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## How do We Educate and For What? Fundamental Methods and Objectives in Theological Education in Cuba

In the first place I want to clarify the purpose of this paper. It is my desire to point out those realities that give shape to the theological work in our country, as well as the fundamental necessities of the Christian presence in our society in order to be signs of the Kingdom. We start from a fundamental fact: to teach theology means, for us, to work on a necessary ideological front at the level inside our churches so that they can carry out their evangelistic work in the present society. This definition of theological work requires us to clarify two or three things:

1. *Theology is done for the edification and upbuilding of the church.* The preparation of the believer who participates in the Christian community life and who is a part of the secular society is our principal objective. Our task is to offer the necessary theoretical formation for the capacitation of the Christian who lives in our society as a permanent sign of the Kingdom.
2. This task is eminently one of clearing any roadblocks. It breaks traditional patterns that hinder the commitment of the believer for social transformation. In this sense, it has to contribute the so-called liberating elements of the Gospel. Christians, who undoubtedly have a significant importance, are called to play an important role in the struggle of our people for their complete realization; however, the traditional education of the church has consecrated injustices and privileges of the past, as a legitimizing instrument of the "establishment." For this reason the need to *unblock* is a priority theological work.
3. The principal reason for the being of the church is its evangelizing task, which consists not in "filling pews each Sunday" but confronting men and women with the liberating message of Jesus and making them participants of the salvific, liberating, and justice-bringing work in history. To evangelize is to convert the person into someone who struggles for the right to life in the here and now. The conversion of the heart and the transformation of the structures are dimensions that complement each other, in tension, and come to be simultaneous tasks in one and the same historical vocation.

The insistence on the conversion of people (evangelize) cannot make

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faith a mere matter of a personal relationship with God without interference in the political and social action of the human being. From the perspective of the gift of God, both the conversion of the human heart and the transformation of social structures are liberating grace.

## PART I.

*Let us speak now about the realities experienced by those who are objects of our theological discourse: the Cuban Christian believers.* Let us mention the most important realities, those that have influenced in an outstanding way the present Cuban Christian situation and scene.

a. *The educational level of our Cuban people has changed in an extraordinary way in these years of building a new society.* There is a motto that we have used always with care because of the truth it supposes and the practice it counsels: "the Revolution does not tell you to believe, it tells you to read." We are always reminded of that which we learned as little children in the Cuban Presbyterian Church that the Apostle Paul said: "Examine everything, keep that which is good." That it is the duty of our church to found a school alongside each local church. The literacy campaign, the follow-up with the objective of the sixth grade, the massive opportunity for increased study to levels of pre-university or middle technical studies and the possibilities for those who want to study to do so in the universities or higher institutes, have characterized our Cuban people now as one that likes rigorous research, serious educational capacitation, and the habit of reading. This reality has challenged our levels of theological production.

b. The consciousness of the possibilities to be fully realized in the framework of the historical situation in which we are living constitutes another of the achievements reached by our Cuban people. Formerly, the Cuban men and women lived in their dreams; today, they have learned to live by facing and dominating their realities.

I was a pastor for many years in a church whose building was in a city, though it had five preaching points in the neighborhoods on the outskirts. In one of them, in the poorest area, the people literally lived on the ideal of winning something as a product of illegal gambling or the lottery held every Saturday afternoon. "If I would only win the lottery, I could have so many things" was the philosophy of those people. Today in that same neighborhood the people who live there know that they will have only that which, through their work, they are capable of producing.

*The historical reality has taken on a new and determining meaning for our people.* We live from one day to the next, but only by living in the present will we be able to achieve a good harvest in the future. This sense of realization in true history which is lived daily is another of the

determining factors that challenge our theological teaching here and now.

c. One of the achievements in this social process that we have in Cuba, without a doubt, is *the extraordinary value placed on work as an instrument of creativity, happiness, and security*. A people who had considered work as a great disgrace, as a curse of God on humankind, discovers all of a sudden its effectiveness in the production of a new life of opportunities and achievements. The responsibility to produce goods for others to consume has forced Christian believers of our local congregations to think seriously about the role of the human being as a steward (*economista*) of the God-given riches.

d. *Finally we have learned to overcome some of the historical contradictions that have characterized our ecclesiology*. On the one hand we have experienced the social, political and religious conservatism of the institutional church that often has served to legitimize the most repressive governments in our country; but on the other hand we have experienced the ways of life as a church that with dignity proclaims its hope in the future without neglecting incarnation in the present. We today are more than ever conscious of the fact that in spite of all this, it is time to be the church. We understand that what traditionally we called Christian, behaved ethically like idolatry. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ was represented by the image of a determined social, economical and political structure. The true God that was revealed to us as a demand for justice was substituted by images of pleasure, consumerism, money, vanity, pride, religiosity. We have gone from being a church in which one learned a lot about how to live in the eternity to being a community of faith in which we try to live the abundant life while the culminating moment of the final manifestation of the Lordship of Christ arrives. To elaborate a Christian vision of the everyday world and everyday things, in answer to social, political, economical and cultural questions that surround us, also challenges our theological task of today.

It is not my intention to exhaust the challenges that the Cuban space puts before the theological task, but rather I have wanted to present those challenges that most sharply affect our work. As you have heard, the objective of our theological teaching is conformed by the reality of three fundamental needs of our base Christian Communities:

*The theoretical definition* consistent with the educational capacity of the average Cuban.

*The practical preparation* that permits us to take our daily existence seriously and to realize ourselves effectively in the arena of the everyday world, of the contextual, of the historical, in order to be stewards of the just distribution of the common good God offers. *The rediscovery of the ecclesiology* that permits us to live as part of God's people, pointing out

the possibilities and the hopes of the Kingdom.

*Now let's talk about methods.* I must confess that the person talking to you has no experience as a professor of theology: scarcely one semester of teaching religion to the first-year students in this Seminary. I am just getting started in this field. Nevertheless, I have been a pastor in different communities for 34 years and I have been very much involved in ecumenical organizations for many years on this continent. What I can contribute does not come from experience in a professorship, or from an academic classroom, but from my daily practice in contact with and living with the grassroots people in the Christian communities in Cuba and in Latin America.

In the first place one has to confess that the majority of theological teaching offered in the seminaries of our country follows the traditional way of dealing with the great themes of the faith. I believe I do not exaggerate if I say that in this sense we suffer an enormous backwardness. The lack of books that could put us up-to-date in our theological studies, the constant marginization of the sphere of the real and of the everyday, and other reasons contribute to maintaining this posture. On the other hand, the Cuban situation is truly unique and we do not have established patterns for action. That permits us to be in a posture of constant search, of always being open to the possibilities of putting into practice our own methods in the face of the challenge of society. From this perspective let us propose some solutions, some already being practiced, the majority of times hoped for as an ideal.

We have said that the massive opening up of possibilities for education, science, and technology has created in our Cuban people a true concern for using all their capacities in order to obtain a place in life from which they feel realized and they feel useful in the production of goods for collective consumption. Even more, they have learned to share with others that live far away from our country. There has appeared on the scene what we can properly call proletariat internationalism. *A faith that can give the impression of not being about solving the problems of the present moment, of the real world in which we live, cannot make any contribution to this new man, new woman, that our society is creating.* For this reason our theological teaching has to be given in the context of an integral theologian. It should serve to capacitate the theological student in order to be really a man or woman immersed in the problems and situations of their time. *We have to awaken in them interest and commitment for the true conditions in which they have to act, for understanding their situation and not renouncing their challenges,* to start not from a series of supposed *a priori* truths from which to judge reality, but rather to start from the reality itself in order from there to understand, verify, make become true, the Word of God.

It would lack meaning, for example, to teach the great Christological or trinitarian debates, the decisions of the first ecumenical council in this regard, the formulation commonly called the Nicene Creed, as something useful to faith, but without meaning in the contemporary reality. Rather, from the experience of that which blockades us today and makes us live in marginality, from the reality of our Manichaenism, our world divided into spiritual and material, from our perspective of the action of God in history, to study how Arianism postulated this duality, this a-historicalness of faith, this dangerous game of spirituals goods and material evils, and how a committed theologian like Athanasius stimulated the church to declare the reality of a God made human, forces us to respond to him with effectiveness and commitment to justice.

The combination of manual work with intellectual production should be another of the methods to be practiced in theological teaching. To achieve a full integration in society in order to share in the benefits of creative work should be a formative method in the preparation of our students. That would eliminate many useless things, among which we would mention what we have called the phenomenon of the inflation of the word. The Christian believers who are part of our congregations suffer an authentic bombardment of words that makes them feel what someone has called the "nausea of the word," or the "imperialism of the words devitalized because of the excess." The inflation of the word not only has desensitized the listeners, but also has made them untrusting. Our contemporaries, some people say, no longer believe in words, they want deeds. They take as an evaluative criterion of things, not what is true, but what is useful; not an abstract principle, but its concrete effectiveness.

This reality must be very much present in the methodology of theological teaching. For example, let's take the theme very interesting and necessary for our congregations such as the so-called *spirituality as a sign of true Christian life*. I am one of those who believes that our theological education has to be interested in the formation of the believer for whom the religious life is something really marginal. It should serve for these people as an unblocking instrument par excellence. But we are very much interested in those believers, or those who will be "added to the church" who reject what is simply moralistic, the really abstract and the unreal of the religious life as it is presented by the great majority of Christians. To these, *theological education must contribute the demands of an effective spirituality*. That is, it must search for *the essential* and detest getting lost *in the periphery*.

This theme of the essential (the faith as something to motivate the very center of life) and the peripheral has been dealt with by theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For Cubans this theme has an extraordinary importance. We are tired of the fragmentary character with which

we have been offered traditionally the aspects of the Christian faith: liturgy, the Scriptures, the church, dogma, morality. Men and women today look for a center around which they can gather, convinced that there is no spirituality without unity. In this yearning, there is latent the desire, sometimes not entirely conscious, for greater contact with the very sources of spirituality, with the Bible, liturgy. In this sense we have to orient our theological teaching toward the profound message of the Bible, which supposes the abandonment of traditional "spiritualist" hermeneutics, which tries to evade the political content of the Bible message, its explosiveness, the dynamics of that message, to substitute in its place the "running away toward sublime space." For this reason in an environment like ours it becomes very important to study and practice communication capable of making those explosive devices of the Gospel, that energizing capacity of the Christian message, reach the common believer. Serious analysis of the so-called means of communication, in order to achieve their complete control, becomes absolutely necessary in our theological education. Communication is, as you know, an adventure, a risk. The difficulty is present in the encounter between persons, because it is necessary to tear down, most of the time, great barriers. Now if this is so among us, it is true on a greater scale when it is the encounter between the person and God.

The question is: how to provoke the conversion, that is, the reconstruction of the human being around a new center in the plane of possibilities, ambitions, and secular achievements of today in Cuba? Is our preaching, or communication, adequate to the demands of our society? What does it mean to transform the life of men and women in Cuba today? I believe that the problems of an adequate and effective communication should be kept in mind in our theological methodology. Pastoral practice is required of us and is something in which I believe we have not been successful. *If scholarliness is not subordinated to pastoral practice, we will not be effective in communicating the demands of our faith.* This brings us to another of the necessary aspects to be kept in mind in our methodology as teachers in theological education. *We must motivate the concern for and the discovery of new forms of being the church of Christ in Cuba.* Take seriously the ecclesiological problem as part of the theological discipline. Among us some are speaking of the traditional model of the church which tries to prepare us to live in the beyond and to resign ourselves in the midst of the inevitable sufferings and troubles here and now. They also speak of a model of church that becomes an historical corporation that tries to survive and avoid total state control: strong in the face of the secular powers and in the face of internal divisions. They also speak of a model of church capable of creating an autonomous social space in the Cuban reality. We live the anguish of desiring a model of a dynamic and relevant church with a role in our society, yet being

held back by the past model. Some say that perhaps there is no longer any space to be the church in Cuba today.

All these reasons force us to theologize about an alternative models of a church in our society, about the forms of transition, about the strategies and tactics of change. On the one hand, the social sciences will tell us much about the formulation of categories for the analysis of the religious phenomenon; but we have to allow ourselves also to feel the impact of the community and the social experience of the ordinary member of our base church communities, our local congregations.

The ideal of the evangelizing community, involved and committed in our society, congregated around the Word, challenged by the social reality, hopeful because of the evident signs of the action of God in history, must produce the "system of signs" that will proclaim the reality of the Kingdom.

I have tried to present ideas to stimulate reflection. I finish with the solidness of a basic principle of our task of theological education that Cubans cannot forget: in spite of our small size, the society and the church of the future are here at stake.