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A Latin American Critique of Latin American Theology

Samuel Escobar and Pedro Arana, Valdir
 Steuernagel, Rodrigo Zapata

THE SETTING OF THIS REFLECTION

This reflection would like to be “Evangelical” and “Latin American”, and consequently demands an explanation for our brethren in other parts of the so-called Third World. From the viewpoint of statistics, Latin America is Christian. More than 90% of the population in most of our countries are registered as Catholics in the census. Within a century after Columbus’ discovery in 1492, millions had been baptized, churches had been built in every important town and city, thousands of tons of gold and silver had been taken to the treasuries of Rome and Spain as tithes and offerings from the new Christians and several universities had been founded that had a theological school as the center of their life. It was a marvellous example of what the engineers of mission call today “Church Growth”!

Such facts explain why in 1910, when the great churches of Europe gathered in Edinburgh to consider the evangelization of the world, they discarded Latin America as a mission field. It was already Christian! It was precisely the “Evangelicals” inside the great denominations who insisted that ours were pagan lands in need of the Gospel. We thank God for them now. It was their insistence on faithfulness to the Gospel as a real mark of Christianity, rather than a naive acceptance of statistics and external signs, that explains now the existence of a growing Evangelical minority in search of identity and mission. Thus for us, faithfulness to the Gospel is a value which we place above a desire for numerical growth. That may help others to understand the nature of our theological commitment.

Furthermore, we are close neighbours of the United States of America and it is impossible to avoid reference to our big neighbour in any effort to understand our own reality. Waldron Scott, the former Secretary of the World Evangelical Fellowship wrote an enlightening paper about the role of the multinationals in “controlling the fortunes of nations and peoples ... in the third world”, and pointed out the fact that the American companies dominate the scene. Consequently, though already in 1902 the book *The American Invaders* was published in London, and in the sixties Servan Schreiber wrote in Paris about *The American Challenge*, it has been in Latin America that economists, sociologists and theologians have made the p. 49 imperial presence of the USA, and its physical and spiritual consequences, the object of more systematic and articulate study.¹

TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC THEOLOGY²

The process of “Christianization” of Latin America in the XVIth century was closely linked to military conquest by Spain and Portugal. “Evangelization” was the moral justificative of the imperial adventure. The cross was imposed by the sword. So during the three centuries of the colonial period some features of Catholic theology were:

Scholasticism

Spain transplanted medieval Thomist (Aquinas) theology. Theological teaching and activity was simply the repetition and commentary upon what the “Angelic doctor” had already defined. The Bible was completely absent from the missionary efforts.

Ideology for conquest.

Theology provided an explanation of the conquest and was used to create intellectual consensus to the Iberian presence. Especially as taught to natives it stressed other-worldliness. Jesuits developed dispensational eschatology.³

Anti-Protestantism

Spain saw itself as the defender of the faith against Protestants. The Inquisition was very active in combating heresies. People who never had a chance to read Calvin or Luther would refer to them as “children of the devil and enemies of mankind”.

Though there were some theologians and priests who opposed this praxis and this theology,⁴ this is the dominating line that lasted until the late part of the XIXth century. Syncretistic manifestations of faith still take masses of Catholics to the streets. There are rural parts of Latin America where this traditional Catholicism still predominates, and is taught in schools and the army. p. 50

THE PROTESTANT IMPACT

¹ Waldron Scott in *Church and Nationhood*, WEF Theological Commission.

² John A. Mackay, *The Other Spanish Christ*. Recently a liberation theology historian has delved deep into this, Enrique Dussel.

³ Spanish Evangelical theologian José Grau has shown the Catholic origins of Dispensationalism in his book *Escatologia*, CLIE, Barcelona, 1978.

⁴ Lewis Hanke, *The Fight for social justice in the conquest of America*.

Protestantism arrived at the beginning of the XIXth century and in the wake of revolution against Spain. The basic message of the Reformation—Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, Solo Christo—had a powerful impact and had elements that were part of the modernization process. The theological heritage thus received was transmitted and following notes are important:

The liberating role of the Bible

In many places the Bible arrived before the missionaries. People then entered into a religious experience that required literacy and stimulated an open mind for free examination of the text. Love for the Word and an emphasis on “Bible without notes” characterized early protestantism.⁵

A polemic faith

Sola Fide (and not good works), Solo Christo (and not the Virgin Mary also) were points of constant polemics in evangelization. The debate of the Reformation was not out of place or “foreign” because the reality of Catholicism was that of the Pre-Reformation. Christology emphasized the resurrected Christ in contrast with the infant or suffering Christ of popular Catholicism. The correlate was an emphasis on the transforming power of the Gospel.

An Anabaptist stance

Rome’s reaction, and use of social coercion and police against Protestants, created in the latter an attitude that was basically critical of society and eager to change it. Evangelicals became suspicious of the marriage of church and state, and fought for secularization of education and life that would free society from the grip of Rome. Their ecclesiology was that of a faithful minority, but committed to gain the whole population for Christ, for the true Christ.⁶

This militant Protestantism was basically Evangelical and it grew fast. Its hopefulness and sense of mission was well expressed by Brazilian theologian Erasmo Braga who wrote in 1916 after the Evangelical Congress of Panama: “... (the) lesson from history allows us to hope that under the impact of a simple but sincere Gospel [p. 51](#) message, such as that preached by the Apostle in ancient Rome, there will also come for Latin America an end of paganism”.⁷

DEVELOPMENTS LEADING TO THE CURRENT SITUATION

If the Second World War is taken as a milestone to understand the current social and religious situation, we could say that between the wars a process of ferment was taking place in church and in society. Within Catholicism, the forces that exploded in the Vatican II Council had been at work for decades. The Biblical movement of Cardinal Bea had already started in the twenties and with it Ecumenical cooperation between Protestants and Catholics in Bible scholarship. The two wars and the rise of Communism had forced

⁵ Bible Societies agents were the *avant garde* of Protestant missions in A.L.

⁶ Samuel Escobar, *The Kingdom of God, Eschatology and Political and Social Ethics in Latin America*, LATF Bulletin, 1975/1.

⁷ Erasmo Braga, *Panamericanismo: Aspecto Religioso*, New York 1916.

the Catholic Church to new definitions in the area of the relationship between church and society.⁸

Within Protestantism the forces were split by the Liberal-Fundamentalist debate, especially in the English-speaking world, which was the one with a larger missionary force overseas. The Neo-Orthodox reconstruction was not complete from an Evangelical perspective⁹ and serious theological work was paralyzed by the extremism of Fundamentalism with its reductionist theology and police methods. Only in the forties did we start to see the beginning of serious scholarship, especially Bible scholarship in England.¹⁰

The post-war period after 1945 became the cold-war, with tensions of a world divided in two camps, bitterly opposed and engaged in an arms race that has not stopped since. The end of European colonialism in Asia and Africa gave birth to the appearance of the Third World. To the surprise of many, Independence and Nationalism did not mean the end of Christianity in the former colonies, and vigorous national churches developed in many of those places where two-thirds of the population of this world live. However, theology among Evangelicals has not yet explored with Biblical perspective the real significance of this new fact. We are in a way taking first steps in this consultation!

REPERCUSSION OF THESE DEVELOPMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA

The fifteen years between the end of World War II and the Cuban P. 52 revolution triumphant with Fidel Castro, were a period of loss of hope about the possibilities of democratic reforms that would change the deep-seated evils of Latin American society. Though at the end of World War II many Latin American leaders were enthusiastic about democracy and suspicious of totalitarianism, their efforts to achieve rapid change through democracy were hindered by the repeated military coups at the service of the more conservative forces. The foreign policy of the United States, committed in Europe to defend democracy and a free world against Communism, was supportive of strong military regimes and thus destructive of democratic hopes in Latin America. In the atmosphere of a cold-war it is easy for any dictator in Latin America to label his enemies as Communists and thus justify terror, corruption and postponement of desperately needed reforms.

The brief interim of encouragement to democratic structural reforms through Alliance for Progress, during the Kennedy era, ended in blood and shame when the U.S. marines invaded Santo Domingo in 1965, and helped to destroy a democratically elected government. Latin American countries are thus forced to accept a false alternative: either they accept the model of development imposed by U.S.A. through the World Bank and the multinational corporations, or else they have to accept the model of violent revolution proclaimed by different forms of nationalism with the aid of Russia and China.

It is within this situation that we can understand the movement towards breaking away from the hegemonic dominance of the North Atlantic nations, which is seen by some

⁸ The best summary of this is G. Thils, *Corrientes Actuales de la Teologia*, Troquel.

⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelical Responsibility in Contemporary Theology*, Eerdmans, 1957 is the best evaluation of Fundamentalism's failure.

¹⁰ Especially in circles linked to IVF and The Tyndale Fellowship in Cambridge.

as true liberation. *Liberation* means in this case breaking away from the economic, political and cultural dependence in which the Latin American nations live.¹¹

Within Roman Catholicism the post war period was a time of ferment. An effort at self-criticism was motivated partly by the Protestant advance, trying to imitate its evangelistic and pastoral methods: mobilization of laymen, special work among youth, music, house churches. The reforms of Vatican II, especially the liturgical reforms and the new emphasis on the Bible, came to help this development, and we see part of this in the documents of the Medellin Episcopal Conference (1968).

However, a more vocal and decisive movement appears among those working among university students, labour unions and p. 53 marginal poor areas in both urban and rural situations. The “praxis” of priests, nuns and laymen in these segments of society puts them in contact with militant political groups active there also. The idea that their religious ministry has to be put within the context of a fight for liberation draws them close to marxists and socialists. It is important to realize that Gustavo Gutierrez, the now famous Peruvian theologian, was adviser to the Catholic Union of University students, adviser to a group of Peruvian priests working among slum-dwellers and professor at the Catholic University in Lima.

When political circumstances seemed to be leading towards a shift of Latin America towards socialism, this movement became publicly known at the Conference of Christians for Socialism (Santiago de Chile, 1971). It became clear that an important segment of the Roman Catholic Church had decided to cooperate with the movements fighting for the socialist project. However, long before that they had become influential at the theological level in the Episcopal Conference of Medellin. The language of this new theology could be detected in the official Document that came out of it.¹²

Within Protestantism the post-war period was also a time of ferment and we can point out two developments. Within some of the so-called historical churches that had the more developed theological institutions, the social situation of Latin America became an object of research and reflection. A para-church group called “Church and society in Latin America” (ISAL) published several books and a magazine where this reflection and research reached the public. Separating itself rapidly from the churches ISAL went through a process of radicalization and loss of its Protestant sources. It eventually became linked to the Liberation movement within the Catholic Church.¹³

The post-war and post-China situation meant also the arrival of a new missionary wave in Latin America. Coming especially from the U.S.A. it shared the militant anti-Communist stance of the cold war attitude in that nation, and the bitter experience of expulsion from China. This trend accentuated attitudes that were already at work in the midst of Evangelicals in Latin America. Different from the initial missionary efforts, some faith missions were quite weak in their Protestant theology and majored in Evangelism at the expense of serious theological training for leaders. This coupled with a rapid p. 54 popularity of Dispensationalism not only stopped theological reflection but also impoverished the heritage already existing.

Applying categories from the Liberal-Fundamentalist debate of North America, an unnecessary gap was created between theological work taking place in denominational

¹¹ The first part of José Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a revolutionary situation*, Fortress, 1975, gives a well documented summary of this process.

¹² Medellin was a milestone for Catholicism in Latin America. It is the name of the city of Colombia where Bishops conferred in 1968. The final *Document* has probably been published in English by Orbis Press.

¹³ C. René Padilla ed. *Fe Cristiana y America Latina Hoy*, Certeza, 1974.

and Union Seminaries and the more evangelistically oriented free churches and missions. The result could be seen in the book *Latin American Theology: radical or Evangelical?* by missionary Peter Wagner. The book tried to fit several Evangelical and non-Evangelical thinkers from Latin America into the simplistic pattern of Liberal-Fundamentalist categories. But at the point of trying to find “Evangelical alternatives” Wagner also demonstrated the utter poverty of theological reflection in the free conservative churches.

Finally, in this period a new phenomenon also became evident. The rise of Pentecostalism as a new force that, though placed among the Protestant forces, represented a new ecclesiastical and theological reality. Without articulate theological expression, its vitality however corresponded to a life that was expressing certain living truths that have not yet found systematic interpreters.

THE CHALLENGE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

There is not just one “theology of liberation”; it is more correct to speak today of “theologies of liberation”. However, if for the sake of simplicity we try to find some common general lines we could recognize a threefold challenge from theologies of liberation. Gustavo Gutierrez defines theology as “a critical reflection on the historical praxis in the light of faith”. So we will consider the primacy of praxis, a critical reflection about it and the hermeneutical method.

The primacy of praxis

Severino Croatto, one of the Bible scholars in the liberation theology movement has said:

A theology of liberation is not worked out with books, not even with the deep knowledge of biblical exegesis. The biblical message springs out of the event ... Theology was a logos about the biblical God who is the God-of-history, before being “dried out” into a rationalist system. The saving event is the starting point of all theology. For a Latin American theology of liberation there is no other primary source than the Latin-American-facts-of-liberation. Again, the facts “un-cover” the meaning.¹⁴ p. 55

The theological itinerary is clear: you first perceive God moving in history and consequently throw in your lot with Him; only then you go to Scripture or to Christian truth in order to read. Praxis comes first, it is in their missionary praxis among the poor that liberation theologians say they have discovered where history is going, in what direction God is moving.

When they started to deal with issues like infant mortality, salaries of misery, fight for the rights of the workers, effects of inflation on the daily life of the poor, defence of landless natives, they came to the conclusion that the way out was in a global process that would change the economic system from the roots. These facts had to be dealt with in a scientific way and they came to the conclusion that Marxism was the science that illuminated the facts and offered a way out. Gutierrez says:

We are not in the middle ages, but in the end of the 20th century, nor are we in Europe, but in Latin America. The science of today is not Aristotelian philosophy but Marxist

¹⁴ Severino Croatto, *Liberacion y Libertad*, Mundo Nuevo 1973, p.20.

sociology. Perhaps it is for all of this that liberation theology proposes to us not so much a new theme of reflection as a new way to do theology.¹⁵

From the adoption of Marxism as science we can understand the conclusion that non-Marxist political movements are not adequate. Some theologians of liberation use their hardest terms for Social democrats or other parties that propose a reform of existing structures. Nothing but revolution can be accepted as adequate by Marxism. And that is the only acceptable praxis for the Christian, say many liberation theologians.

Critical reflections and historical awareness

One of the immediate consequences of reflecting about your praxis is to revise history, your own personal history and the history of Christians. In the case of Catholics in Latin America there is even an effort now to re-write history from the view point of this revision. A social scientist writing along this line has thus judged the missionary work of the Roman church in Peru:

A mission effort that, save for the very rare and individual exceptions, has never realized or even wanted to realize that it operates as a colonialist dominating force. And we are talking of a church that was founded by a p. 56 revolutionary and oppressed Man, and preached in Peru during the four and a half centuries of its presence here, by a mission that has been consciously or unconsciously at the service of oppressors.¹⁶

Many Evangelicals would agree with this statement, and we find similar ideas in the missionary literature written by Protestants at the beginning of this century.¹⁷ But the historical revision done by theologians and historians in the liberation movement tends to generalize and apply the rule to all missionary action. Thus the famous *Barbados Declaration* states:

The missionary presence has always implied the imposition of criteria and patterns of thought and behaviour alien to the colonized Indian societies. A religious pretext has too often justified the economic and human exploitation of the aboriginal population.¹⁸

The final point in this form of revision of history is to conclude that the church has always been classist, i.e. an institution at the service of one social class: the exploiters. It is true that the church has had the poor in her ranks but it has been to teach them to be quiet, obedient and submissive to those in power.¹⁹ This conclusion goes along with the view that history can only be understood as the result of class struggle.

In the case of the Catholic church in Latin America theologians are asking the church to change sides in her political alignment. She has always been involved in politics, but on the wrong side.

The hermeneutical method

¹⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Teologia de la Liberacion*, CEP, 1971. (English translation *Theology of Liberation*, Orbis, 1973) pp.31–33 of Spanish version.

¹⁶ Stefano Varese, "Mission Work, Native Societies and Liberation" in LADOC Keyhole series No.2, *The Theology of Liberation*, p.31.

¹⁷ See for instance, Thomas B. Neely, *South America*, NY, 1910.

¹⁸ "Declaration of Barbados", in W. Dostal, ed. *The Situation of the Indian in South America*, WCC, 1972, p.378.

¹⁹ In this, several theologians of Liberation follow the marxist theory about religion used by Karl Kautsky in his *History of Christianity*.

It is from this praxis and this reflection that we then arrive at Scripture in search of light. The Catholic theologians of liberation have taken very seriously their hermeneutical task. Severino Croatto and Porfirio Miranda are professional Bible scholars. Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo and Gustavo Gutierrez have an evident debt to Bible scholars, mostly Protestant, but also Catholic.²⁰ There is a need for serious evangelical scholarship to take their challenge. In part of this section we already quoted Croatto's description of his method. His **p. 57** Catholic stance in face of Scripture appears clearly in the following lines:

... it is not by deepening theoretically in the study of Scriptures or the Christian faith that one comes to acknowledge God in the events. Truth is the opposite way: because the Christian has "grace" (that comes from the prophetic "Spirit" which is given through Baptism) he is able to discover God in his history not only individually but also communally and universally and he has also the gift of penetrating the unsearchable riches of God.²¹

We first discover God in history and throw in our lot with Him. Only then can we penetrate into the meaning of His word. It is when we are fighting for the defence of the poor that we understand better the God who liberates Israel in the Exodus. We do not have access to the truth of the Bible from the ground of neutrality or non-commitment.

There is more, however. If Marxist science helps us to understand our own world today, it can also help us to understand the context in the biblical world. Social class analysis can then be applied to Scripture. Thus Croatto makes a distinction between a "factic nuclei" in the Exodus and a theological interpretation. Why not accept the "factic nuclei" and reject the theological interpretation as outmoded or conditioned by the social class of the writer and his interests?²² Another scholar of this school, protestant Jorge Pixley applies the methodology and dismisses Paul while accepting some parts of the Synoptics.²³

For an Evangelical it is clear that these theologians generally accept the "scientific" conclusions of higher criticism, redaction criticism, form criticism and the historical scepticism of Bultmann. Evidently, some elements of classical liberalism are here combined with the Marxist analysis. The strength of their argument however, is that because of our praxis or lack of it, because of our belonging to a social class, our way of reading of Scripture is never neutral, we bring to Scripture a pre-understanding of the text. That becomes evident in the choice of books and passages for our hermeneutical task, and so large portions of Scripture like the Exodus, the Prophets, or the more critical sayings of Jesus have remained obscure or untouched.

AN EVANGELICAL EVALUATION

As was pointed out in the previous section *Repercussion of these* **P. 58** *developments in Latin America* paragraph seven, we cannot say that there is an Evangelical theology in Latin America. In the following lines of evaluation we will be sharing insights that are part of the work of the Latin American Theological Fraternity. The LATF is committed precisely to a theological task that at the same time will be faithful to the Gospel and relevant to the

²⁰ It would be important to ask the question why Catholic scholars have not become acquainted with Evangelical scholarship.

²¹ S. Croatto, *Int. op. cit.*

²² *Ibid.* p.20.

²³ Jorge Pixley, *Reino de Dios*, La Aurora (English translation by Orbis)

situation and needs of the Church and the world in our continent today. Our common platform was clearly established in our first consultation in 1970. Revelation, Authority of the Bible, Inspiration and Hermeneutics were our subjects. We grappled and struggled passionately to come to a common consensus. We tried there to establish the difference between the Biblical content and the Anglo-Saxon trappings in our heritage. In the initial volume that Peter Savage edited, we had really traced a programme where the seeds for an adequate criticism of Liberation theology were already present.²⁴

As we evaluate some challenges of Liberation theologies in detail, we will also be pointing out some of the weaknesses in our own Evangelical community, and some of the gaps in our theology.

The primacy of God's Word

For ourselves as Evangelicals, the Word of God is eternal. It was there before we even existed as people of God. It is the Word that brought the world to be, the call that made of Abraham a people, the Word that produces new life in the new birth. Of course we cannot separate God's Word from God's Spirit in action. Nor are we saying that God's saving events did not precede the written record of them. But what we are saying is that the written Word of God is not a product of the literary activity of the Church. Rather, the Church is the result of the preached Word that we find registered in Scripture. In good Evangelical theology the Church bows before the authority of the Word.²⁵

Human traditions and systems, the praxis of the Christian and the non-Christian, every historical moment, all are to be illuminated by the Word of God and judged by it. At every point of their pilgrimage on earth God's people have to subject their praxis to the light and judgement of God through his Word. Here is where we have found the weakness of traditional Evangelical theology as we received it in p. 59 Latin America. It has not dealt adequately with our own situation. René Padilla contended in Lausanne 1974 that the praxis of many Christians was more the praxis of their culture than the praxis taught by God's word, and that they were unable to see it. The Lausanne Covenant warns us: "We need both watchfulness and discernment to safeguard the Biblical Gospel. We acknowledge that we ourselves are not immune to worldliness of thought and action, that is to a surrender to secularism".²⁶

Disposition for praxis necessary for understanding

Though for us the Word is the beginning we have to acknowledge that in the Bible: "if any man's will is to do his will, he shall know ..." (Jn. 7:17). This saying of Jesus has a long and rich background in the Old Testament teaching that to know is to do, to love is to obey. Only if we are ready for obedience can we understand and have eternal life. To understand God's Word is not only an intellectual process of grasping some propositions; it is submission to the Spirit of God. It touches the will; it is openness to correction.

There are many humble Christians who practice the two commandments. They are expressing their love to God and their love to the neighbour, and they *know* better than theologians who discuss academically the intricacies of the text and the methodology of its inspiration.

²⁴ Pedro Savage, Ed. *El Debate Contemporáneo sobre la Biblia*, EEE, 1972. Several of the chapters of this book were published in the LATF Bulletin in English between 1970 and 1972.

²⁵ René Padilla, *The Authority of the Bible*, LATF Bulletin No.2/1972. Norberto Saracco, *The Word and the Spirit in the Evangelizing Community*, LATF Bulletin 2/1980.

²⁶ *Lausanne Covenant*, par. 12.

This openness to correction and obedience demands that theology be contextual, because obedience is located in the here and the now. Theology cannot limit itself to the scholastic repetition of formulas coined in Geneva or Princeton by people who had their own praxis in their own day. During the Second Congress on Evangelism in Lima (CLADE II), several theologians of the LATF took the central concepts of the Gospel and tried to expound them in the context of Latin America today: Word and Spirit, Sin and Salvation, Christ and Antichrist, Hope and Despair. As we examined these basic themes we were astonished to discover that the task had never been done before, and that some Evangelicals were very impatient with it: "If this has already been done in England, Germany or U.S.A. by so and so, why should we waste our time? Let us learn methodologies; that is what counts".²⁷ p. 60

Marxism is not science but an ideology

To begin with we question that science can be the ultimate source of truth and guidance for man. Scientism is the spirit of this age. Acknowledging the limits of science in no way means denying its value and use. However in the case of Marxism there is more to be said. Marxism is a mixture of science and anticipation. We cannot deny that it has brought to light the economic realities behind every social and political process and that it has uncovered the fact of oppression in economics inside capitalism. However, by making economics the base of every aspect of reality it gives us a unilateral and distorted view of the world. A Christian discovers this in relation to the atheism and the materialistic anthropology of Marxism that cannot be separated from its analysis. There is no factual basis for postulating that history is moving towards a classless society. It is utopianism, not science.

What is the alternative? What ideological alternative comes from the West? is an important question for any Third World person, Christian or non-Christian. If the classless society of Marxist dreams ends in the nightmares of the Gulag archipelago or the Cultural Revolution, what is the hope provided by Europe and North America for our nations? When we examine it we come to the conclusion that it is materialistic, atheistic, nihilistic, and we see its effects upon our youth, defenceless against the pornography, the violence, the cult of material success as the highest value in life. Traditional Evangelical theology has many times been vocal against Marxism, without always understanding the real nature of its challenge. But it has been silent about the evils in the West. Francis Schaeffer has found that when he dared to criticize Western economics and politics he lost the popularity he had when he criticized literature and art.

A critical task is open then for Evangelical theology in the Third World. The Word of God has much to say about justice, a desirable social order, real peace. We have rediscovered in Latin America the biblical teaching about the Kingdom of God as a key to understand God's work and our mission.²⁸ The theological poverty of extreme dispensationalism and pop-eschatology is completely unable to answer the all-encompassing challenge of Marxist ideology.

The urgent need for an Evangelical hermeneutic

Evangelicals have used too much time fighting about the mode of p. 61 inspiration and unfortunately they have imposed North American debates on realities where they did not

²⁷ The papers of CLADE II have been published in English in the Bulletin of LATF beginning with No.1/1980.

²⁸ C. René Padilla ed. *El Reino de Dios y América Latina Hoy*, Casa Bautista de Pub., 1975. Some articles of this book were published in the Bulletin of LATF in 1975.

exist and were not relevant. We Latin American Evangelicals have no doubts about the Authority of God's Word, the unity of Old and New Testaments, the revealed nature of the Bible. But we are impatient with a hermeneutical procedure that has left the Old Testament out, has spiritualized the New and has turned the Jesus of the Gospel into an unoffensive and unobtrusive professor of theology.

Already in 1970 Pedro Arana criticized the hermeneutical procedure of ISAL with words that could be applied to the hermeneutical procedure of several theologians of liberation: "In the ideology of ISAL, God is translated as revolution. The people of God as revolutionary hosts. The purpose of God as humanization. And the Word of God as revolutionary writings. No one could fail to see that this is Marxist humanism".²⁹ Andrew Kirk and René Padilla have deepened and systematized Evangelical criticism of this hermeneutic.

By the same token Padilla especially has worked demonstrating that the hermeneutic procedure of the Church Growth movement coming from Pasadena bows before social sciences and pragmatism and accommodates Scripture to them rather than judging them by Scripture. In other words right in the middle of a very popular movement among Evangelicals we find the same hermeneutical procedure of Liberationist hermeneutics.³⁰

Renewed historical awareness

As Evangelicals we cannot separate the social and economic history of our countries from their spiritual history. It is too easy for Catholic theologians today to blame American Imperialism for all our evils. But we are the result of several centuries of Catholic domination and teaching that have created social structures, social habits, economic procedures, political systems, etc.

We find some Protestant theologians who have followed the liberationist and marxist analysis of our history and are ignorant of Protestant history. Some of us in the LATF consider that historical research is an important part of theological work. What is amazing is to find that many Evangelical leaders and missionaries are also unaware of Protestant and Evangelical history. Calvin is quoted in relation to the authority of Scripture but his social teachings and p. 62 practices are ignored. Some of his commentaries on passages from the Old Testament would sound like liberation theology to some ears today.³¹

The growth of Evangelicals has brought them to positions of power and responsibility as individuals and as communities. Unfortunately, because of their lack of theology of social realities and power, they have been tempted to become blind supporters of the government instead of critical cooperators. Constantinianism and the temptations of power and benefits should not be something that take us by surprise, theologically unarmed. We also need a careful examination of Church history and our own history.

A theology of the Spirit

The growth of Pentecostalism in the great urban centres of Latin America and the advance of the charismatic movement among Protestants and Catholics is posing many new questions. How is the Spirit blowing today? Are traditional theological categories enough

²⁹ Pedro Arana y P. Savage ed. *op. cit.*, p.78. See Andrew Kirk, *Liberation*.

³⁰ *Theology: an Evangelical View from the Third World*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980. See the seminal chapter by René Padilla in Stott-Coote eds. *Gospel and Culture*, William Carey, 1979, pp.83-108.

René Padilla, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 1982.

³¹ See the massive work by André Bieler, *La pensée social du Calvin*, Univ. of Lausanne.

for discerning these times? In relation to this, Liberation theologies apply their concept of the social origins of religion and the way in which religion as a social force can be manipulated for political purposes. The same is valid for popular religiosity. But for us Evangelicals a whole new set of questions is opened.

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An African Critique of African Theology

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(Translated from French by Tite Tienou)

I PRELIMINARY REMARKS

A The Topic

The critique of African theology is not an easy matter. The difficulty of the topic resides in its very nature, in the ambiguity and the ill-defined contours of the so-called African theology. There are some expressions which the most serious thinkers use without ever asking themselves about the reality involved. African theology is one of those expressions. We know what critique, theology and the adjective African mean. The word “theology” meaning discourse about God, study of God, or science of God, is easily understood. But, as soon as one adds an adjective (Western, African, American, etc) the expression becomes more difficult to understand. One must, in fact, determine the characteristics given to the experience by the adjective used.

In other words, when we speak of American, Western, European, White, Black or African theology, what do we mean? Can we establish precise and specific details which make theology theology in the general sense of the word but more specifically African and non-European?

B African Theology

What is African theology? What are the traits which distinguish it from theology per se and from other local theologies? What is its content and what are the areas of its application? What makes this theology African? Theologians must elucidate such questions in order to give, if need be, a solid basis to this theology so that we may not build on sand. That is to say that when we speak today of African theology, we must admit that we are walking on quicksand and that we are speaking of a still ill-defined subject for most African church leaders. But, be that as it may, everybody speaks today of “African theology”. Obviously everyone uses the expression in his own way and gives it the meaning of his choice. This does not facilitate our task of critique which will necessarily be incomplete, but discussions and other papers will help to deepen it.

C Our Goal