

JANE CARY PECK*

Is Theological Education Captive of/ Critic of/Enhancer of the Respective Cultures in Which it is Rooted?

Ernst Troeltsch argued that churches characteristically become accommodated to culture, perceive a vested interest in preserving and extending the culture, and thereby forfeit their capacity for prophetic witness in the culture on behalf of the poor. The assumption with which I begin is that Western Christianity in general manifests this thesis, if we modify "culture" to refer to dominant or ruling class culture. The Western church, a *part* of the culture, has characteristically become accommodated to the dominant culture of the ruling class rather than to "people's culture." Western churches are characteristically part of and support the status quo, identifying with, collaborating with, and casting their lot with the dominant social forces and structures in society. This is a matter of identity (who we are), social location, and loyalty.

Churches are, thus, *situated* in reality — historically, geographically, culturally, and in terms of class. And this social location determines, or at least greatly contributes to, a perspective. Our dominant, mainline churches in the U.S. have a perspective "from the top", the view seen by those sectors with power and control; namely: that society is basically a satisfactory system meriting preservation and only requiring modification to perfect shortcomings. They do not see the view of society "from below", because the church as institution is for the most part not *located* there (even though many members may be). Churches may, and often do, care about the poor, dispossessed, and oppressed who *are* located there. But they do not share the view of society and what's wrong with it perceived by the margined. And thus the churches' caring may be enacted in ameliorative, heartfelt or guilt-ridden charity, within their understanding of the "problem of the poor" rather than the understanding of society by the poor themselves (a problem of the rich, of domination). This is not a prophetic witness in the culture. It does not change society,

* Dr. Peck is Associate Professor of Religion and Society, Andover Newton Theological School.

nor the situation of the poor, nor the class character of the church.

Theological seminaries — schools of the churches — participate in this same class character, to an even greater extent because they are the elite of the churches; the educated, the fount of theology, the gatekeepers. Their faculties are overwhelmingly white, male, Anglo — even today — and their administrations are even more so, with the exceptions of the historically black theological schools whose faculties and administrations are predominantly black and male. Though most of us at the Colloquium from the U.S. teach in seminaries with student bodies of as many as half women and substantial numbers of black, Hispanic, and/or Asian American students, this number of minority students is not equal to the percentage in the general population, nor are such student bodies typical of the majority of American seminaries which continue to train mainly white males for ministry.

Theology is thus formulated, and theological curricula are developed, by white Anglo-Saxon males in the U.S. If it is not specifically and intentionally modified, the theological curriculum reflects and contributes to the churches' accommodation to ruling class culture.

If "critical consciousness" is not intentionally developed throughout the curriculum and learning is not focused on "decision," and alternative visions of human collectivity besides the nation-state are not explicitly considered, then the power of the status quo will continue to hold sway, in seminary as in the wider society. That is what being captive to (dominant) culture means. Reflection and strategic curricular action are required in all disciplines and the overall curriculum, not just ethics departments. Instead, in my judgment, the reality of cultural captivity of theological education has been strengthened by the developments in recent years of increased emphasis on spirituality, popularity of training in pastoral care, and return to concentration on "basics" (systematics) in theology. These tend to reflect or contribute to dualism, individualism, abstractionism, isolation from global perspective and context, all of which leave unchallenged or uncriticized the status quo. Liberation theology would seem to offer a counterbalance, but it is marginalized and trivialized. The return to basics sometimes includes patronizing consignment of liberation theologies (especially Latin American) to the intellectual ghetto of the Social Gospel, charged like it with being soft on sin, overly optimistic in its anthropology, heretically expectant of the Kingdom of God on earth by human effort and the Kingdom identified with contemporary socialist societies.

Thus what I am assuming is that theological education, in both content and personnel, reflects the culture and the interests of the dominant class in U.S. society unless it intentionally becomes critically conscious of its social location, perspective, and social function.

This is not a matter of choosing a "Christ above culture" position, as

though church and seminary could ever escape being "in culture," or should desire other than a truly worldly, deeply cultural Christianity. To decide for and articulate analytically and prophetically, a commitment to a "Christ transforming culture" perspective today would be to take a liberation stance, of denunciation (including social analysis of root causes of injustice) and annunciation, and of metanoia — a different way of viewing our culture and the church's mission as the Body of Christ in the world, and choosing a loyalty, *within* culture. It would be to discern in the myriads of cultural forms what shape genuinely humanizing culture takes,¹ and to make that our choice.

But how are we to get to that point if we are captive to the culture of the dominant class? How can we see beyond the range permitted by our social location? We need to hear from those who view the world from the underside of our location, the marginalized, the underclass, who have an epistemological privilege of seeing and knowing what we cannot and will not. Our consciousness can be raised, and confession and change can begin. As José Míguez Bonino writes,

*Social location is a matter not merely of fate or circumstance, but also of option and decision. We are situated in reality, to be sure. . . . but we can also position ourselves differently in relation to that situation. The ethical question, therefore, passes through the decision about one's social position.*²

That decision can also be taken by our seminaries as institutions, though I do not minimize the difficulty or costliness of such a process within capitalist social order.

We offer today two examples of perspectives from the margin of U.S. culture — or perhaps the cutting edge? — which we think are significant contributions to this process in the U.S. One is from the ecumenical movement now far broader than the U.S. and even Europe, and the other is from the grass-roots of the U.S. in particular, though it is represented in many other parts of the world as well. I refer to ecumenical ethics and feminism. The latter is clearly manifested in U.S. seminaries and many fields of theological study and churches though it is far more extensive than the religious arena. The former is probably very slightly represented in U.S. theological education and churches, indeed involves only an ecumenical elite formally. Both contribute to critical consciousness in theological education.

¹ This point was made in correspondance from Beverly Wildung Harrison on October 10, 1985.

² José Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 43-44.

Ecumenical Ethics

Ecumenical ethics is one critical perspective which could raise critical consciousness of cultural captivity of U.S. theological education.

It was itself Western dominated at the beginning of the ecumenical movement in the early international church conferences at the beginning of the 20th century which led to the formation of the World Council of Churches. The concept of justice in ecumenical ethics was oriented to *charity*, from established centers of power to the victims of the system, and to *reforms*, not fundamental changes in social structures (Stockholm 1925). The ethical concept of the "Responsible Society," first developed at the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Amsterdam 1948), focused on the social structure *within* countries rather than issues of justice *among* countries and assumed orderly change within a basically democratic society. It was changed to the "Responsible World Society" as the ecumenical movement became truly global with the New Delhi Assembly of 1961 when increasing numbers of Third World churches and the Eastern Orthodox Church joined the ecumenical community.

At the Geneva 1966 Church and Society Conference, for the first time lay delegates and the Third World Christians played a major role. With such participation, the issues addressed were different: ethics of revolution; struggles between North-South, rich-poor, and white-colored; and the inseparability of peace and justice. Before Nairobi (1975), ecumenical conferences had concluded that existing power relationships were morally unjustifiable and economically oppressive and that further study on the morality of these relationships was not needed, however, study was needed on the necessity of overthrowing them, especially where economic power was combined with racism and repression of whole ethnic groups. By Nairobi, the development vs. liberation debate and WCC action in human rights struggles led to an emphasis on justice in society, in international political, economic, and even ecological terms. Nairobi set as one of four main tasks for the WCC: the search for a Just, Participatory, Sustainable Society.

The Just, Participatory, Sustainable Society (JPSS) concept is now very influential in ecumenical ethics. In it the Responsible Society was refocused from "order" to "justice" (Just Society), becoming more global and representative (*JP*) and critical of scientific-technological idolatry (JPSS), with more responsibility for people, who are seen as of sacred worth and co-creators with God and must therefore become more self-reliant and have a voice in their own destiny. Future generations' participation is also an essential ethical consideration as well as the worth of non-human creation (JPSS). Justice is considered in terms both of distributive economic justice, and participation and profound develop-

ment (liberation) of people (JPSS), fair distribution of social goods and participation in determining what goods will be produced and how; in other words, justice not only in economic but also political terms. The ecumenical church is now realizing and saying that in order to be a good social structure for human community, society — national and global — must be at the same time just, participatory, and sustainable.

Participation is key in this new ecumenical ethical concept of JPSS, key in terms of both method and content. This is a new style of reflection which takes as its starting point the distinctive perspective of the underprivileged rather than the perspective of the centers of secular power. The core principle of people's participation is the right not only to have but also to belong, to share in decisions affecting their lives. It is also a different method because it does not deduce from the Bible and theology or from abstract philosophical principles what form justice should take in society. It is rather inductive, starting with the reality of the poor. (As John Bennett says, we discover God's will partly through understanding the needs of God's people.)³ The search for the JPSS thus involves listening to testimony of people about their own societies' structures of injustice, lack of participation, and threat of unsustainability.

Definition of the problem, or definition of the situation, is a crucial step in ethical method. Alan Geyer says that ethics is not simply an argument about what ought to be, but about what is, has been, will be. Establishing what are the *facts* in a problem of public policy is often more problematical than choice of ethical principle. Perception as well as choice is at the heart of ethics, says Geyer.⁴ Therefore, *whose* view, whose perception of the facts is heard is a crucial ethical factor in determining public policy, and that is why the ecumenical ethical concept of JPSS makes such a significant contribution. It is ecumenical, global, giving voice to the voiceless of the underside, poor majority of the world, while most previous ecumenical ethics has addressed the situation of the powerful.

JPSS is a contextual ethics starting with concrete experienced problems articulated by those in the situation and oppressed by the problem and those in solidarity with them. Issues raised from this perspective look very different. This leads to a sounder understanding of political realities as a necessary beginning step for the church's addressing of problems, and therefore to more adequate ethical concepts. I think we saw this progression in the movement in ecumenical ethics from charity, to development, to liberation, and in fact in the consequent formulation

³ John Bennett, *The Radical Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 8.

⁴ Alan Geyer, "Towards an Ecumenical Political Ethics: A Marginal American View," in *Perspectives on Political Ethics: An Ecumenical Inquiry*, ed., Koson Srisang (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), 135.

of the JPSS. Participation constitutes a necessary condition for the full realization of social justice — a primary reason being that it is necessary for adequate definition of the situation (not sufficient but necessary).

Note the important element of justice as “participation,” conceived in global terms. A significant contribution of ecumenical ethics to breaking the cultural captivity of churches is its global perspective. The perspective of and loyalty to the world church is a critical principle brought by Christians to society. This global perspective, especially including the experience and consciousness of the “underside” (of each society and the Third World as a whole), and loyalty to an institution transcending national boundaries, coupled with the international institutional mechanisms of this world church, challenge church subservience to national sovereignty and cultural captivity. This critical perspective is available to theological education and could be tapped by our seminaries and our local churches.

A final critical ecumenical challenge to cultural captivity is eschatological. The discipline of ethics and Western churches have generally been preoccupied with order and stability, based on general satisfaction with the social system, thus supporting the status quo and presupposing a static history. Some ecumenical scholars now note and affirm ecumenical ethics for its recognition of the dynamic pull of the Spirit into the future. The WCC Advisory Committee for a JPSS recognizes that the messianic Realm is already at work (inaugurated by Jesus Christ) and therefore not futuristic or spiritual escape; but at the same time that it is not yet fulfilled: it is already operative in human reality, yet still we are waiting for it. It is in this sense that ecumenical ethics sets forth a “Christ transforming culture” position. Our historical reality is being judged and redeemed by Christ in the here and now of God’s Realm already inaugurated; we read both judgment and hope in the signs of the times of the present. This constitutes a radically critical principle over against religious apathy and acquiescence to dominant culture. The Body of Christ must be where Christ is, even now transforming culture. And where the church *is* so located, it is a costly discipleship. Seminaries and theological education must change accordingly, to educate for such ministry within Christ’s messianic Commonwealth.

Then within this “already” of the Commonwealth of God, there is also a dynamic pull of the future, both an indicative and an imperative attraction of the utopic, the not yet: the full realization of God’s Realm. We yearn and reach out for it yet also fear and resist it, and God draws us into this eschatological community of Shalom. Then will our culture be utterly transformed and we will be new women and men.

Ecumenical ethics, recognizing this dynamic future, combats static history and status quo with praxis — action, vision, and theory — oriented to a Just, Participatory, Sustainable Society. This ecumenical ethi-

cal concept and action does and could contribute to radical challenge of culture by theological education.

Feminism is another way of getting beyond the ideological captivity of seminaries and churches in the U.S. It is from the marginalized half of the population — women — the majority of the grass-roots of the church though a small minority in the power structure of church and seminary. Its criticisms of male-dominated culture and of content and method of theological education, on the one hand, and its alternative values and methods, on the other, constitute a perspective from the underside which challenges dominant culture, raises critical consciousness, and offers alternatives. Susan Thistlethwaite's presentation will lead us in consideration of feminist perspectives on this issue.