theological Education* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1985).

tained at the national level.

Given the sophisticated ideological manipulation exercised by our rulers, we do well to consider ourselves in the earliest stages of political conscientization. Liberation theology is contributing to that conscientization. More and more people, and grass roots organizations, are coming to awareness that we are in the grip of irresponsible power that threatens not only our survival, but all the positive gains of historic struggle for justice in our nation's history. More and more of us still related to Christian tradition look to the creative elements in the Black and Hispanic churches, and to what we feminists call "Woman-Church"—the authentic, empowered community of Christian women who no longer ask anyone's "permission" to define the appropriate theological agenda—for the theological annunciation we require.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, liberation theology is now taken seriously by many from the secular political left who had not before believed that Christianity could contribute anything significant to the struggle for justice.<sup>13</sup> Here, too, fragile but important coalitions are being forged for the first time in over forty years.

The major ideological barrier to a genuinely global vision of justice in the United States still remains the massive mystification of capitalism as a system of political and economic control. We in the USNA have been subtly but systematically deprived of a critical analytic framework, not only for understanding global economic dependency,<sup>14</sup> but for grasping the rigid class-bound character of life in our own political-economic system. The denial that class operates as a structural determinate of everyone's life in the US runs deep. No theological method of conscientization can succeed for us that does not enable our people to name concretely the loss of control over our lives that is occurring in broad sectors of US society, and to link our own growing social and economic suffering to the same global monopoly capitalist system that also functions to increase the sufferings of Latin American peasants. These concrete connections must be understood.

---

<sup>12</sup> On the meaning of *annunciation* see Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> See for example, William K. Tabb, ed, *Churches in Struggle* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Beverly W. Harrison, "The Role of Social Theory in Religious Social Ethics: Reconsidering the Case for Marxian Political Economy," in Robb, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 54-80.