

- Topic: Christian Doctrine in the Caribbean: Development?  
Convener: Gerald M. Boodoo, Xavier University, New Orleans  
Presenters: Gerald M. Boodoo, Xavier University, New Orleans  
Jason Gordon, Regional Seminary of St. John Vianney, Trinidad

Jason Gordon claims that in the Caribbean the urgent hermeneutic task revolves around the interpretation of doctrine in its more generic sense—the whole corpus of teaching that we have come to define as Christian in the region. The working hypothesis of his presentation was that the generic teaching of a church in any geographical space is beholden to the unconscious cultural assumptions of the civilization rooted there. Through this hypothesis Gordon proposed that insofar as Christian doctrine seeks to keep good faith with the prevailing civilization, the latter becomes the interpretative framework through which Christian doctrine (generic and specific) is mediated. Thus the process of mediation is not neutral. It could mask and legitimate the inner logic of the civilization. It could however, also unmask this inner logic, leading the civilization to reflexivity.

To test this hypothesis, Gordon undertook a threefold historical reading of the Caribbean. His first reading was structural. Here he looked at whole centuries showing the relationship between the geographical structure and the emerging sociological structure. Through this reading of “the long time span” he illuminated the interpretation of doctrine and its relationship with the sociological structures that emerged in the region so that the enslavement, as well as the defense, of the Amerindians can be seen to be justified by a specific reading of the Christian tradition. What is important in this perspective is the connection between the geographical and sociological structures and the hermeneutic employed.

The second reading focused on a shorter span of time, the time of the economic and cultural cycles. In this reading Gordon explored the way the cultural and economic cycles vary within the patterns of interpretation of the civilization on the whole, and that of the Christian teaching in its most generic sense. In the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, prolonged recessions allowed the region to establish some form of resistance to structured racism. However, during periods of boom, oppressive measures were structured into the law. With the rise and fall of the economic and cultural cycles, different interpretations of Christian doctrine emerged to justify the cultural movements. The third reading, looking at the level of human events, opens the relationship between structural, economic and cultural forces as they interact with free individuals who are enmeshed in them.

What became clear in Gordon’s presentation was that two major strands of interpretation of Christian doctrine have been prevalent in the Caribbean. One strand takes its point of departure from the existing political, social, cultural, economic structures and sees doctrine as a legitimation and continuation of the dominant civilization. The other takes its point of departure from the native

population and sees their struggle against colonization and exploitation as central to the gospel message and any formulation of Christian doctrine.

Following upon Gordon's historical reading, Gerald Boodoo outlined how the development of doctrine in the Caribbean must be seen as interwoven with the development of theology in the region. Situating the genesis of contemporary theology in the Caribbean in the 1970s, Boodoo showed that theological concern revolved around the need to have more indigenous churches that enshrine the religious intuitions of peoples of the region. This was to be accomplished by some form of a Caribbean liberation theology that would range from the many varying shades of Marxist interpretive action and identification to a recognition and use of local folk culture in liturgical practices. Important in this Caribbean theology was the need to see colonial domination, racial oppression and strife, and class exploitation as inherently interrelated. It was to be a theology both subordinate to, and a response to, the interpretation(s) of the historical reality of the Caribbean and its peoples.

Boodoo then claimed that such an interpretation must take into account the forced context of Caribbean reality. According to Boodoo, in the Caribbean, the past, present and continuing situation of exploitation is one that is forced upon the region. Just as the region was a forced region, made up of international members brought together and challenged to survive, so too the theology of the region must take on this characteristic of being forced.

Four characteristics of this forced theological context were then outlined. The first characteristic of such a theological context is precisely its forced nature, whereby one does not have the luxury of "choices." The so-called availability of choices is an illusion of self-determination which is provided by, and is a concession from, the dominant political and cultural economy. As a result, such self-determination merely replicates the ideology of the dominant structure(s) and is legitimated by it. The second characteristic of a forced theological context is that freedom is not to be understood in the light of hope, but in the light of despair. It is the condition of being forced that propels the human to identify and move towards what is urgent in their existing and continuing situation. Our actions are determined not by the splendid possibilities before us but by the urgency of our present condition. The third characteristic of a forced theological context is the nonessentiality of the human condition. There is no essential condition of the human that can be appealed to in determining some prescription for the human condition. The fourth characteristic is that the aim of any forced theological context is not primarily that of survival but liberation understood as salvation. A forced theology is not a theology of survival as much as it is a theology of salvation.

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