

The Bible and Christian Theological Education

Today Christians of every variety clamor for a return to the Bible. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone who does not stress Bible reading as a source of nourishment for the Christian life. Cuban Christians are no exception: the Church in Cuba has always placed great emphasis on the Bible in its life and work. It would be interesting, then, to outline the Bible's place in Cuban theological education, as well as to suggest ways it should function in the future. In this essay we will, first, describe different types of biblical readings or approaches found in the past and present experience of the Cuban Church. Second, we will try to present certain emphasis relevant to our theological education with respect to the Bible.

1. *Readings of the Bible in the Cuban Church*

1.1. *An "immobilizing" reading of the Bible*

This is a type of Manichaeian reading, found in dualistic schemes in which the secular is separated from the sacred. In the context of Latin America, this dualistic approach has an enervating effect with respect to social change, since what its manipulative approach produces is "pacification." In the Cuban context, it produces marginalization: one remains at a distance from where history is in the making. Because there is no participation in the process of social change, there is no motivation either.

In Cuba, this dualism between sacred and secular is honed more finely into a dualism between Christian faith and revolutionary process. Here it is not a case merely of immobilization resulting from passivity; rather the polarization which occurs now can be understood also as a sign of resistance to the system, a mark of protest and even of rejection. In short, whether producing passive marginalization or more decided opposition to change, the dualistic reading of the Bible involves a denial of

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history. That God is hard at work in the events of everyday life is lost from view.

Such historical blindness is common here in Cuba, since our knowledge of the faith was linked to a certain system. When it fell, another replaced it, but many otherwise sincere Christians have never been able to make the necessary "epistemological break." History becomes meaningless; hope is thought of in transcendent terms only; God turns into a refuge. Tragically, right in the middle of the most dynamic social change, apathy or silent opposition forces the Church "to sit out the game of history," rendering it irrelevant to its own times. Rather than an instigator of change, the Bible is seen as a refuge for wailing and moaning.

1.2 *An emotional reading of the Bible*

The emotional reading is rooted in situations of human conflict and emotional tension and sees the Bible as a solution for these problems. This approach entails several dangers.

All social change necessarily involves deep personal, family and social transformations. Emotionally, these are highly-charged events requiring many readjustments which in turn, can produce even more disquiet. Sometimes even personality undergoes profound disturbance and becomes unbalanced or unhinged as a result. Into this scenario the Bible is injected as a remedy, a sedative to quiet the emotions. The Church becomes a kind of mental hospital; its pastors turn into psychologists. There is no denying these emotional and affective needs, but when they demand disproportionate attention, they overshadow the mission of the Church to help construct the new.

Using the Bible this way leads people to think of it as an oasis rather than a wilderness. They tend to prize only the passages which pacify, relieve and tranquilize, passing over those which are difficult, confrontative and tension-provoking. A dichotomy is created between the individual and society, and an individualistic interpretation of life prevails. Because of its one-sided emphasis on the individual, conceived solely in emotional terms, this approach — which otherwise attempts rightly to preserve and enhance important human values not fully taken into account in certain social theories — loses its prophetic power within the resentful, the fed up, and the emotionally crippled.

Found often in "charismatic" movements, lately this approach has made inroads in the mainstream Cuban churches. Where it has gained a following, the Christian community has experienced polarization within itself. It is significant that the upsurge in this approach coincides with a stage in the revolutionary process when personal, family and small group values, as well as the affective and spiritual dimensions of life, are being played up. This shift ought not be regarded simplistically, however, as a mere move toward the individual at the expense of the social; rather it

should be seen as broadening of our understanding of the value of the social, in which the inescapable needs of the persons are given due weight. This conceptual enrichment may have come about because Marxist theory began to feel its own limitations with respect to the "new person" in his or her totality; or it may be the fruit of experience, as the activity of attempting to form "the new" goes forward, lending of itself to the inclusion of these human dimensions which the theoretical texts often missed.

Whatever the case, in the situation we are describing, new points of contact between Marxism and Christianity could be — and in some cases, already are — forthcoming. We may see the Marxist-Christian encounter in Cuba go beyond the day-to-day practicality which has characterized it to date, and enter the theoretical realm. After 27 years of the Revolution, we could be seeing a revolution of faith in Marxist thought. At the same time, we might re-think Marxism in our Cuban theology, steering a course between sharp antagonism on the one hand, and reductionist over-simplification on the other.

This is one of the greatest challenges facing the Cuban Church today, but an emotional reading of the Bible evades this reality altogether. The charismatic Protestantism of our context produces an individualistic, introverted ethic in sharp contrast to the social order envisioned in our country. In this reading, the Christian message is apocalyptic rather than prophetic, more emotional than spiritual, reductionist not universal. What this reading amounts to is spiritual *machismo*; the Christianity it offers is over-bearing, self-sufficient and privatized.

Some progressives engage in an emotional reading, too. In this case, the tables are turned: the Biblical text is read only for its social implications; the person, spiritual and affective are left out. What results is discourse of pure political emotionalism. I recall a series of biblical studies some years back in which Christ was pictured more or less as a "*tupac amaru*,"** the flight out of Egypt sounded like the battles in the Sierra Maestra,** and the prophets could have been certain left-wing, Latin American, religion-hating politicians. Most of us came down with this "leftist disease" at one time or another; but in the end we discovered that the Bible is not a pretext for commitment to social action. The justice it proclaims is tied to the total liberation of man and woman, of the people, and of society. Liberation is the fullness (pleroma) of humanity; it is fundamentally anti-reductionist.

** Native people who resisted Spanish colonization of Argentina and Uruguay in the 16th century.

*** Mountains in Oriente Province in Cuba in which Fidel Castro led the early phases of the revolution.

1.3 An "academicist" reading of the Bible

This kind of intellectualist interpretation, focusing upon textual criticism itself, rather than upon praxis, burst onto the scene toward the end of the last century, coinciding with the great advances in Western science and industry. It represents the adjustment of biblical interpretation to political liberalism.

Right from its inception in 1946, the Seminary of Matanzas aligned itself with this approach. In the milieu of Cuban Protestantism, so missionary-conservative in tone, the Seminary opted theologically for the new liberal vision. We put forth our progressive position in intellectual terms: our academic level was superior to other similar institutions; we were handy with the tools of European hermeneutics; we located ourselves in the neo-orthodox camp; we discovered Barth, Tillich, Bultmann, Brunner, etc.; we turned the theological enterprise into a display of ideas borrowed from developed nations; and, in the last analysis, cloaked the pragmatism of the North American missionary movement in European pseudo-intellectual garb.

The outcome of this theological option speaks volumes. By 1963, approximately 85% of our Seminary's graduates had fled the country. It could be said that the Seminary of Matanzas was a training camp for missionaries to be sent to the States, not a place preparing pastors to serve the Cuban reality. Logic dictated these results; a dependent theological education creates further dependence. When the sustaining political system vanishes, one is overwhelmed by the sense of loss akin to what the Israelites felt in the wilderness. Orphaned, confused and insecure, one longs to go back to Egypt.

For a long time, for example, Bultmann was the mainstay of our approach to the Bible. Now, no one is against reading Bultmann. Our mistake was to read him uncritically, making his world our interpretative key. We were blind to the Bultmann who, snug in his ivory tower, declared miracles to be alien to us moderns because of our rationality, scientific sophistication and self-possession; and this precisely at that historical moment of supreme human irrationality, as fascism's terror threatened the world. We were blind to the Bultmann who was ignorant of the miracle of our poor who, bereft of life's most basic necessities, live on. We did not consider Bultmann who proclaimed his apolitical condition without once referring to the profound political moment the society he lived in was undergoing. We failed to see that our Bultmann knew nothing of the option for the poor, nothing of the peoples' religion, nothing of the need for liberation.

An academicist reading of the Bible led us to three errors: (1) *It was a dependent reading.* Its schemas and hermeneutical keys were imports which we never sifted through our specific reality. We were so dependent on the European academic model that all we managed to produce was

artificial, "hot-house" theology. I recall that in the first year of my pastorate, I gave a series of Bible study sessions in my church on the topic of The Pentateuch. I structured the cycle around the most advance biblical criticism. The group and I were able to get beyond certain formal and literalist schemas of the fundamentalist nature which held sway in the congregation. At the end, a question raised by one of the brothers situated me in space and time. He asked: All these intellectual contributions are good, but what I'm really interested in is not so much whether Moses is the author of the Pentateuch or if this or that theory is correct; what I want to know is what meaning the concept of biblical creation has in a context like ours, in which science has set itself as a cornerstone; or what meaning the flight from Egypt [the Exodus] has in the midst of a revolutionary process." (2) *There was no link to praxis.* Our textual interpretation ignored the starting point of the people's experience. Did secularization really mean anything *to us*? What did Bultmann's existentialist rationality have to do with us? Or Barth's zeal for the revelatory word given in absolutely vertical fashion, devoid of human mediation? Could a concept like "saving history" mean anything to us if it were not linked to the liberation of the poor? We fell into empty theorizing divorced from praxis. We read the Bible and lost touch with history. We were unable to effect a synthesis between the experience of faith — the basic option of Christian life — and the historical options we were living through. In the Cuban situation, this phenomenon is all the more critical since most Cuban intellectuals have remained close to the people and in some ways related to the revolutionary process. But most of the intellectuals trained at Matanzas operate out of a "theoreticism" which has little to do with popular practice. (3) *Individual personalities dominated.* Not only did biblical interpretation ignore praxis as its proper starting point, it also passed over the biblical text itself. The meditations of particular Bible scholars and exegetes replaced the text, so that one could actually study the Bible without ever reading it, like those who study Marxism by reading the manuals, not Marx himself. Appropriation of the biblical text is a task of the entire community; to exalt an individual over or apart from the community is to engage in an anti-reading of the Bible.

1.4. *A praxis-based reading in the midst of social change.*

Toward the end of the '60's, both the Seminary of Matanzas and certain sectors of the Cuban Church began to make a serious effort to read the Bible from the standpoint of our actual experience of the revolutionary process. All along, we have found ourselves greatly indebted to the theology of liberation which, for better or worse, has become an obligatory reference point for everyone.

In Cuba, we have imbibed this theology directly, but we have made a

serious mistake with respect to it which I call "theological transculturation without mediation." In other words, while we feel completely at one with a Latin American identity, we have not always adequately weighed in the particular characteristics of our Cuban reality. We should be asking, for example, what "option for the poor" means here in Cuba. Or how we interpret the liberating process of Egypt here, after 27 years of the Revolution. In our situation, what do we mean when we speak of the Church's prophetic role, or Christian base communities?

Let us, then, underscore these aspects of liberation theology, both methodological and practical, which have been important for our theologizing and biblical interpretation. At the same time, however, we should point out in what way some of these aspects have been or ought to be adapted to the Cuban Church. (1) For us, praxis as point of departure has been a part of our everyday experience, not just a methodological principle. The people's practice always constitutes the starting point in a society caught up in rapid, far-reaching social change. It is impossible to describe the vertiginous character of the revolutionary process. You live the precariousness and the fullness of the now in every minute. No one strolls along with history; you literally get shoved forward. You don't opt for praxis; *it* surrounds you. On pilgrimage in the desert, you have only three choices: turn back and try to escape, linger there and die, or go forward and live.

What is it that characterizes our praxis? St. Thomas Aquinas would say that the first moment of all theology is the knowledge of faith — faith which is grace and gift, but is also gratitude capable of being lived out only in a fully human act. Re-reading Thomas today, we must say that the praxis of liberation is an act of faith. This faith-dimension of praxis is basic to our Christian identity. We Christians did not initiate the people's praxis. We've had to be dragged into this historical reality all these years. When we say, then, that our praxis is an act of faith, we are declaring that we are able to take part in the human project of building a new society and creating new people. To draw the biblical analogy, it is as when the Israelites, upon their exodus from the Babylonian Captivity, regarded the Persian king Cyrus as a messiah. The old ecclesiastical and structural world view is shattered and one begins to live the one and only history of God. This is the fundamental act of faith for Christians in the midst of a revolutionary process.

Moreover, the act of faith as a fully human act realized in the praxis of liberation signifies the proclamation of the Kingdom of God — that Kingdom which is "already" present, and which is "ever" opening up as hope toward the future. Faith makes us live political praxis in the present moment with ever-growing hope. Faith makes it possible for us to go beyond praxis itself — not by negating it or putting it off, but by opening the present to hope, by never limiting the present exclusively to the

now.

Of course, in our society one doesn't have to be a Christian in order to engage in liberating praxis. But when we proclaim praxis as an act of faith, we proclaim the Kingdom. It is not that we have all the "true" political answers. Political solutions are in others' hands. Our praxis of faith means we try to make sure those hands always stay wide open, and that the fullness of the kingdom can be experienced in its "already" reality and its "not yet" hope.

We mustn't fool ourselves; all ideology, however just it may try to be, tends to create absolutes. The praxis of hope helps to avoid all sorts of reductionist tendencies, no matter how justified they may be.

(2) We often tend to view liberation as a moment, but it is a process. Liberation in the Bible occurs in three stages: freedom from captivity (Exodus from Egypt); transition (wandering in the wilderness) and the building of a new society (conquest and settlement of Canaan). In general, Latin American theology has emphasized the Exodus. But our Cuban reality has gone beyond Exodus and wandering. We have begun the building of the new society — the most difficult and creative stage of the whole process.

Yet the categories we use most often in our reading of the Bible are derived from Exodus. We haven't even completely articulated yet a reflection on what the time of pilgrimage meant for our Christian community. This lack of reflection is a gaping hole in our theology. It explains the Cuban Church's tendency to return to the past, since we jumped from our Exodus directly to the building of the new, never having come to terms with the implications of leave-taking, rupture, the wilderness, and the acceptance of new ways. In the best of cases, we've produced "masochistic" biblical reflection, a confession of past errors which is never creative nor capable of articulating proposals for renewal. Only with great difficulty has this reflection been able to think out the mission of the Church in new terms, adequate for today's needs.

We could take for example, our frequent use of the category the "poor." If we say that the poor are those who remain, for whatever reason, on the margin of the process, we get caught in a theological involution. It is not that we have no pastoral word for those who were or still are marginalized in our society; but rather that the Cuban Church's fundamental option must be for man and woman in all their fullness. In Cuba, we stand at that historical moment in which the poor, the people, have taken power. Our analyses must, then, be different from those of other contexts.

Matthew says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 5:3). In our context, these poor in spirit are those who in the past were consigned to history's edges, the displaced, the exploited, the victims of injustice, those who knew the poverty of being

barred from developing their authentic human potential; those denied access to technology, health, education, spiritual and cultural life, and the right to work. This kind of poverty is a valid category for our context, if we mean by it that we are determined to remain faithful, never forgetting the spiritual richness of the poor; that we are resolved to reject anything that induces us to forget our own experience. We must reject all "verticalities" which deny people their rightful, meaningful participation, and never permit systems and structures to take precedence over persons. We are to identify with the less able, making our own every struggle for justice and equality. When we in our context opt for the poor, we choose the spirit of poverty which animates them, that spirit which prevents us from becoming "the powerful" ourselves, the "other" who exploits our neighbor. In our society, the goal can never be to take the poor and transform them into new rich people, either. The option for the poor has to be a goading reminder which makes us prophetic, heralds and movers of that Kingdom which is already built.

(3) The people are forever searching out the signs of the times. liberation theology's emphasis on discerning the signs of the times in history has represented for us that "reserved meaning" of which Severino Croato speaks. That is, when we read some biblical passage in the light of our history, a new event or process appears within the passage of which the biblical author may not have been mindful. One makes the incredible discovery that history is the setting for the action of God's grace.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus felt frustrated at the turn of events they had experienced. Having lost hope, they were blind to history's signs. After they met Jesus on the road, however, everything changed. The disciples did not have to be lifted out of history for this to happen; rather they were able suddenly to see the signs that had always been there, but which they had failed to read and understand. It has been very hard for us in the Cuban Church to read the Bible as "source of meaning," to see the dawn where we believed only darkness existed, to see the times as new possibilities which we had not contemplated.

Luther wrote of God's Word held captive. We know that the freedom of the spirit moves the Church in the present and toward the future. The past is a starting point, but it does not control the outcome. The Word of God cannot be chained to any particular construct. We need always to regard theology as historically relative. If we can break the bonds of absolutizing tendencies, we will be less likely to become captives and more able to stride into the future with fresh energy and enthusiasm. From this point of view, the goal of the Bible is to know the presence of God in the practice of liberation. The aim is not to get at "the innards" of the Bible itself — to sacralize the Word found in the text — but to get at "the innards" of the people's praxis. Or, as Pablo Richard says, a

reading should yield not so much a commentary as, in a sense, a new text altogether.

Refusing to absolutize the Bible is part of the liberation we proclaim, since absolutization makes for relativization and manipulation. To be consequent with a liberating reading means, in our context, to stand up as faith witnesses for all society as well as for the believing community.

George Casalis provided us with an attractive notion in the way he interrelates situation, kerygma and witness. Even if, as he says, biblical redaction ceased with the establishment of the canon, the practice of the faith continued. The problem is not one of writing a brand new Bible, but of reading liberation as "sacred scripture" in process. This sort of approach staves off paralysis in faith: God used to reveal Godself, but we no longer see God. When we view the practice of faith as on-going, "today" acquires much greater value. No longer a mere interval between a past replete with powerful divine revelations and some future fullness of revelation, "today" becomes the time of grace and liberation from God. "The lame walk" — that is God's new miracle in history, a miracle not all the Cuban Church has been able to experience and confess.

The kerygma-situation-witness relationship points up the socio-economic-political variables bearing on the text. The practice of our society has taught us how political and economic factors, among others, shape the biblical-theological enterprise. This dialectical relationship is still somewhat unexplored in Cuban theology, but it plays a crucial role in Latin America today. There is no question that the economic crisis and the foreign debt are devastating our countries; the economic becomes political, while certain aspects of the political become economic.

Having said all this, we see that Bible interpretation is not merely emotive; it is not even a complex of well-intentioned practices. It has to do with social mediations, structural problems, and the possibility that nothing lies outside the realm of the "theologizeable." It has to do with the practice of the political, without, of course, reducing it to politics. It has to do with the joining of theory and practice, and about being moved to militancy out of conviction, resisting instrumentalization and not losing our bearings as Christians. Learning to read the Bible as a criterion for discernment has forced us to reconsider history and understand it as the setting for God's revelation. To the degree we have done so, the Word of God has both challenged and encouraged us in our mission.

With respect to all these points we are indebted to liberation theology. But we still need to underscore what makes us different. We turn now to a brief analysis of the hermeneutical keys to our particular approach to the Bible.

2. *Hermeneutical Keys*

Theological education in Cuba is faced with the task of breaking ground for liberating reading of the Bible. Although efforts are underway, much more needs doing, and we are still devising ways to meet the challenge.

Earlier, we alluded to the fact that a new stage in Church-Revolution relations is upon us, and that within Cuban Marxist circles new weight is being given to the dimension of faith. Pragmatism may be involved in the shift, but to a greater degree I think it is related to a coming of age by both sides. The most important aspect of this new engagement is, in my view, that it is not confined to the higher-ups of both sides. I have seen for myself that it is taking place on the popular level. That is a real sign of hope and authenticity.

A by-product of this new situation is a re-awakened interest in Bible reading in our churches and in society at large. New expectations are being raised, and we theologians and exegetes must be ready to respond. I wish to share, then, a few ideas about approaches to the Bible which I think essential for a reading appropriate to our context.

2.1 *A pastoral reading of the Bible*

"Pastoral" is a word on everybody's lips these days. Still, a certain reluctance about the term lingers, perhaps because in the Protestant tradition pastoring is concentrated in the hands of the minister; or because in the Roman Catholic camp, "pastoral action" is understood in ecclesiological — i.e., structural — terms. It would help to say just what we mean by this term, then.

When we speak here of the pastorate, we understand it to belong to the whole People of God. It is not the exclusive preserve of any particular vocation within the congregation; rather the whole community has a role to play — and not as something imposed from outside, but as integral to the Christian calling. God invests us with this awesome, difficult responsibility at the moment of election. Thus, the principal mark of election is not assurance of some apocalyptic personal salvation which tends to engender "spiritual obesity." Our call from God is a call to the work of liberation.

The image of pastor is a rich, full one in the Bible. The pastor stands for fidelity: he is faithful to his own. God is pastor *par excellence*: When all others fail, God stays true to the people. The pastoral task, then, is to be true to the people, and such fidelity, in any context, entails a mission and exacts a price.

To be true to the people means encouraging the builders of the new society; identifying with the suffering; resisting the idolatry of power; maintaining the spirit of poverty; keeping hope alive and growing. Pastoring is leading, in and through the reality of history. To be true to the

people is a theological and political vocation, a reminder and a warning to the Church and to the processes of social change that the people are the linch-pin of the saving plan of God. In the processes of change, they are not an excuse for power, but the very animators and movers of history. They and the degree to which they can participate are criteria by which we judge the validity of those processes. For these reasons, in this new moment, it is urgent that the Church acquire a new pastoral theology. Allow me to share the following suggestions for a new pastoral reading of the Bible.

2.1.1. Christians have to act decisively as participants in our society, since the starting point of the pastoral endeavor is precisely participation alongside the people. Now, the Cuban Church has not been absent altogether from the processes of change, but what is required now is a qualitatively new mode of engagement; i.e., explicitly conscious participation. In the past we participated at times almost in spite of ourselves, grudgingly; or our participation was thrust on us by, so to speak, our own sense of ethical obligation. Sometimes we figured that getting involved would be the best way to demonstrate the superiority of all things Christian. Utilitarianism drove us, or a certain sense of security about our own political options. Or perhaps we simply had good intentions, acting ingenuously for what we thought was right.

The conscious involvement we need now, however, has as much to do with leading as with being led; with challenging as with being challenged. We cannot be content with carving out a "space" for Christian participation in society. We have to break with notions of "spaces," stop thinking of the Churches as "reservations," and weave the dynamic of faith into the very fabric of society as a whole.

2.1.2. A pastoral reading of the Bible must be highly creative, dwelling not on what we are forbidden to do, but on that we are enjoined to do. Original sin has a place in our pastoring, but over-emphasizing it can trap us in that past where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We are called to live the fullness of the present, filling it with hope. The spirit of the new must stir within us, renewing our faith, going beyond formal and structural change to the renewal of our vocation itself. Only thus will we become forgers of the new in history.

2.1.3. A pastoral reading of the Bible means that we get in step with the people. We don't have to be more avant garde than those out in front, nor slower than those bringing up the rear. The challenge is to figure out how to be at once truly among the people and pastors of the people.

The new moment being experienced by our Cuban Church has as many pitfalls as promises. The dangers, though, come more from inside the Church than from without. Sometimes one gets the feeling that the Revolution is taking this moment, with all its ramifications, more seriously than the Church is. Let me cite a couple of worrisome examples

related to the Church's witness to illustrate in passing what I mean.

One has to do with the material facilities to which the Church — specifically some ministers and hierarchical representatives — has lately gained access as a consequence of improved relations with the Revolution. Now, improving the conditions (transportation, for example) of the Church work is by no means a negative thing. Only an ethical masochist would not welcome it. The problem is that in some cases, we are dealing with rather obvious symbols of a certain level of consumption in our society, and it can happen that a minister's standard of living gets to be much higher than that of the general public. From a sociological standpoint, this is a loaded situation for a minority group like the Protestant Churches which, historically, have been barred from certain levels of consumption. At the same time, among Cuban religious folk, it is hard to find anyone articulating the sort of new social ethic which might present a prophetic challenge to the new context. As a result, the very incarnation of the Church in Cuba may be jeopardized.

Another concern: After the blockade, the Cuban Churches achieved a level of economic independence remarkable both for how it overcame the isolation we had been subjected to and the gigantic efforts our people had to make to attain it. We also sought, at one time, a certain originality in our theologizing and pastoral planning. Then we were not as exposed to programs and ideas such as those we now receive in profusion from the outside and which do not always fit our experiences very well. I ask myself if perhaps we are not once again depending too much on the outside with respect both to economic matters and the originality of our thought and planning. To speak of a pastoral reading of the Bible is to touch upon the very meaning of our existence as a Christian community within the Cuban revolutionary process.

2.2. *A prophetic reading of the Bible.*

What does being a prophet mean? Is the prophet's role limited to criticism? Over the years the prophetic role of the Cuban Church has been scrutinized by many friends from beyond our shores eager to know how we do or do not criticize the revolutionary process. As far as they are concerned, the primary prophetic task is criticism.

In reality, the mark of the prophet is whether and how his or her critique is mediated by praxis with the people. Furthermore, it is crucial that a political criterion be applied to the prophetic critical task since, as we know from the Old Testament, not all prophecy can be lumped together; there is a sharp dividing line between false prophets and true. And it isn't the same thing to talk about the Church's prophetic role in El Salvador as it is in Nicaragua, Poland or Chile. One can call Mons. Romero a true prophet. Standing with the people, heedless of personal risk, he criticized the system. The people knew him to be one of them, and the system said he had to die. Mons. Obando, on the other hand,

appears to criticize the Nicaraguan Revolution from the standpoint of those who had oppressed the people, responding not to the people's cause, but to other interests whose gospel vision is blurred with the respect to the poor. We know we are in the presence of a true prophet, then, if the prophet stands with God in the midst of the people.

In the Cuban Church we recognize the prophet, in the first place, by his or her participation, alongside the people, in the construction of a new hope. The primary qualification is to be wherever God is at work, by the side of the poor, in the midst of the people. But what is Christian prophetic participation like? I can do volunteer work or work hard and well at my job just as any non-Christian might. If I am to be a prophet, I need to clarify what my participation means.

In the Old Testament, the prophetic word has two dimensions: judgment and salvation. This double dimension, although universally valid, is different in different contexts. In Latin America, the emphasis falls — although not exclusively — on the word of judgment. In Cuba, the situation calls for emphasis on salvation, although judgment, too, is needed. The tragedy of the Cuban Church is that it has allowed itself two polarizing tendencies *vis-à-vis* the social reality: it criticizes without participating, i.e., judgment without salvation; or it participates with scant critical sense, i.e., salvation without judgment.

A prophetic reading of the Bible means living the tension between judgment and salvation in its fullness. It is to be subject to the dialectic of the Kingdom, already present, yet to come, never absolutized in history. We are the companions of those who fight for justice, traveling the same road, but ours is a comradeship always in tension. We take the present with total seriousness and creativity, but we never absolutize it.

The prophet is the poor standing up to those in power, even when, as in our case, the powerful are more just than the powerholders usually are. To do so, a prophet must stay in solidarity with the community; choose the person over all economic and political goals; identify with the suffering and show mercy to the weak; maintain a spirit of disinterested service, of liberation unfettered by preconceptions, of self-gift to the cause, free of dogmatic religiosity. The prophet's poverty means eschewing that narrow scientific mentality so tempted to view the spiritual-subjective realm with a reductionist eye; it means sharing in human creativity, expecting to receive no slice of power's pie, no glory of one's own.

Three elements, it seems to me, cannot be left out of a prophetic reading of the Bible:

2.2.1 *Cultural identity.*

The Latin American Protestant tradition has always feared syncretism in any form. In our efforts to remain pure, we have ended up severely alienated from our cultural identity. Our formation has been white, liberal, *machista* and middle class. How can we do a prophetic reading of

the Bible devoid of any sense of our cultural identity?

Cuban culture is *mestiza*, or better, *mulata*. We are the product of numerous influences. First, we have the Spanish tradition and the spirit of colonialism. Its expression is a very conservative Catholicism. Along with this conservative streak we find western liberalism, which came to our shores in the principles of the French and American Revolutions, and in the spirit of the Enlightenment. In the 20th century, the Protestant missionary movement brought with it its own liberal, modern spirit. And, representing the popular in the face of both conservative and liberal western traditions, our Black African culture constitutes one of our greatest riches.

Our need to live more fully what it is to be Cuban is not met, however, by mere passive assimilation of these traditions. Some of their elements, such as the strong *machismo* of the popular African tradition, are plainly unacceptable. We need to separate "wheat from tares" in such cases. The Cuban Marxists are making a valuable contribution in this regard as they try to retrieve our traditions "myth-free." The weak spot in their efforts is their tendency to play down the subjective-spiritual factors the traditions contain.

Today, culture is the "fourth dimension," as Ludovico Silva used to say. We must pay stricter attention to what transpires in that world. Contemporary capitalism has mounted a huge offensive in the area of culture, threatening our identities through its various manipulations and the implantation of "mass culture." At the same time, the people are finding in their own culture a strong, rich expression of resistance.

In the Cuban context, the formation of the new person, among other things, is what culture is all about. The cultural has to do with the authenticity of the process itself. It is not a marginal issue, but stands at the very heart of the Revolution.

With respect to cultural identity, the Cuban Church stands either to recover or to lose its meaning for our people. It has to decide either to prolong its waltz with European Christianity, or take up the Cuban *danzones** and step to our own tunes.

2.2.2. *An ecumenical approach to the Bible.*

What does an ecumenical reading of the Bible entail? What meaning does reading the Bible in a non-Christian context have?

As far as ecumenism is concerned, we are currently experiencing a peculiar turn of events. With the triumphs of the Revolution, the ecumenical movement grew by leaps and bounds. The Cuban Ecumenical Council, for example, is one of the strongest such bodies in all Latin America. At the same time, confessionalism is on the rise as a result of

* Cuban folk dance.

the need the various denominations had to build themselves back up after a long decline. What we see then is confessional ecumenism.

Moreover, our understanding of ecumenism itself has grown wider. We are recapturing the fullness of the concept "*oikoumene*," "the whole inhabited world". Our inclusive ecumenism has its point of departure in the creation of the new: it is the meeting of all who are engaged in building a new and liberating historical reality. The unity of the Church and the unity of society come together in a fruitful way through our ecumenism also. We know that the oneness of Church and the oneness of society are interrelated; in the struggle for the unity of society, church unity is achieved. In turn, the unity of the Church must be held aloft as a sign of the times. For the Christian, both these ecumenical expressions need to be fostered simultaneously.

To propose an ecumenical reading of the Bible involves us directly in the matters of concern to the Christian-Marxist dialogue. Both sides now have matters of experience under their belts, and as a result, at least in part of a whole societal praxis, have moved to a new level of relations. Even though practice must always be the point of departure for dialogue, I think the time has come to reflect on and analyze its impact on our theoretical assumptions. The theoretical advance made possible by practice should be brought out much more clearly and consciously. Such an analysis would be prophetic indeed, since it could help wipe out the inveterate dogmatism of both sides.

2.2.3 *The power structures.*

The cluster of problems posed by the issue of power has to do directly with prophecy, yet in our Protestant horror of contamination we avoid dealing with the subject almost entirely. There are two kinds of power we must look hard at, however, to see their limitations and their possibilities. I am speaking of political power and economic power.

Cuban political power has shown great promise in producing change and assuring popular participation. The Cuban Revolution is an explosive political phenomenon that has profoundly altered society, projected a creative program of social construction, and promoted positive human values. But this creative ardor has its limits and tensions.

Unresolved tensions exist between power and participation. As power is structured, the ability to participate in it should become more transparent, but such is not always the case. Likewise, while the Cuban process has given new meaning and value to the concept of freedom and helped us understand popular democracy in new ways, polarizations between freedom and power remain. Also, the Cuban process represents a qualitative leap with respect to the creation of the new man and woman, yet formative, spiritual and volitional elements persist which still are not being satisfactorily addressed.

By looking at the possibilities and limitations of political power we do

not mean to offer ourselves as an alternative nor haughtily to presume we have easy answers to its inherent problems. When we scrutinize power, we mean humbly only to try to make sure that it does not give rise to mass conformity; we wish to guard against political practice becoming a "status quo," even though that be revolutionary. Since our effort will meet with success only if there is participation, we must reconsider and reevaluate the participation of Christians in the power structures.

We must look at economic power structures, too. During all these years of revolution, we've come to see that good intentions alone are not enough to reach our social objectives. We have felt in our very flesh how terrible are the economic power structures of developed capitalist countries: blockades, economic sanctions, unjust prices, unequal exchange, transnationalization of the economy, severely limited access to technology, and more. The economic structure of today's world is hegemonous, privatized, never participatory. The highest achievement of Cuba's economic system is the level of participation, the number of economic opportunities available to all. We think in social-participatory terms, not individual-private ones.

We have also come to grasp better the impact of economic factors on the social structures, and on our own religious structures. We don't advocate a mechanistic view of the economy, nor presuppose some one-dimensional, ever-constant relationship between infrastructure and superstructure; but we do believe strongly that biblical-theological thought has to factor in the implications of economics as it goes about its task. A prophet knows that the economic sphere is not the exclusive domain of the economist and politician; it is "*materia prima*" of our faith.

3. *Final Remarks*

The Cuban Church faces the urgent task of formulating a new reading of the Bible, all the more needed in this era of new political openness. In this regard, the task of theological education here becomes quite complex practically, methodologically and theoretically. Methodologically, we must act on the conviction that the new reading be done in solidarity in a world characterized by inter-correctedness. For as I have insisted throughout, in the process of liberation, reading the Bible is fundamental as a principle of discernment and accompaniment in the very praxis of liberation.