

corresponds to a given standard, but whether it belongs to the family. In its own idiom, does the theology we are discussing show signs of kinship with other theological forms in different cultures? Pluralism in theology does not mean there will be no need for judgment and discrimination, only that the task of evaluation must be performed with enormous sympathy and empathy.

## **THEOLOGIES OF THE “THIRD CHURCH”**

– **John D’Arcy May**

Walbert Buehlmann, the director of Franciscan missions, was sitting in his office in Rome one day, when he realised something was wrong with the map of the world on his wall. After pondering it for some time, he reached for the scissors, cut the map in half, and transposed the two halves. Now it looked right: the Pacific was in the centre! He has been thinking how, long ago, the Mediterranean (lit.: “the sea at the centre of the earth”) had ceased being a barrier to the peoples living around its shores and had become a high road of travel, a medium of communication between them, thus giving rise to the civilisations of North Africa, the Middle East, Greece, and Rome, and later Europe. Today, the Pacific is becoming the new Mediterranean, our true central sea: jet travel shrinks distance, and a hitherto unimagined community of diverse peoples is gradually taking shape.

In his book, *The Coming of the Third Church*, Buehlmann shows how the continents of “the South” will be the Christian continents of the future. By the year 2000, perhaps two-thirds of all Christians will live in the countries of the so-called third world, and the church’s centre of gravity – meaning power and resources, teaching authority, and theological creativity – will slowly but surely be shifting south. This process is already evident in the significance of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in Latin America, the Liberation Theology that is their voice, and the consequent weight of the joint statements of the Latin American Bishops’ Conference, as it responds to these new developments.

I would venture to say that all the very diverse theologies emerging from the third church have one basic theme in common: liberation. To

many church people in Melanesia, including some seminary lecturers, the very term Liberation Theology is a provocation, conjuring up pictures of Marxists and socialists undermining the authority of the gospel. This question deserves serious discussion, which it is getting, e.g., in Germany, as Rome confronts the Latin Americans on this very issue. Yet a great deal of ignorance of the situation of dependency and oppression, out of which these theologians are speaking, misunderstandings of what they are actually saying, and a certain “evangelical” prejudice are at work here. It is my personal conviction that the theme of liberation is deeply biblical in its preferential option for the poor and oppressed, and that it takes its place alongside other central themes of Christian tradition, such as sanctification, at the time of the Desert Fathers, and the shaping of the Orthodox churches of the East, or justification, at the time of the Reformation. From denoting the struggle to be free of the alien influences of the Western missions on church life and indigenous cultures, the theme of liberation has been radicalised to call into question the whole expansionist, aggressive, acquisitive identity of the – white Christian! – West.

A Buddhist temple I visited in Sri Lanka was decorated with murals and frescoes depicting the life of the Buddha and the coming of his teaching to Sri Lanka. Only one of the paintings had been disfigured. It showed Portuguese soldiers destroying a Buddhist shrine, and, towards this, the people had showed their resentment. The soldiers and merchants who plundered the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were mainly European Christians (though some were Arab Muslims); the ships on which their cannon were mounted had the cross painted on their sails. Memories such as these die hard. The peoples of the Pacific, though their encounter with Christianity was not always peaceful, did not have to endure shocks anything like as severe as these. Great theologies, as a rule, formulate answers to great problems, and in our relatively placid corner of the world we must try to realise how deep was the alienation which led to the sometimes strident tones of Liberation Theology.

Though liberation may be the dominant theme of the new theologies emanating from the third church, it is understood in markedly different ways in different contexts, partly because of the very different cultural backgrounds of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Some – mainly the Asian

Christians – mean it in the spiritual sense of inner, psychological freedom from the sinfulness and transitoriness of human nature; others – mainly the Latin Americans, and those of the Africans, who are still struggling against racist oppression – mean it in the political sense of freedom from the unjust and sinful structures of society, with their consequent poverty and oppression. Common to both approaches, however, is the centrality of what has come to be called *praxis* (a term unabashedly borrowed from Marx), whether spiritual or political. This, whether rightly or wrongly, is the key point of opposition to the theologies of the West. These are seen as being too academic, too beholden to the laws of logic, and the ideals of science, to be relevant for those who are struggling for their very survival in their dependence on Western economies, and their helplessness in the face of Western technologies. Of course, there is considerable tension between the spiritual and the political senses of liberation, which is faintly reflected in the attitudes of evangelicals and charismatics, on the one hand, and those who are committed to the ecumenical movement, on the other, in the South Pacific. The fascinating thing, however, is that these differences of emphasis and apparent contradictions are being worked out in a “South-South” discussion among the more-farsighted theologians on each side, for example, in the forum of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and its periodical *Voices of the Third World*. We may look forward to the day when Melanesians, too, will make their distinctive contribution to these discussions.

Theologies, like any other expressions of meaning, assume their full significance only in relation to contexts. I should like to identify two very broad and fundamental contexts, which we might call both “geo-political” and “geo-cultural”, in which the debates sketched above are taking place, before going on to give examples of the contributions being made in them. The first context I call the “Mediterranean-Atlantic”, including, as it does, in its area of common culture and the presuppositions of its discourse the highly-diverse traditions of Christian Europe, and their derivatives in both North America and such Latin American countries as Brazil, Peru, and Nicaragua. Even if Karl Marx is turning both Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther on their heads, so that their lofty thoughts finally touch the firm ground of social reality, the sometimes heated discussion can take place in a language shared in common.

The second context, I call the “Indian-Pacific”, including therein the highly-spiritual traditions of Asia, and the tribally-oriented cultures of Africa, Oceania, and Australasia. Here, too, there is certainly no lack of variety, but the basic terms of reference are communal rather than individualistic, and whether the medium of expression is oral or literary, experience and narrative generally take precedence over conceptual analysis and formal logic. In each of these two broad contexts, and in many of the sub-contexts which they embrace, “liberation” means the struggle to be free of the Western Christian identity imposed from without, and to regain the cultural identities that have been submerged in it. In both, *praxis* has priority as the means of achieving this end. Buddhists, Christians, and Marxists could each use these two key terms within their own traditions, though, of course, in widely differing senses. Here we see in outline the basic ecumenical problem faced by the third church, and some approaches to solving it.

Hugo Assmann, one of the more radical Latin American theologians, and thus working within the Mediterranean-Atlantic context, makes no concessions to the traditional *loci theologici*: “The original ‘text’ has become our reality and our practice”, i.e., analysis of, and response to, the situation of oppression, in which these Christians find themselves has precedence even over the New Testament, because “In the Bible, no message is valid unless it is ‘made true’ in practice”, and “faith must be understood as basically its practice”. By contrast, Raimundo Panikkar, also a Catholic theologian, but this time from India, maintains that whoever would “translate” Hindu spirituality and doctrine for fellow-Christians “has to be, to a certain extent . . . converted to the tradition from which he translates” if he is to participate fully in the “intra-religious dialogue”, i.e., the dialogue which must take place at the heart of one’s own religious convictions. In Assman’s case, context is placed above text; in Panikkar’s, the plurality of texts is taken seriously, without giving pre-eminence to any one of them; in both, Christian identity, as it has been defined by the West, is laid open to radical reinterpretation.

The more-reflective theologians of the third church do not hesitate to claim that they are developing a whole new epistemology, i.e., a new approach to theological knowledge. In Latin America, Juan Luis Segundo

shows how theological understanding that is truly liberating is circular; it begins in *praxis*, which is identification with the struggle of the poor, and, after opening up for us the meaning of the inspired texts, it ends in renewed and more enlightened *praxis*. There are very few theologians, however, who actually complete this circle; for many, the abstractions, which are merely instruments of understanding, become an end in themselves. In Sri Lanka, Segundo's fellow-Jesuit Aloysius Pieris says that, for the Asian mind, understanding that does not change anything, whether in the spiritual or the political realm, disqualifies itself as understanding. Even the elaborate conceptual analyses of Buddhist philosophy and psychology, of which Pieris is a recognised master, in both theory and practice, are pursued towards the sole end of clarifying and facilitating the practice of meditation, which, for the Buddhist, is the way of liberation.

The best of the liberation theologians bring about a synthesis of the spiritual and political emphases, which, at first sight, seem to be so opposed. Echoing the conviction, which has grown out of listening to the poor, as they search the scriptures for signs of hope in a hopeless situation, the Brazilian Leonardo Boff insists: "The 'poor' is not just one theme among many in the gospel; it is a constitutive element, without which the message of the kingdom as good news cannot be understood"; indeed, "we can say (and hopefully our German theologians hear us) that the bias of liberation is the only hermeneutically-correct stance from which to start the reading of the sacred texts, a bias that does not violate the nature of Revelation". Yet, whereas Boff, working in a country that is still largely Christian, is able to say that "The action of the church should be able to contribute to the process of liberation, because of its very identity", Pieris, aware that Christians in Asia are a tiny, but over-privileged, minority, sees in both the destitution, which characterises the staggering poverty of the Asian masses, and the serene and self-sufficient spiritual authority of the Buddha, a challenge to this Christian identity. His language is forceful because the task is urgent: only when the church has been baptised in the Jordan of Asian religiosity, and crucified on the cross of Asian poverty, can it begin to assume the new Christian identity of a truly Asian church.

And what of Melanesia? While there is undoubtedly much still to be learned from the Western traditions in which you were formed, and while it

is only possible to adapt successfully what you have securely mastered, it is also apparent even from this schematic survey of some theologies of the third church that these will probably be much more helpful to you. In them, you hear the voices of brothers and sisters who have emerged from a crueller experience of colonialism than yours, and who are much more aware of the exploitative economic forces still bearing on you. The sooner you join in the many-sided South-South dialogue that is already in progress, the better for all concerned.

It is the purpose of the discussion which follows to reflect on the possibilities opened up for Melanesian theologians by the theologies being developed elsewhere in the third world (assuming that Melanesians are happy about being included in the third world!). I do not wish to anticipate this discussion, but perhaps I can suggest in conclusion some possible starting points. The writings of Bernard Narokobi, and others, have left us in no doubt that there is an urgent need to forge a “Melanesian identity”, which will help the peoples of these islands find a secure place in a complex and threatening world. As these countries regard themselves as Christian, this will also be a Christian identity. It is the task of Melanesian theologians to explore ways in which these two streams of tradition, the “noble traditions” and “Christian principles” mentioned explicitly in the preamble to the Constitution of Papua New Guinea, can flow together into a synthesis that is both culturally and ecumenically viable. It follows that the peoples of Melanesia experience “liberation” primarily as the struggle for *cultural* liberation, the need to feel that they are defining their own identity. Under the influence of the economic, social, and political pressures that are becoming apparent, however, this may be regarded as only the first stage of a more far-reaching process.

Perhaps the most significant question for us is how Melanesians will interpret the *praxis* of liberation. The concept of *praxis* seems to suggest that the means of achieving one’s goals are important in themselves as the seedbed of reflection, whereas Melanesians are often said to be oriented towards results, no matter how they are reached. Will this introduce a more-pragmatic note to liberation theology? The answer to this and many other questions lies in the hands of Melanesians themselves.