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MINISTRY

The United States as a Mission Field

Orlando E. Costas 2

FOUNDATIONS

"Real Presence" Hermeneutics:

Reflections on Wainwright, Thielicke, and Torrance

Ray S. Anderson 5

INTERSECTION

A Working Group on Biblical Feminist Theology

Mark Lau Branson 8

SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The Dangerous Life of the Spirit

Richard J. Foster 9

INQUIRY

The Bomb and the Cross: A Review Article

Paul A. Mickey 11

ACADEME

**On Getting Acquainted with a
Theological Library**

Donald W. Dayton 13

BIBLIOGRAPHIES

**A Select Bibliography for
American Religious History**

Douglas Firth Anderson 15

REVIEWS

Book Reviews (Itemized on back cover)

17

The United States as a Mission Field

by Orlando E. Costas

Can the nation with the greatest missionary presence¹ in the world be regarded as "a mission field"? If so, can that sector of the world which represents the habitat of the have-nots and the oppressed of the earth have anything to contribute to the missionary situation of the United States?

The United States qualifies as "a mission field" because many of its people are alienated from God and neighbor. In spite of the millions who profess to be Christians by virtue of baptism, church membership, or conventionality, an overwhelming number of Americans have not really heard² the gospel or had a reasonable opportunity to consider it as a personal option. They go through life without a personal awareness of the God who in creation and redemption has staked a claim upon their lives and invites them to experience, by the power of his Spirit, freedom, community, and hope. The dominant symptoms of this situation of alienation are fear, anxiety, and distrust at the personal level, and racism, classicism, and sexism at the social level.

The United States also qualifies as a mission field because the witness of American Christians is intrinsically related to their life and thought as a church and as an indissoluble part of their culture and society. Whatever they do affects their missionary activity at home and abroad. Whatever happens in the American sociocultural milieu affects the life and thought of the American church. This in turn affects the life and thought of churches abroad, especially their own missionary witness, and the fulfillment of the political-ecumenical

dimension of God's redemptive purpose for the world. To see the relevance of the United States as "a mission field" today is not missiologically urgent only for American Christians. It is just as crucial for third world Christians.

Changes in the Sociocultural Milieu

That the United States is a nation of immigrants is well known. Very few nations of the world can boast of such a complex ethnic composition. Today, however, this nation faces a new ethno-cultural panorama. This reality poses a unique missionary challenge.

Besides the traditional European groups, which have "melted" into the main "pot" of North American society, there are said to be over 120 ethnic groups communicating in more than 100 languages and dialects. They represent roughly one-third of the total population. But, as Eduardo Seda Bonilla (among other social scientists) has reminded us, in dealing with United States ethnic minorities it is necessary to distinguish between (1) the immigrants of different nationalities, and (2) the racial minorities.³

The latter can be grouped into four categories: Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asians. All of them are classified by the mainstream culture and society as "non-White." This is another way of saying that they are not of European stock. (Hispanics, though having among them many Whites, represent, as a group, the halfbreed offspring of Europeans and Amerindians; consequently they are not pure White.) As a matter of fact, when grouped together these minorities represent the regions that have suffered the greatest impact of Western civilization (Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean). They are the offspring of the worst social rape in the history of humankind. Forced or induced to migrate or relocate for economic, social, military, or political reasons, they have settled mainly in the large urban centers of the country and the rural areas of the southwest and midwest. Not only have they been

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marginated socially and culturally, but economically and politically. Their plight is therefore relatively identical with their African, Middle Eastern, Asian, Pacific, Latin American, and Caribbean counterparts.

As the ethno-cultural panorama has changed, so has the religious situation. It used to be that—apart from Native American religions, New England Transcendentalism, and other rather small “harmonious” religious movements—the overwhelming majority of the religious frontiers that United States Christians had to cross in the evangelization of their fellow Americans were rooted in the Western tradition. In the last few years, however, the United States, along with other Western nations, has seen the emergence of non-Western, non-Christian religious frontiers.⁴ The Eastern Missionary Advance—as the activities of the various movements, older Eastern religions, and occultist sects may be labeled—is not only attracting numerous Americans but is also forcing a new religious pluralism in the United States.⁵ It is revealing, at the same time, how missiologically stagnant have been North American Christian churches and believers *at home* and how spiritually empty are, especially, Middle Americans.

A third reality may be witnessed among certain sectors of American society. Sydney Ahlstrom has called it the end of “the Puritan era.” Wesley Michaelson has referred to it in terms of “the gradual disintegration of a dominant, traditional culture.”⁶ James Wallis has described it as the growing awareness of “what two centuries of doctrines of racial and national superiority, of Manifest Destiny, of violence have done to the American spirit.” Wallis goes on to state: “The traditional American civil religion which blesses the social order rather than calling it into question is now under serious attack, and for many quarters that civil religion is being named for what it is—misplaced allegiance which usually degenerates into outright idolatry.”⁷

Closely related with the foregoing is the new economic-technological reality that can now be witnessed around the globe. While Western technology (of which the United States is a senior partner) has induced certain economic growth around the world, thereby contributing to the transformation of global society, it has also created numerous problems for itself and others. For one thing, it has severely damaged its own environment. For another, it has become the means through which Western societies (and particularly the United States) have been able to dominate, domesticate, and oppress less-developed societies. This has given way to a twofold reaction from the third world: on the one hand, a global rebellion against Western models of “development” with a concomitant critique of what Ruben Alves has called the ideology of “technologism;”⁸ on the other, an increasing recognition on the part of Western societies of the much healthier attitude of less-advanced third world societies toward their environment. Indeed, the absence of the dichotomy between human-kind and nature and the mistreatment of the latter by the former, so characteristic of Western technological society, has become a fundamental point of reference in the Western quest for a “theology of nature.”⁹

A Crisis of Church and Theology

These sociocultural challenges call for a response. Yet American Christians seem almost paralyzed by a crisis of the institutional church and its theology. This crisis has many facets.

A Culturally Bound Church and an Ideologically Captive Theology

The cultural boundness of the church and the ideological captivity of its theology are one aspect of this crisis. Michaelson is right in stating that “the distinct problem with mission to America is that the Christian church finds itself deeply identified already with the dominant but disintegrating culture” of the United States.¹⁰ One need not go far to see this uncritical acculturation to the “American way of life.” From the corporation-type pattern of church organization to the types of ministerial training, worship, and evangelization, patterns of church administration and lifestyles, the majority of American churches reveal an uncritical commitment to their sociocultural milieu. This being so, the affirmation that American theology has been and still is ideologically captive to the “American way of life” should not come as a surprise. As James Cone said:

... American theology from Cotton Mather and Jonathon Edwards to Reinhold Niebuhr and Schubert Ogden, including radicals and conservatives, have interpreted the gospel according to the cultural and political interests of white people. ... White theologians, because of their identity with the dominant power structure, are largely buoyed within their own cultural history.”¹¹

A Clergy-dominated Church and a Laity-dominated Clergy

Another facet of this crisis is the clergy-dominated character of the American church and the laity-dominated situation of its clergy. In the North American Interchurch Study conducted by the National

American churches reflect a gospel with a conscience-soothing Jesus, an other-worldly kingdom, a pocket God, a spiritualized Bible, and an escapist church.

Council of Churches in the early 1970s, the role of pastors as intermediaries of church life was strongly underscored. They not only controlled the flow of denominational information in their respective congregations, but projected their own fears and feelings on the information which their congregations rendered to the denomination.¹²

Because of their professional training and the prestige carried from the colonial and frontier periods, clergy dominate local church and denominational church programs and priorities. This dominating role may be witnessed even in the realm of theology. As Martin Marty has pointed out: “Almost all church theology is clerical; almost always ordained ministers in seminaries or in congregations are called upon to depict the meaning of the Christian life in any profound way.” In consequence, the laity have been generally absent from “the circles out of which theological interpretation of life occurs.”¹³

Conversely, American laity exercise an extraordinary control over clergy. The fact that the clergy person is considered an employee of the church speaks for itself. Many clergy are conscious and fearful of the fact that their job depends upon the “happiness” of their respective boards and/or congregations. If they control the flow of information to and from their congregations and if their denominational colleagues are eager to get their messages through to the laity, it is because they suspect (indeed know) that their respective vocations depend upon the laity itself. To quote Marty once again: The laity “expect ministers to speak in hushed and hollow tones, not to reveal the true range of human emotions, to be soft and compromising or unprincipled adapters to what their congregations want them to be.”¹⁴

A Gospel without Demands and Demands without the Gospel

The crisis of American church and theology becomes even more intensive when one reflects on two opposite patterns that can be witnessed in churches throughout the United States. The first pattern offers a *gospel without demands*. The content of this gospel is a conscience-soothing Jesus, with an unscandalous cross, an otherworldly kingdom, a private, inwardly limited spirit, a pocket God, a spiritualized Bible, and an escapist church. Its goal is a happy, comfortable, and successful life, obtainable through the forgiveness of an abstract sinfulness by faith in an unhistorical Christ. Such a gospel makes possible the “conversion” of men and women without having to make any drastic changes in their lifestyles and world-views. It guarantees, moreover, the preservation of the status quo and the immobility of the People of God.

The second pattern lies at the other end of the spectrum: *demands without the gospel*. Whether it be the individual legalism characteristic of some Holiness church groups or the collective legalism of the Moral Majority or some radical Christian groups, the accent is the same: judgment without grace, with similar results—moral exhaustion, discouragement, and frustration. The first pattern robs the gospel of its ethical thrust; the second, of its soteriological depth. The first

reduces the church to a social club and theology to an ideology of the status quo; the second enslaves the church and buries the gospel.

A Mission in Crisis and a Crisis of Mission

This leads to the fourth aspect of the crisis. With such a truncated view of the gospel and the prophetic task of the church, the fact of a mission in crisis and a crisis of mission becomes obvious. This double missionary crisis represents two sides of the same coin. The world mission of the American church is in crisis because of the burden of

***The clarion call comes to the offspring
of the former missionary era to go to
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and witness there to the liberating Word
of God.***

what Carl Braaten has rightly called the *impedimenta Americana*, that is the interplay between the American missionary movement and American imperialism.¹⁵ This interplay, which Ruben Lores, among others, has linked with the ideology of "manifest destiny," has made the American missionary movement the carrier of Anglo-Saxon Christianity and "the American way of life" rather than the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ A credibility gap can be thus witnessed between "a faith that proclaims a living, loving Lord," and the participation of its "adherents . . . in inhuman ventures, exploitation, hate and death."¹⁷

In the face of this credibility gap, the American church seems to be turning inward, spending "more and more of its energy analyzing itself, financing costly studies of its functions and structures and affirmations." This would not be such a dangerous path if it were not for the fact that "such studies keep the church in motion through revolving doors, and do not drive it to the frontiers of world history." Instead of calling the church to accountability, they seem to be driving it "to retreat from world history and to enter into a new religious isolationism."¹⁸

The crisis of the American world mission calls not for a new religious isolationism with an inward kick that hides itself behind a mission to the backyard, but rather, for the removal of the scandal of the American missionary movement. This implies a radical break with the ideology of "manifest destiny" and thus American cultural, economic, and political imperialism. It implies the "maintenance of a low profile by Americans within international structures of world mission."¹⁹ This is necessary if the imperialistic image attached to the modern missionary movement is to be effaced. Such a restructuring demands that American Christians do away with the notion of a mission to the world and replace it with the concept of *participation* in a global mission to, from, and within all six continents, a mission that will involve all the resources of the world church, and that will be based on Christian solidarity, respect, and trust, and not on the multinational-corporation mentality. This may mean, that, for the present, American mainstream Christians "may have to play a more passive role abroad and a more active role at home." For how can they "expect to cross the racial, cultural and economic barriers abroad when their experience at home proves that their white, affluent, middle-to-upper class status creates a gap they have not yet effectively bridged?"²⁰

Toward a Third World Contribution to American Church and Theology

Such a perspective imposes a strong dose of responsibility upon third world Christians in relation to the United States. For how can there be a truly global mission if a partner fails to come to the aid of the other when a situation of crisis arises? The issue here is not just that it is to the missionary interests of third world Christians that the American church and theology experience a radical conversion. It also has to do with the fact that third world Christians *are* the keepers of their American brothers and sisters!

What then can third world Christians do on behalf of church and theology in the United States? How can they respond to this crisis? Following are some concrete ways by which third world Christians

can participate in this ecclesio-theological dimension of the American missionary situation.

First, third world Christians can serve as a mirror for the critical self-understanding of American Christians. The writings, lectures, and leadership of theologians and church leaders from the third world have already played a significant role along this line. They have given American Christians a vision of themselves from outside their cultural milieu. This vision has been greatly enriched by the work of American Black Christians. Indeed their critical insight into White-dominated church and theology has become one of the most significant moments in the history of Christianity in the United States. Moreover it has stimulated Christians from other ethnic minorities to offer their own insights and has made possible a meeting point with mainline third world Christian leaders. These leaders, being the representatives of those peoples who have suffered the consequences of the Pax Americana in their respective continents, have engaged in critical prophetic exposures of American behavior abroad while offering, at the same time, interpretations of their own of church and theology in the United States.

Second, third world Christians can offer models of authentic contextualization. To be sure, after almost 200 years of Anglo-Saxon-culture Christianity, the American church and theology need desperately a process of deculturation. Michaelson's assertion that mission in America "must begin by de-Americanizing the Gospel"²¹ cannot be treated lightly. Yet the process of de-Americanization must go along with an inverse process of incarnation in the present American reality. Otherwise the Christian faith in the United States will succumb further to an otherworldly, escapist faith, which in the end will be no more and no less than a silent supporter of the same system. If it is true that American-culture Christianity is the fruit of many years of contextualizing the gospel *a la Americana*, it is equally true that not all contextualization is good or desirable. What is needed in the United States is not a spurious form of uncritical contextualization, but an authentic process that will make church and theology critically responsible to the gut issues of American society—and the place to witness such a process today is the world of the poor and the disfranchised. Third world Christians may not be able to provide money or an overwhelming amount of missionary personnel, but they can provide models of a critical insertion in their culture and society that has given prophetic depth to their life and witness. To see and hear what is happening in the churches of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, Oceania, and in the Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities of the United States should be a top priority of mainstream American Christianity.

Third, they can provide meaningful paradigms of dynamic, liberating church leadership. In contrast with the highly clericalized American church life and theology, third world Christians form, by and large, churches with strong lay leadership, drawn from among themselves. They begin their training in the heat and sweat of everyday-life Christian service. This being so, their patterns of ministerial training and leadership formation are not bound by the formal, heavy-laden, sterile structures of American (and for that matter Canadian, European, and Australasian) theological education. This is why the third world has produced such movements as Theological Education by Extension, Base Communities, and Liberation Theology. These movements have not only stimulated a wave of dynamic indigenous leadership, but have initiated third world churches into a process of liberation from the clergy-laity dualism so common in American Christianity.

Fourth, third world Christians can offer a partnership for radical discipleship. For there are significant sectors in the American church that are rediscovering what it means to be a disciple of Christ in its concrete historical reality. They have thus embarked on a radical course even to the very root of biblical faith and to the philosophical foundations of their cultural milieu. In this pilgrimage their faith and commitment have become ever more profound and their prophetic energies ever more intensive vis-a-vis the American religious establishment. They have thus come to where significant sectors of the third world church are. Little wonder then that at the International Congress on World Evangelization held in Switzerland in 1974 and at the Consultation of World Evangelization held in Pattaya, Thailand, in 1980 these two currents produced a "Response to the Lausanne

Covenant" and a "Statement of Concern," which have caught the attention of many church leaders around the world. Indeed this partnership in radical discipleship has already begun, and only the Lord can tell what it may mean for the future of Christianity around the world, but especially in the United States.

The United States today is one of the most challenging mission fields on the globe. Not only does it have millions who find themselves outside the frontier of the gospel, but its own culture and society, its churches and their theologies have become inescapable missionary frontiers. Walbert Bühlmann is certainly right in stating, "We are not at the end of the missions but rather at the beginning of a new and extraordinary missionary era."²² In this new era the clarion call comes particularly to the offspring of the former missionary era to go to the land whence came many of their missionary forebears and witness there to the liberating Word of God. For third world Christians the United States has become truly a "new Macedonia."

FOOTNOTES

1. Cf., e.g., Samuel Wilson, ed., *Mission Handbook*, 12th ed. (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, 1980) pp. 20ff.; R. Pierce Beaver, ed., *American Missions in Bicentennial Perspective* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1977), passim.
2. That is, "the millions who are geographically near, but live on distant socio-cultural frontiers. To say, for example, the de-Christianized masses of the West have had ample opportunity to reasonably consider the option of the Christian faith is to oversimplify the complex reality of western society, with its fantastic input from the mass media, the socio-cultural roadblocks in the clusters of men and women that make up the western mosaic and the psychological distance which syncretistic religious tradition has brought about between them and the faith of the New Testament" (Orlando E. Costas, "Churches in Evangelistic Partnership," *The New Face of Evangelicalism*, ed. C. Rene Padilla (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 149).
3. Eduardo Seda Bonilla, "Ethnic Studies and Cultural Pluralism," reprint from *The Rican*, n.d., p. 1.
4. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Conn.:

Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 1037ff.; Harvey Cox, *Turning East: The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977); Howard A. Wilson, *Invasion from the East* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978).

5. Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, p. 1079.
6. Wesley Michaelson, "De-Americanizing the Gospel," *The Future of the Missionary Enterprise*, no. 17: *Mission in America in World Context* (Rome: IDOC, 1976), p. 57.
7. James Wallis, "Evangelism: Toward New Styles of Life and Action," *Mission in America in World Context*, p. 67.
8. Rubem Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope* (Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1969), pp. 21-22.
9. Cf. E. C. O. Ilogu, *Christian Ethics in an African Background* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 178. For further discussion on the question of technology and the third world, see Rubem Alves, *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity and the Rebirth of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), passim; Rubem Alves, *O Enigma da Religião* (Petropolis: Editora Vozes, 1975), pp. 150-66; Rubem Alves, "Identity and Communication," *WACC Journal* 22, no. 4 (1975) passim; Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 105ff; and Stephen C. Knapp, "Mission and Modernization: A Preliminary Critical Analysis of Contemporary Understanding of Mission from a 'Radical Evangelical' Perspective," *American Missions*, pp. 146-209.
10. Michaelson, "De-Americanizing the Gospel," p. 52.
11. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 47.
12. Douglas W. Johnson and George Cornell, *Punctured Preconceptions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1972), pp. 24-25.
13. Martin Marty, *The Pro and Con Book of Religious America: A Bicentennial Argument* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1975), p. 84.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
15. Carl Braaten, "The Christian Mission and American Imperialism," *Religion and the Dilemmas of Nationhood*, ed. Sydney E. Ahlstrom (Minneapolis, Minn.: Lutheran Church in America, 1976), p. 72.
16. Ruben Lores, "Manifest Destiny and the Missionary Enterprise," *Study Encounter* 11, no. 1 (1975): 15.
17. Sergio Arce, Plutarco Bonilla, et al., "An Open Letter to North American Christians," reprinted by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, October 1976 (mimeographed), p. 2.
18. Braaten, "Imperialism," p. 71.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Michaelson, "De-Americanizing the Gospel," p. 57.
22. Walbert Bühlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 166.

FOUNDATIONS

(Doing theology on the basics of classical faith)

"Real Presence" Hermeneutics: Reflections on Wainwright, Thielicke, and Torrance

by Ray S. Anderson

"The fundamental motivation of Christian exegesis and hermeneutics should be doxological," suggests Geoffrey Wainwright in his monumental new work in systematic theology, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (p. 176). This important book raises provocative questions which ought to demand the serious attention of evangelical interpreters of the Scripture. As has already been pointed out in a review published earlier in this journal (*TSF Bulletin*, May/June, 1982), Wainwright ranges widely over the terrain of historical, ecumenical, and contemporary theology to argue his main thesis: the worshipping community, through its life of obedient hearing of the Word, incorporates a "hermeneutical continuum" (p. 175) in its witness to and praise of God. Through this hermeneutical continuum the teaching of the church (doctrine) and the living out of the Christian faith (ethics) re-enact the power and authority of the original Word in a new and living way.

Wainwright is not the first to suggest that theology should be

grounded first of all in doxology. If that were the single note he plays upon his instrument, there would be little in his book to warrant our attention. To accuse him of substituting doxology for theology would be misleading and unfair. What has attracted me in this book is his underlying refrain concerning the presence of God himself in the context of reading, preaching, and hearing Scripture, and concerning the presence of Christ in the liturgical life of the church. Consequently, I do not read Wainwright as suggesting that the experience of God in worship is a substitute for the revelation of God through his Word. Rather, he points us to the "real presence" of Christ as an exegetical and hermeneutical assumption.

Wainwright cites Augustine, who once said, "So let us listen to the Gospel as though the Lord himself were present" (p. 179), a twelfth-century abbot who made the same appeal, and the words of the Second Vatican Council: "He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church" (p. 181). Not to leave out classical Protestantism, he points out the "real presence" indicated by the language of the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566: "*Praedicatio verbi divini est verbum divinum*" (The preaching of the divine word is the divine word) (p. 511).

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