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# A Latin American Critique of Western Theology

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*This article is abridged.*  
(Editor)

As the title of this paper suggests, its purpose is not academic, but rather practical; not so much to pursue investigation in order to break new ground, as to reflect on the theological situation already in existence in the Western world. In doing so we will touch on certain issues which I believe call for urgent consideration. This will be done not in a destructive critical spirit, but rather with a sincere desire to be objective and to confront reality. Therefore, in line with the realistic approach of our reflection, many quotes and examples are not necessarily taken from books, but rather from the historical reality of our Western world, and from personal reflection.

## TRADITIONAL WESTERN THEOLOGY

Traditionally, Western theology has been characterized by its systematic approach to the subject. The greatest Western theologians have been systematic theologians. In analyzing a bibliographical list of about one hundred theological books written by American and European theologians before 1940, I found in the titles the words “systematic”, “system” or “dogmatics” 26 times. As a contrast, the word “Biblical” appeared only once.

The main characteristic of the systematic theologian is that he begins his theologizing with theological categories like God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, etc., and attempts to give a systematic presentation of the doctrines of the Christian faith. The approach is dogmatic and the reasoning is philosophical and traditional rather than Biblical.<sup>1</sup> Under this approach, Biblical study is completely subordinated to ecclesiastical dogma. That is, the Biblical study is used only to reinforce the dogmatic teachings of the Church. Therefore, the source of dogmatic theology is not the Bible alone, but the Bible as interpreted by Church tradition. This was the theological mentality which prevailed in the traditional Catholic Church during the Middle Ages and even to our day. This mentality has also prevailed in most Protestant theology since the times of the reformation until the p. 14 beginnings of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> It is true that the reformers reacted against the unbiblical character of dogmatic theology and insisted that theology must be founded on the Bible alone. *Sola Scriptura* (“only the Scriptures”) became the motto of most reformers. They insisted on the study of the Biblical languages and emphasized the importance of a consciousness of the role of history in Biblical theology. They also insisted on the literal rather than the historical interpretation of the Bible. However, all this was soon lost in the post-reformation period, and the Bible was once again used uncritically and unhistorically to support orthodox doctrine.

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<sup>1</sup> See Orlando Costas, *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Coverdale House Publishers, Inc., 1974), pp.221–231, where the author says that the theology of liberation is a “theological rebellion” against this form of doing theology.

<sup>2</sup> Some believe, for instance, that John Calvin was more dogmatic and authoritarian than the Pope.

But this Biblical theology which the Reformers fail to establish in the sixteenth century, was destined to resurrect again at a later time. After struggling through the rationalistic-philosophical-liberal historicism approach of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Biblical theology established itself on firm ground during the first part of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> The greatest contribution that Biblical theology has made to Christian thought is threefold: (1) the insistence that the Bible must be allowed to speak for itself, (2) that Biblical theology must be done from a starting point that is Biblical-historical in orientation, and (3) its commitment to sound, scholarly approach to exegesis.

But once again the “Biblical theology” movement has been pronounced dead and some have attempted to bury it for good.<sup>4</sup> According to Brevard Childs in *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (1970), this crisis is due to the fact that the Biblical theology movement tried to combine a liberal critical methodology with a normative Biblical theology. In his opinion, Biblical theologians failed to bridge the gap between exegesis and theology. Whether this crisis in Biblical theology is temporary or permanent remains to be seen.

## WESTERN THEOLOGY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Western theology during the first half of the twentieth century has been characterized by the intense confrontations caused by the upheavals in the intellectual, economic and social spheres. These upheavals were produced by the scientific revolution which took place during the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth.

The scientific revolution was characterized by the inductive method of inquiry. This method is based on two assumptions in the quest for authentic knowledge: (1) direct observation and experimentation is the most reliable way of learning about any subject matter, and (2) rational analysis is the best judge of the reliability of knowledge. The scientific method works on the premise that truth must be found and tested by human experience and inductive thinking.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of a succession of new intellectual developments based on the scientific method that decisively challenged orthodoxy, compelling Christianity to rethink and restate its traditional doctrine. One of these intellectual movements was introduced by Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* (1859), and *The Descent of Man* (1871). Such was the impact of his writings that within a decade or two most American scientists had been converted to the “new biology” with its theory of natural selection. But the influence of Darwin was not confined to biology. Evolutionary thinking permeated almost all intellectual areas. Especially, Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* was seen by many conservatives as a frontal attack on the Genesis version of the creation of man.

Even the study of the Bible was not exempt from the inroads of the new intellectual climate. A second challenge to orthodox Christianity developed when the techniques of “higher criticism”—originating mainly in German universities—were applied to the study of the Scriptures so that the Bible was studied with the same attitude and the same objective and scientific methods as those applied to any other ancient documents. What appeared to the critics to be errors and contradictions in the Biblical text were pointed out; questions of the date and authorship of the various books of the Bible were raised. Time-honoured beliefs, such as the conservative assumption that Moses himself had

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<sup>3</sup> For an extensive survey of the literature on Biblical theology, especially New Testament theology, see George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the editorial in *Interpretation*, 23 (1969), pp.78–80, where R. Grant pronounced the movement a failure.

written the Pentateuch, were denied. From the perspective of the new sciences, the belief that the Bible enjoyed a unique status as a reliable, authoritative source of truth was challenged.

These developments and others, such as the beginnings of the studies of comparative religion, helped to create an atmosphere of intellectual ferment that put conservative<sup>5</sup> religion on the defensive, p. 16 encouraging the further spread of religious liberalism.<sup>6</sup> Among the Protestant Christians three broad positions of response to the new intellectual climate emerged.

First, some Christians, accepting wholeheartedly the discoveries and theories of science as well as the findings of the higher critics, sought to modify the traditional faith drastically in order to make it conform to the new scientific world view. This position became known as “scientific modernism”.

A second group tried to find an intermediate position somewhere between the extremes of total acceptance or total rejection of the new sciences, hoping that the essential of the Christian faith and the new sciences could be reconciled. This movement has been referred to as “evangelical liberalism”, and sometimes as “Christocentric liberalism.”

A third group resisted the new developments strongly, insisting on the retention of the traditional doctrines in an unchanged form and without compromise. Any modification of those doctrines was viewed as heresy, to be resisted at all cost. The conflict between liberals and conservatives that raged in the nineteenth century erupted in its most violent form in the Fundamentalist-<sup>7</sup>Modernist controversy of the early twentieth century.

The major Protestant theology from the late 1930s to the late 1950s has been labelled Neo-Orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup> Its chief concern was the deliberate attempt to return to the teachings of the early Reformers, particularly Luther and Calvin.

The theologians representing this position were convinced that liberal Protestantism had perverted its heritage and changed the Christian faith into a religion different from that which was intended by the early Reformers. Theirs was a protest against liberalism, but not an affirmation of conservatism, although they held to some beliefs to which conservatives also subscribed.

This new movement was essentially a European phenomenon—virtually all of its original leaders were German, Swiss, or English. Its p. 17 influence on American theology was felt mainly in the theological seminaries and among the intelligentsia and less in the local congregations. It did not begin to dominate in the United States until the effects of the depression of the early 1930s began to take their toll on the human spirit.

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<sup>5</sup> A “conservative” has been described as possessing some of the following characteristics: theocratic, otherworldly, revelation, traditional, dogmatic.

<sup>6</sup> A “liberal” has been described as possessing some of the following characteristics: anthropocentric, naturalistic, rationalistic, revisionistic, pragmatic.

<sup>7</sup> A “fundamentalist” is one who subscribes to the five “fundamental” or basic doctrines of Christianity as defined by the Niagara Bible Conference of 1958: (1) the inerrancy of the Scriptures, (2) the virgin birth and divinity of Christ, (3) the belief that Christ took the place of sinners in his death on the cross, thus providing a “substitutionary atonement”, (4) the physical resurrection of Christ from his tomb, and (5) the bodily return of Christ to the earth in his Second Coming.

<sup>8</sup> Although “Neo-Orthodoxy” is the most common designation, it has also been labelled “Neo-Protestantism,” “the New Reformation,” and “Dialectical Theology”.

The problems with which these four responses dealt still remain very much part of the contemporary scene.<sup>9</sup>

With the “death” of the Death-of-God Theology and the spirit of secularism at the end of the sixties, theological thought expressed a peculiar interest in social issues.<sup>10</sup> Another phenomenon which is observed is that theologians confined their efforts primarily to one area of social change. The result was that in the 70’s we witness a splintering of theological thought giving rise to the different contemporary “theologies,” like Black Theology, Feminist Theology, Liberation Theology, etc.<sup>11</sup> We also witness a challenge to the spirit of secularism which has been labelled “new evangelicalism.”<sup>12</sup>

After having briefly surveyed the theological development in the North-Atlantic countries (Europe and the United States), we would now like to reflect on some of its weaknesses. In an attempt to be objective and realistic in our criticism, we would like to express in a very candid manner the way in which European-American theology is perceived from the Third World. This will not be done in a destructive critical spirit; rather our intention is to provide a constructive criticism. This does not mean either that there is nothing good to be said about Western Theology.<sup>13</sup>

In my concept most of the weaknesses of Western theology are p. 18 related to two main factors: ideology and technology. First we will analyze these two phenomena and then we will see how they have affected Western theology.

## THEOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY

When the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he made two profound observations about the religious life of America (United States). First he said that he found the “religious atmosphere” to be the first thing that strikes a visitor from abroad and concluded that “there is no country in the world where Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”<sup>14</sup> The second observation was much more meaningful. He described the religiousness of the New World as a religiousness “which I can only describe as democratic and republican.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For an excellent treatment of the literature and positions of the different theological currents during the first half of the twentieth century, see Deane William Ferm, *Contemporary American Theologies—A Critical Survey* (New York: The Seabury Press), chap. 1. For an excellent treatment of the controversy during this same period, see George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon, Jr., Charles T. Wellborn, *Religion in America* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1975), chap. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Examples of this, for instance, are “The Chicago Declaration” in which over forty leading evangelical leaders expressed their concern for the proper relationship between their faith and the world’s issues, and also the monthly magazine *Sojourners* founded by the People’s Christian Coalition.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the literature of these different theologies, see Deane William Ferm, *Contemporary American Theologies—A Critical Survey*, *ibid.* chaps. 3–5 & Schubert M. Ogden, *Faith and Freedom—Toward a Theology of Liberation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

<sup>12</sup> See Deane William Ferm, *ibid.*, chap. 6.

<sup>13</sup> It is a well known fact that Christians from all theological persuasions and traditions in the Third World benefit today by studying the Bible using the tool, the disciplines and the methodology developed by the excellent scholarship of the North.

<sup>14</sup> *Democracy in America*, edited by J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp.268 and 271.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.265

Tocqueville makes this statement based on his theory that “every religion has some political opinion linked to it by affinity.” Not just any “political opinion”, but a “congenial” political opinion. He believed that “the spirit of man, left to follow its bent, will regulate political society and the city of God in uniform fashion; it will ... seek to harmonize earth with heaven.”<sup>16</sup> Tocqueville’s observation seems to make sense,<sup>17</sup> except that in the case of the United States he could have turned it around for in this country it appears that the government has a congenial religious opinion linked to it, a civil religiousness.

The religious experience which has characterized the American context came into being at about the same time as the formation of the American Republic in the late eighteenth century. It is a well established fact, for instance, that one of the most cherished principles of American democracy, the principle of freedom of religion was established, not by the religious leaders of this country, p. 19 but rather by the political leaders who framed the American constitution, like Thomas Jefferson and Samuel Adams.<sup>18</sup> In the minds of these great leaders the principle of freedom of religion stood side by side with the other three freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly.

This civil religion<sup>19</sup> which has characterized the American religious context, has been expressed throughout the last two hundred years by both political and religious leaders. Nearly all colonial settlers thought of themselves as participating in the birth of a New Israel and couched their rhetoric in the language of the Old Testament. They constantly used the Exodus metaphor around which to organize their thoughts about their life in America. They thought of themselves as having been freed from the bondage and decadence of the Old World in order to enter into the New World—a land flowing with natural riches and spiritual freedom. This attitude was typical of virtually all colonial groups. In requesting a clergyman for South Carolina, for instance, the first governor wrote back home: “The Israelites’ prosperity decayed when their prophets were wanting, for where the ark of God is, there is peace and tranquility.”<sup>20</sup>

Samuel Adams was one of the first prominent political leaders to articulate American civil religion by putting the conflict with England in a Biblical framework. In his speech on

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> This is the case also of proponents of liberation theology, which is fighting for the oppressed class and preaching equality for all men, find a natural link with the political opinion of Marxism which also preaches equality and claims to stand in favour of the oppressed. See for instance José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (1975). He champions socialism as the vehicle of Latin-American liberalism and declares, in support of Karl Marx, that the proper role for theology is to transform, rather than to understand the world, and that Christians are called to participate in the class struggle by identifying with the oppressed.

<sup>18</sup> Most of the religious groups during the colonial period (Congregationalists, Anglicans, etc.), attempted to establish their own religion and impose it on others.

<sup>19</sup> “Civil religion” is a term utilized by scholars to express a sense of destiny in the American nation. The idea, for instance, that God was behind the formation of the United States, as he was behind the formation of the nation of Israel. This is seen, among other things, in the motto “In God we trust”, printed on the coins and bills of its monetary system. This is seen also in the idea that God is on the side of democracy, and therefore will never allow communism to overcome the United States. For a more complete treatment of the theme of civil religion, see George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon Jr., Charles T. Wellborn, in *Religion in America*, *op. cit.* chap. 1.

<sup>20</sup> Edward McCrady, *An Historic Church: The Westminster Abbey of South Carolina—A Sketch of St. Phillip’s Church, Charleston, S.C.* (Charleston, S.C.: Lucas and Richardson Co., 1901), quoted by George C. Bedell, Leo Sandon, Jr., Charles T. Wellborn, *ibid.*, page 32.



“American Independence” at the State House in Philadelphia on August 1, 1776, he likened America to ancient Israel. And then speaking of the prosperity and the military power of the United States, he adds:

There are instances of, I would say, an almost astonishing Providence in our favor; our success has staggered our enemies and almost given faith to infidels; so that we may truly say it is not our own arm which has saved us. The hand of heaven appears to have led us on to be perhaps humble p. 20 instruments and means in the great Providential dispensation which is completing. We have fled from the political Sodom; let us not look back, lest we perish and become a monument of infamy and derision to the world!<sup>21</sup>

In the religious front, the Puritans dreamed of establishing in the New World what they had been unable to establish in England—the “Holy Commonwealth.” But in a real sense, the overwhelming majority of the new settlers, whatever their religious connections, shared in the Puritan dream of a decisively new and better world.

In the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards, generally regarded as the greatest theologian produced in America until the twentieth century, saw the Great Awakening—the remarkable spiritual awakening in the eighteenth century—as clear proof that America was indeed the New Promised Land, and so he expresses it in *The History of the Work of Redemption*.<sup>22</sup> In his work *Thoughts on the Revival*, in a section entitled “The Latter-Day Glory is probably to begin in America,” he expresses his conviction that God has chosen America (the United States) as the final scenario for the manifestation of his glory. And then he adds:

And if we may suppose that this glorious work of God shall begin in any part of America, I think, if we consider the circumstances of the settlement of New England, it must needs appear the most likely, of all American colonies, to be the place whence this work shall principally take its rise. And, if these things be so, it give us more abundant reason to hope that what is now seen in America, and especially New England, may prove the dawn of that glorious day.<sup>23</sup>

This concept, that America is the *New Israel*, the new chosen people of God, has prevailed, perhaps undetected, in the theological thought of American Christianity. Much of the motivation behind the colossal effort to support the gigantic missionary enterprise around the world, is the conviction that God has raised America—especially Anglo-Saxon America—as the *vessel of redemption* of the world.<sup>24</sup>

In the United States, for instance, the “American dream” from the p. 21 beginning of the Republic has been a democratic form of government. The American constitution is based on the four basic principles of human freedom: (1) freedom of speech, (2) freedom of the press, (3) freedom of assembly, and (4) freedom of religion. I personally believe that these four principles are the noblest principles which man could ever have dreamed of. Freedom is the most cherished possession of any mortal being. But freedom, when misused, is a very dangerous thing. That is why democracy is a paradox, because at the

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<sup>21</sup> Frank Moore, ed., *American Eloquence* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1876), p.329.

<sup>22</sup> *The Works of President Edwards* (London: Hughes and Baynes, 1817), vol. V, p.221

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>24</sup> Until a few years ago the only individuals who could qualify for missionary appointment in some denominations were Anglo-Saxon (Americans, Canadians, Europeans). Those Americans belonging to minority groups, like black, latino, oriental, were advised not to apply.

same time that it attempts to protect man's freedom it leaves the doors open for the abuse of that freedom. Therefore democracy carries within itself the seed of its own destruction.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF THEOLOGICAL "NEAR-SIGHTEDNESS"**

In the western world, democracy, in the process of protecting the principles of human freedom, has fostered some "illegitimate children" which now threaten to destroy it. In my opinion, one of the problems with western theology is that because it has developed within the democratic system and it is congenial with it, it has developed a theological "near-sightedness" which has prevented it from detecting these evils and therefore it has not let its prophetic voice be heard on these issues.

One of the direct by-products of democracy is capitalism. Capitalism is based on the principle of "free enterprise," that is the "unlimited freedom" that a person or a corporation has under this system to accumulate goods. But when one puts this principle of free enterprise with the basic greedy spirit of man's nature you are bound to have a problem. This peculiar combination has produced in the Western world some phenomena with which Western theology has not dealt adequately. We shall mention but three of them.

### **(a) The Problem of Riches**

One of the direct results of democracy is riches. The principle of free enterprise has given rise to gigantic and powerful corporations.<sup>25</sup> At the same time it has produced some unbelievably rich individuals who own their own financial empires and control a large part of the world's riches.<sup>26</sup> Below the "multi-millionaire class" is the much p. 22 larger "rich class," and below it is the "middle class" which comprises the majority of the population of the North Atlantic nations. It is estimated that in the United States, for instance, out of a population of almost 250 million, nearly 200 million belong in one of these three categories. Among them are most of the more than 60 million Americans who can be found in a Christian church almost any given Sunday. Prosperity is one of the main characteristics of the American church-goer. The typical Anglo-Saxon congregation is made up of well dressed and well groomed people, representing at least a middle class mentality, among which a poorly dressed and uneducated person would feel uncomfortable.

But in spite of this reality Western theology has not dealt adequately with the issue of riches. Although the Bible had much to say about riches, the Western theologian—consciously or unconsciously—has failed to deal with this important issue. Do the words of Jesus "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" ([Matt. 19:24](#)), have any meaning for a rich society?<sup>27</sup>

### **(b) The Problem of Abundance and Waste**

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<sup>25</sup> So powerful are some of these corporations that it is estimated that during the current recession the three largest auto-makers combined have lost during the last two years more than 2 billion dollars and still managed to stay in business.

<sup>26</sup> As an example of this affluence, Jacqueline Onassis boasts of the fact that she possesses over 1,200 coats.

<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that there are no poor people in the United States. The latest issue of *U.S. News and World Report* (August, 1982), reports that there are 32 million Americans who are classified in the category of poverty.



Very closely related to the problem of riches is the problem of abundance and waste. It is estimated that the food and clothing which is wasted in the Western world would be enough to feed and clothe the poor population of the world. But although politicians have expressed deep concern about this issue,<sup>28</sup> Western theology has not addressed the issue of the relationship of abundance and waste to the Christian responsibility to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and help the sick.

### **(c) The Problem of Overeating and Obesity**

While one third of the population of the world goes to bed every night hungry and worrying about what they are going to eat the next day, the average American Christian goes to bed worrying about how he or she can eat less in order to lose weight. While thousands of people starve to death every day around the world, the problem of the typical American child is to decide every morning which kind of [p. 23](#) cereal to have for breakfast, and the problem of many adult Christians is to decide in which restaurant they are going to eat.

In spite of the relevance of this situation, to the Christian life Western theologians have remained strangely silent concerning the relationship of obesity and gluttony to the Biblical principle that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit ([1 Cor. 6:19](#)).

## **THEOLOGY AND MODERN TECHNOLOGY**

The second phenomenon which has influenced Western theology, especially in the United States of America, is modern technology.<sup>29</sup> We live in the age of explosions. And one of the most amazing of them is the “technological explosion.” This technological explosion through the aid of computers and artificial satellites has increased man’s knowledge and his capacity to learn at an unbelievable pace. This in turn has forced on us the age of “specialization”. In the United States to have a degree is not enough. Unless you can add the word “specialist” to your degree you are doomed to fail in your profession. The degree of specialization is such that a lung specialist will not dare treat a heart patient, or vice-versa. The same could be said about automobile mechanics.

Teaching has not escaped the age of specialization. The most coveted degree in the United States is a Ph.D., a very highly specialized degree.<sup>30</sup> To obtain a Ph.D. is a sign of “having arrived”. For a northern theologian to be well versed in other disciplines like Biblical Literature, Church history, Philosophy, etc., is the exception rather than the rule.<sup>31</sup> When to a colleague of mine—a specialist in theology—it was suggested that he might have to teach New Testament introduction for one quarter, he blushed, and excused himself by saying, “Oh no, I can’t teach New Testament; I’m a theology man.” [p. 24](#)

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<sup>28</sup> A recent dispatch said that a group of concerned U.S. Senators, in order to dramatize the problem of waste, organized a banquet entirely with wasted food picked up from garbage cans.

<sup>29</sup> In the last regional meeting of the Institute Research Westcoast (March, 1982) a specialist on computers spoke of a monumental project in which she is involved in programming the Bible in its original languages, added that “those scholars who are not experts in computers will not be able to compete in the new generation of computer-minded scholars.”

<sup>30</sup> I was told of a Ph.D in English who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the use of the word “if” but said he didn’t know much about the preposition “but”.

<sup>31</sup> The Latin American Theological Fraternity is one such exception. The members of the Fraternity are not necessarily “theologians” but rather representatives of many different disciplines—Church historians, secular historians, sociologists, anthropologists, pastors, etc.

## CONSEQUENCES OF SPECIALIZATION

This phenomenon of specialization has isolated the North Atlantic theologians in their own discipline depriving them of the benefits of an inter-disciplinary scholarship. This situation has produced two major problems which have characterized much of northern theology.

### “IVORY-TOWER” THEOLOGY

This profound sense of “specialization” and “professionalism” has led the theologian to develop an “ivory-tower” theology, produced mostly in the office and in the library. This type of theology, which is a mere academic exercise and is usually out of touch with reality, is destined to be shortlived.

The best example of this is the death-of-God theology, and the spirit of “Secularism” of the 1960’s. By the end of the 60’s the death-of-God theology, which made headlines at the beginning of the decade even in the secular press (*Time* magazine dramatized the proclamation of the “death of God” on the cover of one of its issues), had virtually vanished. By the end of the decade most death-of-God theologians and those theologians who were proponents of secularism had either greatly modified their position, or were not taken seriously, or had stopped doing theology.

Although the fleeting popularity of the death-of-God theology was due in part to exaggerations by the public press which precipitated both its dramatic rise and rapid fall, the weakness of this type of theology was clear. Not only was it an “ivory tower” theology which consisted only of an academic exercise, but also it tended to accept uncritically the notion that secularization is a good thing, and capitulated to the narrow and arbitrary concerns of the modern world. As Deane William Ferm says, “the death-of-God theologians failed to heed the warning of the philosopher George Santayana that he who becomes married to the spirit of the times is destined to become a widower in the next generation”.<sup>32</sup>

### LACK OF TOUCH WITH REALITY

This phenomenon of specialization has produced theology out of touch with reality. Although the new sub-theologies are attempting to correct this, still it is an unquestionable fact that North American P. 25 theology has not dealt with some of the basic issues which prevail in western society. We will mention only three of them.

#### Ecology

We have always taken the beauty of this world for granted. We thanked the Creator for its grandeur and majesty in our hymns and prayers, but at the same time failed to relate to creation. The command to subdue the earth and have dominion over it ([Genesis 1:28](#)), has been interpreted by man as permission to exploit it.

As a consequence, the ecological crisis is more serious than many of us believe. The experts who are analyzing the information which is available are alarmed at the gravity of the world situation today. We are contaminating the atmosphere, the oceans, the rivers

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<sup>32</sup> *Contemporary American Theology—A Critical Survey*, op.cit., p.35

and the fields. Not only that, but the earth is running out of resources so essential for the survival of mankind such as water, air, energy and food.<sup>33</sup>

Although we believe that “The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” ([Psalm 24:1](#)) the neglect of the natural world in the theology of the North-Atlantic is undeniable. Only in the last decade have we witnessed some theological concern for the condition of the world in which we live.<sup>34</sup> But no in-depth treatment has been attempted on this subject.

### **The Social Problems**

Northern theology has failed to deal with the social problems which are undermining the very moral foundations of the northern nations.

The problems of divorce seem to be getting out of control. After generations of indiscriminately condemning divorce and refusing to deal with this issue, suddenly the church is discovering that a great number of the people who sit in the pews on Sunday morning are divorced people.

The problems of drugs among the adult population, especially in professional sports and the entertainment world is appalling. Also youth are caught in the drug problem. A law officer said not long ago concerning this problem, that if they had to put behind bars all those who engage in the consumption of drugs in California, they would have to jail half of the population. Many churches are beginning to p. 26 have serious problems with drugs among their youth, but as yet, theology has not addressed this problem.

The problem of corruption and immorality both private and public in the United States is shocking the public. Crime is running rampant. The underworld seem to have a free hand in the government, the unions, and the business world in general. Why is it that Christian ethics have not made a greater impact in American society? In a recent trip to communist China, the author was impressed by the high degree of personal ethics of the average Chinese, a people who do not claim to be religious.

### **Civil Rights**

The struggle for civil rights has been a perennial one in the United States, a struggle which almost tore the country apart in the 1960s. Politicians, students and the average citizen could not avoid being involved in it. But somehow the church managed to keep silent during the turmoil. Theology had nothing to say.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is the responsibility of each generation to declare the Christian truth within the framework of its own time and situation. Therefore, if our theology is going to be relevant for the “here and now” we must have cultural sensitivity. Our task is not to make theology *per se*, but rather, we must be concerned with what Charles H. Kraft calls Christian “ethnotheology”,<sup>35</sup> which he defines as that discipline “that takes both Christian theology

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<sup>33</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the ecological crisis see Dayton Roberts, *Running Out* (Glendale, California: Regal Books, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> For a survey of what has been written on the subject, see John Carmody, *Theology for the 1980's* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), chap. 2.

<sup>35</sup> See Kraft’s excellent essay on the subject, “Towards Christian Ethnotheology,” in *God, Man and Church Growth*, ed. A. R. Tippet (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973) pp.109–126.

and anthropology while devoting itself to an interpretative approach to the study of God, man and divine-human interaction.”<sup>36</sup>

In conclusion, what relevance does this situation have for the Third World church? Very much indeed, for at least two reasons:

First, whether we want to admit it or not, the Third World church is the “daughter” or the product of the so-called “mother church” in the north. As children the Third World churches have inherited the North Atlantic theological mentality. Until a few years ago all we had was an imported theology, which was being applied around the world without any attempt to contextualize it.<sup>37</sup> p. 27

Second the difference between the political, economic, sociological and ecclesiological situation in the countries of the North Atlantic and the countries of the Third World, is as great as the difference between day and night. The contrast between riches and poverty, abundance and hunger, gluttony and starvation, is obvious. But in spite of these differences as members of the same body of Christ, the church, should not forget that our task is first and foremost missiological.

I agree with the northern theologians that it is high time that the Third World and North Atlantic theologians entered into a meaningful dialogue.<sup>38</sup> But I disagree with them in that we Third World theologians refuse to dialogue with them. I believe that Third World theologians are as anxious to dialogue as our North Atlantic counterparts are, but I believe that this dialogue will not be possible until the theologians of the North Atlantic experience what René Padilla calls “an epistemological conversion”. Then and only then will we engage in a meaningful dialogue.

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# **An African Critique of Western Theology**

**Billy K. Simbo**

The topic under consideration is very extensive and challenging. One could pursue many possible angles of approach and points of emphasis, but time and space do not allow for a detailed, technical study. I have, therefore, chosen to give a non-technical, brief analysis. I will examine western theology purely from the perspective of a Third World person from Africa.

By western theology we mean the western Christian’s beliefs and formulations concerning God and man’s relationship with Him. We shall treat the subject under two headings. Under the first we will examine the origins and background of Western

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, page 110.

<sup>37</sup> In 1970, in the first consultation of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, in Cochabamba, Bolivia, Samuel Escobar dealt with this phenomenon in his paper “The Biblical Content and the Anglo-Saxon Trappings in Latin American Theology”, in *Occasional Bulletin*, §3, Oct., 1972.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance, “An Open Letter to Josée Miguez Bonino,” in *Christianity and Crisis*, March 29, 1976, in response to his book *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*.