

## Theology in the Caribbean

Theology, derived from two Greek words, *logos*=word, and *theos*=God, is best understood as the study of God through the experience of God. Since we cannot truly know God except within a given human context, theology must be contextual. Hence, it is justifiable to speak about different types of theology. If we are to talk about Caribbean Theology, then the only sensible approach must be to first understand something about the Caribbean cultural context.

Culture is "the way of life of a particular people." Caribbean culture deals with the sum total of life's activities—sports, food, music, language, literature, politics, economics, social structure, religion, education—indeed everything that takes place among the people of those islands that are washed by the Caribbean Sea. Caribbean culture is "a mixed bag." This is so because of the wide variety of cultural influences. There are the vestiges of Arawak and Carib culture—the original Amerindian tribes which had inhabited the region before being wiped out by European invaders. And the European nations—France, Spain, Holland and England—have made contributions. The Asians—notably India, Pakistan and China—also gave certain cultural facets to the region. But by far the most significant contributor to Caribbean culture was Mother Africa.

Africans came to the region early in the sixteenth century as slaves. From Africa, Caribbean people have inherited an *oral culture*. Apart from the mature language of Europe, mature in the sense that they have fixed rules of grammar and syntax, there are the *oral languages*, such as "créole" in Haiti, St. Lucia and Dominica, "patois" in Jamaica and "papiementu" in Curacao. These oral languages developed out of the necessity for Africans to communicate with Europeans. Not many of them, even if today they have been reduced to written forms, have developed a standard orthography or set of grammatical rules.

There is a wealth of *oral literature*. We have the popular Anansi stories—Anansi being an Ashanti spider-god—which are usually told when

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a family or a group of friends gets together for a relaxing evening. Such folk tales are most effectively communicated through the ingenuity of the storyteller whose facial expressions and bodily gestures add greatly to the presentation. Proverbial sayings also constitute a familiar device when Caribbean people try to convey truths to one another, e.g., the Jamaican proverb which says "Rock stone a river bottom nuh know sun hot," i.e., the rocky stone on the river bed does not know that the sun is hot.

We may speak of *oral medical science* within our Caribbean culture which again comes to us from Mother Africa. There are many herbal remedies or "bush medicines" for illnesses which are transmitted orally in the culture, but have not necessarily been codified and written down. Much of the music of the Caribbean is *oral music*. This means that even though a composer might actually write down his/her music for a song, the best way to learn it is to hear it "live." We can better appreciate this fact when we consider that originally Caribbean music was learned by air. It was not played by a symphony orchestra, but to the accompaniment of drum, guitar or steel band—instruments which even the not-so-gifted might play without much difficulty. The Calypso, which is a song telling a story, is itself a form of oral music.

Africa has also meant for us belief in the spirit-world. Communication with ancestral spirits through dreams and visions. It must be said that ancestral spirits constitute a part of the African concept of family. Remember that the most popular type is the "joint" or "extended family." There is a wide network of social relationships, including mother, father, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, grandmother, grandfather, etc. But the relationship also extends to family members who have departed this present life and have entered into the spiritual abode of the ancestors. A noticeable facet of Caribbean culture are the folk religions of Vaudou in Haiti, Santeria in Cuba, Shango in Trinidad, and Pocomania in Jamaica, where honor is given to the spirits which are believed to wield power in the universe.

Africa has contributed much more to Caribbean culture, but time would not permit a full treatment of the subject. Let me add, however, that the spontaneity and the informality of African culture have had lasting effects on the Caribbean way of life. On the one hand there is the leisurely, easy-going manner in which we approach most things, including sports such as cricket, as well as how we do not allow ourselves to be slaves to time. Someone said that Caribbean people prefer the Greek time concept of "kairos" (Kairos=the event) rather than "chronos" (chronos=the chronological time). On the other hand there is a sense in which, as Caribbean people, we regard formal relationships as artificial. Our preference is for informal relationships with persons who accept us, not because of our educational qualifications, or economic or political

power, but for ourselves as we are—"down to earth."

### *A Caribbean Theology?*

The question has time and time again been asked, "Is there such a thing as Caribbean theology?" What is behind the question? There is, it seems to me, a feeling that theology is a highly specialized discipline which must lead to the writing of books. Since, compared to Europe and North America, not much has appeared in print from the Caribbean, the conclusion is that there is no Caribbean theology. William Watty speaks about the hesitation or timidity of Caribbean theologians to write. It is more a matter relating to our preference for the oral. It is not that we cannot write, or have nothing to write about. There is also an economic concern. Printing is a very expensive affair, and the market for theological books is by no means booming. So unless one has godparents in the richer nations of the world who will find printing houses which will agree to market our product, we will always be under-represented in the world of theological books.

Behind the question "Is there such a thing as Caribbean theology?" is the snide assumption that nothing good can come out of the Caribbean. Interestingly enough, it is not necessarily persons from outside the region who are negative about our thinking. It is also Caribbean people themselves who are not prepared to place a high value on their own productions. If it comes from Europe or North America, it is good. Do you know that with Caribbean literature, it was only when the printing houses in London produced books by our writers that we of the Caribbean began to look favorably at our contribution to world literature?

My contention is that there *is* such a thing as Caribbean theology. It is a type of theology which is changing in emphasis every day because the region is changing constantly. We have come a long way from the days of the Amerindian inhabitants, through Columbus and the imperial powers, through slavery, neocolonialism, Castro, the failure of a federation, the rise of independent states, acceptance of varying political ideologies and economic systems. Through all these changes we have been reflecting upon what God has been doing in our cultural context. Notwithstanding the absence of books, Caribbean people have been theologizing! Many of our people will tell you that their introductions to the theological process came on the laps of their mothers and grandmothers. Ours is a matrifocal society; the contribution of women has been dominant, particularly in view of the marginal role played by men. It was our women folk who sang songs of Jesus to us, who taught us how to pray, how to talk to God as if God were right next to us in the room. Our women handed down the faith to us. They were not writing down theology in books. They were doing *oral theology*. When they took us to

church, when we were fed on sermons that were couched in an orality which appealed to the hearer through the use of images, proverbial sayings, stories and drama. That is why Caribbean preachers have been reluctant to write down their sermons—because that is only half the job. The more important part is the delivery of those sermons. Video-taping is a more faithful recording of a Caribbean sermon, and I'm sure that this is equally true of the Black preacher in the United States of America!

The oral method of theologizing through dreams and visions, so common among the prophets of the Old Testament, is employed particularly in the independent Baptist and Pentecostal churches across the Caribbean. How many of us are prepared to accept the belief that God can speak, not only through a prepared sermon, but also through dreams and visions? How easy it is to resist the temptation to limit the Spirit of God to a few methods. We must leave the Spirit of God free to bring about revelations in ways that might appear odd to us, but which are genuinely of God.

What matters in the Caribbean today is how God's story is told. The emergence of narrative theology is the natural consequence of having an oral culture, and oral people, many of whom are poor and inarticulate. Such persons find the gospel message more understandable when it is told in story form. Narrative theology is not the only example of how the Biblical message is communicated. It is also when a faithful person gives his or her testimony in church. It is God's story that is being told—how God dealt with him or her in a given situation. Such testimonies help to build up the community of the faithful and increase their dependence upon God. Indeed, through other aspects of the church's worship life, as well as through faithful people facing issues in the social, political, and economic spheres, God becomes more of a reality.

#### *What factors have influenced Caribbean Theology?*

(a) *Western Theology.* In our historical past, we as a Caribbean people embraced the theology passed on by the Europeans. This was "missionary" theology. But it had its limitations. It was denominational in the sense that it tried to defend the doctrines of a particular denomination. In the slave era it tended to be supportive of the status quo. One of our theologians, the late Dr. Idris Hamid of Trinidad, observed that in the missionary period God seemed like the white foreigner who was not "for" us but "against" us. Another well-known Caribbean theologian, Dr. Philip Potter of Jamaica, remarked that when the Spaniards arrived in the region, one of their very first acts was to plant the cross. However, the Arawak and Carib Indians, and later on the Africans and Indians were the ones who bore the burdens of that cross. God seemed to be

against us because the church preferred to remain silent in the face of the injustices of slavery. The way the slaves had the kingdom of God interpreted to them was that "in the sweet bye and bye" when the present life of suffering is over, all will be well. No wonder the slaves sang, "I've got-a-shoes, you've got-a-shoes, all God's children got-a-shoes. When I get to heaven, going to put on me shoes, Going to walk all over God's heaven, heaven, heaven. Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven, ain't going there, heaven, heaven,, Going to walk all over God's heaven!"

Today, Western theology has come under serious critique from the Third World. It is seen as too exclusively western, too elitist, intellectual, too specialized as a discipline, too speculative, too statement-oriented, too much serving the interests of the status quo, and too denominational. We in the Caribbean accept Western theology as one way of doing theology, but not the only way. We employ the fundamentalist approach as well as the critical one in our study of the Bible. We value insights about demythologizing. But we are aware that there are times when demythologizing, as in the case of spirit language, can do an injustice to biblical exegesis. In stories where Jesus supposedly casts out demons, we do not feel duty-bound to suggest that what Jesus really did was to treat a person suffering from a psychiatric disorder. Our way of handling such issues is to admit that many of the so-called "demon-possessed" persons may well have benefited from psychotherapy. However, Jesus did what was culturally acceptable, namely, to cast out the offending demon! In the story of the exorcism which resulted in the drowning of a herd of swine, Jesus was again respecting his culture. Without some visible sign of the "exit of the demons," perhaps there might not have been a cure for the afflicted. We ought not to claim total truth for ourselves. Who knows? As is experienced in Caribbean culture, and as was the case in the time of Jesus, there is no doubt an objective reality called "an evil spirit," or a "demon" about which we know very little, but about which Jesus and his disciples certainly knew a great deal. The implications for pastoral care and counseling are fairly obvious.

One concern about Western theology which we in the Caribbean have is that which is articulated through the mouths of white North American evangelists who either come in person to the West Indies or whose television programs are beamed onto our screens fairly regularly. God is presented as one who will regard those who believe on him with an abundance of wealth. Is it any wonder that our poorer folk equate the "green pastures" with the holding of the "green card" (the permanent visa) and think of the United States as either heaven or the Kingdom of God on earth?

(b) *Third World Theology*. Caribbean people are sympathetic to theologizing that comes out of the Third World in general. Its features are:

- contextual
- based on praxis, i.e., reflection/action process
- Communitarian and multi-disciplinary
- beginning with the poor, the marginalized and oppressed
- ecumenical, and based on a broader understanding of revelation.

Praxis is taken seriously in our theological seminaries, and field education and vocation placements are high priority on the curriculum. In the Caribbean, with the presence not only of Christianity, but of Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and several African-influenced religions, one has to broach questions about the role of the Holy Spirit as the revealer of God's truth. One has to grapple with the supremacy of Christ. Are all religions equally valid? Must Christians evangelize? Is there a way whereby, unknown and incomprehensible to us, Christ is entering other faiths to emerge as the cosmic Christ?

(c) *Liberation Theologies*. The liberation theologians of Latin America have influenced theological thinking in the Caribbean, particularly because they have shown us that faith must be active, not passive. In the struggle to liberate men and women from oppressive and enslaving forces and systems, it is no good sitting back and saying: "We have faith, therefore in God's own good time things will be set right." There is an element of fatalism in such an attitude. Rather, the truly Christian approach is to see ourselves as God's faithful people motivated to action by faith, partnering God in the work of liberation. It is noteworthy that in the ousting from power of the Haitian dictator, Jean-Claude Duvalier, the church played a decisive role. It was the church that inspired its people to reject the injustices and abuses which were being meted out to them by the "tontons macoutes."

Black Theology of liberation both in the United States and South Africa have inspired Caribbean people. Surely God does not will for people to be treated as men and women of worth based on the color of their skin, or on their racial or ethnic origin, God's love is equally extended to all people.

In the Caribbean, we have to see Rastafarianism, which deified the late Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, as a theological attempt to give to Black people a Messiah who was more akin to our cultural roots. Whether or not we want to regard that form of theologizing as heretical or not, I think it has forced the Christian Church to review seriously its program of Christian Education. What images are used in communicating truths about Christ to Caribbean youngsters? Are the pictures and stories told relevant to the Caribbean culture, so that the "incarnation" may be said to take place among us?

#### *Major Emphases in Caribbean Theology*

- (a) *Liberation*. The question of liberation is still a major preoccupa-

tion of Caribbean theologians. How can we be free to be truly Caribbean and truly Christian? Some wonder whether the elements of bread and wine as used in the Lord's Supper should not be changed to some more culturally acceptable things, e.g., in Jamaica, cassava-bread and sorrel. Some concentrate upon producing religious folk songs. There is more experimentation with folk liturgies. Folk religions, which use the people's idioms in music and dance, have much to teach about the relationship between liturgy and life. These religions also are pointing the way which some churches need to go, with respect to women in the ministry/priesthood. It is strange that in the Caribbean, where the woman's leadership in the home and other spheres is totally acceptable, some churches still are reluctant to even entertain the thought of conferring spiritual authority upon women.

(b) *Development*. Cuba has undoubtedly forced the church to engage in serious thinking about development. What has amazed many is the fact that a Marxist-Leninist inspired revolution has apparently created a socio-economic atmosphere where some of the things that we have been praying for within the context of Christianity, for example, a concern for the needs of others, brotherhood and sisterhood, and an end to economic exploitation, seem to have come to pass. The Church has been asking whether socialism is more consonant with the Christian way of life, or whether any social, political or economic system escapes the appellation "demonic." We do not have all the answers to these questions. In fact, we have not even exhausted all the socialist options. We are accustomed to scientifically worked out brands of socialism in Cuba, in Jamaica during the late seventies and early eighties, in the cooperative republic of Guyana, in the Grenada experiment of not so long ago. But just as Nyerere in Tanzania experimented with "ujamaa" or the family concept, so too we have "coumbite" in Haiti and "sousou" in other Caribbean islands, where the general idea is the poor people can achieve if only they will work together. Translated into Christian action, the Church must learn, as it does in rural development projects in Haiti, and in projects within the depressed areas of Kingston, Jamaica, to work not *for* the poor, but *with* the poor, *alongside* the poor. This is the only way to ensure that they maintain their dignity and self-respect as children of God.

(c) *Justice* is an important theme for our Caribbean theologians. What does it mean, in our cultural context, to seek first the kingdom and the "justice" of God? Is it social justice, which ensures equality of opportunity for the different races, for the sexes? How does the "justice" of God as presented in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard relate to our concept of justice? Is the justice of which politicians talk the same? Remember, in that parable, there did not seem to be justice from a trade union point of view. But is it not a question of God's justice being different from our own? And so, we struggle on. And we make our prophetic

pronouncements in the political sphere, because we believe that the preacher has a right so to do.

(d) *Hope*. As a Caribbean people, there is more than enough to make of us a despairing lot. We face natural disasters — hurricanes, floods — every year. But we are hopeful, nevertheless. As the General Secretary of the Caribbean Conference of Churches, the Rev. Allan Kirton, once said: when we reflect upon the rigors of the Middle Passage and how we have not been destroyed as a people, we can all claim to have our Ph.Ds in survival. Hope is a reality for our people. The operative words in Jamaica and in Haiti are “no problem.” This sort of expression might be putting on a bold front; it might be a mere defense mechanism. And yet, knowing our culture, I would say that is not the whole story. Our people *are* hopeful. For us, there is no “God is dead” theology. Because even as we might be grappling with problems about the existence of God, a perceptive sister or brother will testify to having walked with God through a given experience. The cross of Christ gives us hope that in our struggle to survive, we can have life in all its fullness.

(e) *Peace*. The Caribbean has a dream of making our region a zone of peace. But the lessons of Cuba, Grenada and Jamaica tell us that this is not easily achieved. We have our border disputes. The super-powers have their interest in our area. The one thing we do know, is that God’s peace is based on justice. There can be no peace in the face of exploitation, while people are hungry, unhoused, unlettered. Peace goes hand in hand with attempts to remedy illnesses within society.

#### *Ongoing Theological Reflection*

I have merely highlighted certain themes which are significant for ongoing theological reflection. God is real to us as we do our theology. We are not perfect — we have our problems and our failures. But God accepts us as “the people of God.” We are confident that “the right hand of God” is with us at all times and forever.