

Is Theological Education Captive, Critic or Enhancer of the Respective Cultures in which It Is Rooted?

Introduction

a) I am very grateful for the opportunity of having to study this subject. As a matter of fact, when I was getting ready to write this paper, I realized how little I knew about the general subject of culture, and I have to thank you for the opportunity you are giving me to get acquainted with the literature on this matter, especially what UNESCO has published. Perhaps, this is a sign of how little Protestantism and our churches have been concerned with the question of culture!

b) I am also very thankful for the quality of the group which has been convened by Alice Hageman and Jane Cary Peck. I think this dialogue is an important link in the ongoing dialogue between U.S. and Cuban churches. We have a lot to discuss and learn together.

Let me present some definitions of culture, definitions which will form my starting point.

Culture is the total sum of the existential and concrete characteristics of entire peoples. It includes ways of life and production, value systems, opinions and beliefs. . . . The dynamic aspect of this definition is its recognition of cultural specificities.¹

Cultural values are the symbolic relations which unite and support a determined society or group, maintain and enlarge the sense of belonging of their members, perpetuate the richness of their social and spiritual inheritance which secure a feeling of plenitude and life, giving sense to personal life.²

Culture is the production of phenomena which contribute to understanding, reproducing, or transforming the social system through the representations or symbolic re-

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¹ World Conference on Culture, UNESCO, Venice, 1970.

² Jean Viet, ed., *International Thesaurus of Cultural Development* (Paris: UNESCO, 1980).

elaboration of material structures; that is, all the practices and institutions dedicated to the administration, renewal and restructuration of sense.³

The Marxist analysis of culture.

I agree with Marxism when it postulates a close relation between culture and ideology. Culture is always the culture of the dominating class. In this sense we speak of "hegemonic culture" which could be aggressive or conducting, and in opposition to it we have "subordinate cultures" which could be residual or emergent. In this sense there is a great consciousness now among the Latin American scholars about the cultural genocide of the Spanish and Portuguese in our America, and therefore a rediscovery of the cultural values of the pre-Columbian cultures. Armando Hart, Minister of Culture in Cuba, has said:

In our America the emergence, criss-crossing and development of cultures have been accompanied by intense social, economic and political struggles. Our cultures have been in a complex and dialectical way the expression of these struggles. Sometimes we have stressed our condition of dependent peoples, in others we have fought against the cultural deformation to which our exploiters have wanted to subdue us.⁴

For us it is therefore very important what Paulo Freire has called "cultural action for freedom," that is, to subvert culturally the culture of domination and constantly to challenge the new culture. The problem is: 1) to open democratic participation in culture to everybody, and 2) to create the conditions to facilitate such participation.

Popular cultures are shaped by a process of unequal appropriation of the economic and cultural capital of a nation or ethnic group on the part of its subordinate sectors: understanding, reproducing and transforming in a real and symbolic way the general and particular conditions of work and life.⁵ Popular culture is the most uncontaminated and irreducible center of resistance against the oppressor.⁶

The development of popular culture in Cuba.

One of the most important accomplishments of our revolutionary process has been in the field of popular culture. I quote Armando Hart once more:

The best way to defend and develop our culture is to seek its popular roots, to stick to

³ Canclini N. Garcia, *Las Culturas Populares en la Capitaliomo* (Mexico: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1982).

⁴ Dbavalos A Hart, *Del Trabajo Cultural* (Ciudad de La Habana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1978).

⁵ Garcia, *Las Culturas Populares*, 47.

⁶ *Ibid.*

them and to stimulate the participation of the people in literary and artistic creation. Culture is very closely related to the history and creativity of the people. In this continual renewal of our most genuine artistic traditions, Cuban culture has counted on our peasants as one of their strong defenders.⁷

Relation between Church, theology and culture

We have to go beyond the thesis of H. Richard Niebuhr of "Christ, transformer of culture," so dear to us 25 years ago, because of its ecclesiocentrism and its presupposition of a "corpus christianum" no longer valid, at least in our Socialist society and culture. I think a good metaphor could be the one used by our Jose Marti when he said that we should graft the European culture into the only trunk of the tree which should be our American reality. In the same analogy, instead of making the Gospel or Christ the "trunk," the trunk should be "popular culture" into which we graft our contribution as Christians. Notice that I do not use the expression "Christian culture," but I speak about a Christian contribution to our popular culture. It is our task to spell this out. A theological seminary should be the workshop where people are prepared to make this contribution.

Here also we have to pose the question of the lack of cultural identity of our Protestantism. The coming of Protestantism in Cuba meant the introduction of foreign cultural values, which at some points functioned as a sort of "sub-culture" in the midst of our Cuban culture. It is true, if we are going to be objective, that in the beginnings of Protestant missions some of these values were *vis-a-vis* Catholicism of a progressive character. Our cultural dependence on the U.S. made us more vulnerable to the exodus of pastors and members to the U.S. How can we explain the fact that still today in some churches not only Thanksgiving Day is celebrated but Hallowe'en also? This phenomenon is more acute in the so-called "sects."

With regard to the question of the relation between theology and culture, we have to refer to the relation between the "theology of liberation" in Latin America and popular culture. A good example is narrated in *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchu*.⁸ This is the story of a Guatemalan Catholic catechist, who helps her people in their conscientization, showing great respect for the culture of her *quiche* people. If we define theology as "a clarification of the praxis of liberation in the light of the Bible and Christian tradition," we could also say that theology should dynamize the cultural identity of the Church and its creative participa-

⁷ Hart, *Del Trabajo cultural*, 233.

⁸ E. Burgos Debray, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchu* (La Habana, Cuba: Casa de las Americas, 1983).

tion in popular culture. This also means that we have to be very self-critical of the elements in our own theological learning and tradition which are only expressions of the culture of domination, especially of those elements which favor the ideology of oppression of the peoples of the "Third World." We should encourage the Church to become a creative artistic community. We have in Cuba an interesting movement of stimulation of popular culture called *talleres populares* (popular workshops). In this same sense the Church should become a "workshop for popular culture."

Characteristics of our theological education

We realize the need for a deep and radical evaluation of our theological education, even of the very concept of seminary and pastor. I agree entirely with the critique of theological education which the authors of *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*⁹ have made. It is more a scandal that this is still true for us, also! We also have to engage in feminist critique, and a critique from the point of view of Cuban and popular culture. The general goal should also be for Protestantism to become more incarnate in our culture and people. It will mean not only a question of liturgical reform, but of church organization, of the idea of mission and of spelling out new formulations of faith.¹⁰

Concretely, this means for the Evangelical Theological Seminary (SET):

- 1) Better articulation in the curriculum of the theology of liberation.
- 2) Study of Cuban culture in the framework of Latin American culture, and the struggle of our peoples for freedom expressed in popular culture.
- 3) Participation in the actual creation of culture, avoiding the temptation to further a "Christian culture" which does not exist in our context, and contributing to the development of popular culture.

Proposals for an ongoing dialogue between seminaries in the U.S.A. and Cuba on our subject

- 1) To publish a book in Spanish and English with our papers and main line of discussions.
- 2) To set up pilot projects of creative participation in popular culture both in the SET and in the U.S.A., to exchange experiences.

⁹ The Cornwall Collective, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Feminist Alternatives in Theological Education* (New York: Pilgrim, 1980), p. 2-3.

¹⁰ Cf. "The Confession of Faith" of The Presbyterian Reformed Church in Cuba (La Hasbana, Cuba: Editoria Orbe, 1978).

3) To have a second encounter in the U.S.A. in two years, when we can evaluate our experiences already accomplished and further deepen our reflection on the subject.

Conclusion

1) There are several questions which I have not dealt with in my paper, but which should be reflected on, for example, the possible correspondence between the inter-cultural and inter-disciplinary relations among the seminaries in the U.S.A. and Cuba, or the analysis of the possible creative elements of the "Protestant sub-culture" in Cuba.

2) We acknowledge that there is a profound correspondence in our attitudes *vis-a-vis* our cultures. A prophetic attitude towards culture implies first an analysis of the culture as a hegemonic or oppressive culture, or as a popular culture which is the expression of the struggle of the people for liberation or the celebration of their freedom. Using these criteria in our confrontation with culture we can be positive, if it is a popular liberating culture, or negative, if it is a culture of domination. Both attitudes are prophetic. We cannot have the same attitude of criticism *vis-a-vis* a culture of domination or a popular culture. Moreover, we have to make a historico-critical analysis of the place of Protestantism in our cultural development. The prophetic element in you in the U.S.A. is the radical questioning of your culture of domination and being catalysts for a counter-culture; the prophetic element in us in Cuba is to develop our cultural identity in our country and to be *with* our people as they develop a new culture, and as they celebrate their freedom.