

## WORLD CHURCH THEOLOGY

- Topic: Catholicism and Public Life in the "South"  
Convener: Gerald M. Boodoo, Xavier University of Louisiana  
Presenters: Jason Gordon, University of the West Indies, Trinidad  
Jack Davis, Chimbote, Peru

Jason Gordon could not be present, and his paper was read by Phillip J. Linden. Gordon's paper was entitled "Catholicism and Public Life in the Caribbean." His aim was to show that the relationship between Catholicism and public life, when uncritically interpreted, could lead to a betrayal of the Gospel message. To highlight how this has occurred in the Caribbean region, he presented the Guyanese Catholic Church's response to events in Guyana between 1950 and 1980.

With the arrival of adult suffrage and the voting into power of a party with a nationalist agenda in 1953 (Peoples Progressive Party), the threat of communism taking hold in Guyana spurred Britain, backed by the United States to suspend the Guyanese constitution and retain control of Guyana. This set the stage for a resurgence of race-based political parties, with the dominant party being the one which aligned itself with the anticommunist ideology of Britain and the United States. This ruling party (Peoples National Congress) was lead by Forbes Burnham, who until his death in the 1990s was virtually a dictator supported by Britain and the United States.

The Catholic Church's response was to support Burnham since communism was evil and anticommunist activities supported the true work of God. Catholic youth were mobilized to fight the evil of communism and were taught how God-fearing people must unite to fight the "evil enemy." In doing this, the Church acted as a support to continuing British colonization, American intervention, Burnham's dictatorship and against any other possible political parties. Gordon claims that the pastoral action of the church through its collusion with the colonizing power contributed to the return of racial politics, the destabilizing of a duly elected government, and the entrenchment of a system of totality that crippled Guyana for decades.

History has shown that Catholicism in the Caribbean, wherever it is strident and powerful, ends up on the wrong side of history and the struggle for the Kingdom. If we start with the project of the Conquistador and its engagement with public life, which eradicated the native population, or the project of the colonial overlords structuring tyranny, or the Planters and their justification of chattel slavery, or the modern-day business class and their exploitation of workers, Catholicism in the Caribbean, when it has the backing of power, has failed to mediate authentically the Gospel and has confused the norms of civilization with that of the Kingdom.

In a similar vein, Jack Davis, presenting on "Catholicism and Public Life in Peru," claimed that once the Church takes an anticommunist stance it supports an

"end justifies the means" position that allows for considerable corruption and dehumanization. The Church's visible tendency to support the existing government in Peru compromises the Church's option for the poor and betrays the Christian obligation and commitment to liberation. This makes the Church seem impotent in the eyes of the average person and ensures that other social movements, even those based on violence, will continue to attract followers.

Davis was critical of the tendency of the Church in Peru to have the professional elite as its preferred clientele. This elite is a privileged class who "have been 'disenfranchised' by the option for the poor." This commitment to the poor seems to be losing official support in the Peruvian Catholic Church, despite the efforts of Gustavo Gutiérrez and many bishops. Davis sees this decline as a growing trend and warns that unless this trend is reversed, the Catholic Church in Peru will not be an authentic option for those struggling for liberation.

Both presentations highlighted that Catholicism and public life in the "South" has been, and continues to be, beholden to the dominant political context. In such contexts, the authenticity and integrity of Catholic public life is at best tenuous. In the struggle for liberation, Catholicism must distinguish the demands of the Gospel from the norms of civilization and hold steady to the option for those who in their poverty and exploitation are the preferred people of God.

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