

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN THEOLOGIAN TO A THEOLOGY OF PROVIDENCE

Liberation theology offers us a challenge in its determination to be part of a process of empowerment whereby oppressed peoples are enabled to speak their own word about the character of the world they live in. In this connection, formal liberation theology always understands itself to be "second level" activity. It is reflection upon a "first level" of faith-inspired activity, namely the practical struggle against the forces which destroy the lives and dignity of poor people.

In her workshop presentation, Mary Kay Nealan took account of both of these levels of liberating activity. Her paper was an interweaving of two threads. The first thread was a narrative account of the lives and concerns of a group of poor women whom she had visited in the village of Santa Helena in the state of Goias, in Brazil. These women, all pregnant, were part of a sewing circle and prenatal class gathered by a Franciscan sister and pastoral worker. Unaccustomed to any activity outside their own homes, the women had at first been silent, too shy even to speak to one another. Gradually, they had grown in confidence and in the ability to speak, to share their worries and concerns, and also to laugh and to encourage one another. This first thread, then, traces an immediate and particular encounter with hope and with struggle in the lives of poor women. Their experience provides us with an insight into experiences upon which a renewed theology of providence might be founded. We need to recall that the notion of providence, while compatible with certain biblical understandings of God, has its origins in Stoic and Neo-Platonic philosophy. It allows us to emphasize God's loving care, but fails to deal adequately with questions of evil and of human freedom.

The second thread woven into the fabric of this presentation was a review of selected theological articles published by Latin American women in this decade. (See bibliography.) All of these articles deal with serious questions which deeply affect our understanding of the providence of God. The writings probe the experience of being a woman, the commitment to solidarity with the poor, the role of Jesus Christ in the faith-inspired activity of Christians, and the search for a more adequate God-language.

Like the village women, the Latin American women theologians know the experience of being women in Latin America today. They do not share the great poverty of the village women, but they do share the difficulties of living in patriarchal societies where their experience is discounted simply because they are women. A number of them have known deprivation, and war, and even torture at the hands of oppressive governments. These struggles are the raw material of their experience of the God who is and who does justice. Seeking new language in which to

express their experience, they reflect upon the words of Jesus to the women of the Gospels, but they also mine the symbols of popular religion, searching beyond the boundaries of more traditional religious language in order to incorporate women's insights. They hope thereby to develop an augmented vision of God as life-giver and liberator, incorporating therein a wisdom that refuses, in faith, to give in to fear or despair.

In her response Mary Hunt noted three points which ought to be recalled in connection with Latin American women's theology:

Most Latin American women are poor, but most Latin American women theologians are not. Moreover, not all Latin American women theologians are liberation theologians. The relatively limited number of well educated women in the liberation struggle means that most of the latter must be actively engaged, not only in academic pursuits, but also in the active struggle against structural injustice. This is one reason why there is relatively little published theological work by women in Latin America. Again, while some Latin America women write from an explicitly feminist perspective, a number are informed by a perspective that might better be called "womanist," rather than explicitly feminist, because it is primarily directed toward the basic survival of poor women and their dependent children.

The need for solidarity in the midst of the liberation struggle in Latin America is very great. This leaves feminist writers with the special problem of how to criticize the sexism of the men theologians precisely at a time when the latter are under attack from both civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The task is to describe women's issues so that they are understood as an integral and essential part of the historical project of liberation.

We must not overlook the rich resource for liberationist thought offered by women's groups who are deeply committed to love, justice and community, but outside the perimeters of church life. Such would include, for example the Lugar de Mulher in Buenos Aires. Furthermore, we must be honest about the role religion has played in undermining women's confidence. Perhaps we need to set aside, for a time at least, traditional concepts such as providence, burdened as they are with an oppressive history. There are images within the popular culture that may be more help in assisting women to name the divine for themselves out of their own experience. Here the figures of popular religion and legend are more help. Such images would include, for example, Pacha Mama, who presides over the crops, the valiant Argentine widow La Difunta Correa, the Toltecán myth of Chimalman, as well as those images of Mary that draw on Pre-Columbian traditions, such as Guadalupe, Carmen, Lujan, and so forth.

In an effort to encourage wide participation, participants in the workshop initially were invited to introduce themselves and to indicate briefly some aspect of their interest in the topic. At the end of the presentations, discussion was relatively brief, but touched on a number of points. One participant noting the interweaving of themes in the paper, remarked that weaving was a rich metaphor for women's theology. In discussion it was noted that this metaphor, especially when brought

into conjunction with the Wisdom literature of the Bible, might also offer an alternative way to present liberation themes, especially in cultures which do not share the modern Western sense of history as linear movement.

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