

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: THE ISSUES AT PUEBLA

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST SESSION

For this year's topic of the continuing seminar on Theology and the Social Sciences we have chosen "The Issues at Puebla." This was selected not only because of its timeliness, but also because the theologies coming out of Latin America (not only liberation theology but its rivals) are very dependent on some form of social analysis, on some assumptions about the social, economic and political status and future of the Latin American countries. Our interest in this seminar is particularly on the interaction of theology and the social sciences evidenced at Puebla. Consequently, of all the issues at Puebla we have chosen those which seem to focus on this interaction. We should, however, feel free to raise other issues in the discussion.

Of course it would have helped if we all could have read the documents in the original. Even the official English translation is not available at this time, so some of us have had to depend on the unofficial and incomplete translation published by CCUM at Notre Dame. Further, of the panelists I have assembled, only Rosemary Reuther was actually present at Puebla. With these limitations in mind, I have asked the panelists to make a brief presentation, the purpose of which is to focus the issues and stimulate discussion. Since the issues are interrelated and the discussion should be free-ranging, I suggest that we have the first two presentations before the discussion.

Our two panelists are well-known to all of us and I think, need no introduction. First, will be Brian Hehir of the United States Catholic Conference on the issue of "Human Rights," followed by Gregory Baum of St. Michael's College, Toronto, on the issue of "Ideology and Theology." [The seminar paper of Gregory Baum follows *infra*—Ed.]

SUMMARY OF THE FIRST DISCUSSION

One of the problems discussed was that raised by Gregory Baum concerning the rejection by the Puebla document of the three classes of ideologies—the ideologies of liberal capitalism, of national security and the Marxist ideologies (note the plural). How, then, can we claim that the Church's teaching is not itself an ideology? The Puebla document seems to recognize a need for ideology, yet provides no acceptable one, gives no clear guidelines for action and leads to a certain frustration. The document does admit that the Gospel has political implications: it does give criteria for judging any ideology: (1) how adequate is the anthropology implied in the ideology? (e.g., Marxism is deficient anthropologically insofar as it views humans only as means of production); and (2) does the ideology recognize that it is only partial?

A related difficulty was raised—that of speaking of Latin America as a whole, ignoring the vast differences of size, geography, natural resources, culture and the like. The document necessarily speaks in generalities. Some felt that the Latin American bishops perceived enough similarities in the analysis of their varying situations to allow the document to apply to all their countries.

The question of the many meanings of the word “ideology” was also raised, though the Puebla document attempts to define the way “ideology” is being used there. Finally, it was pointed out that “human rights” itself can be used as an ideology and one must look at its use in each context.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND SESSION

For this second session of the seminar on Theology and the Social Sciences, we have two other panelists: Rosemary Radford Ruether of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary on “The Women’s Issue,” and Alfred T. Hennelly, S.J., of the Theology Department of LeMoyne College, Syracuse, N.Y., on the issue of the “Base Communities.” As was already mentioned, Rosemary Ruether was actually present at the Puebla meeting. Alfred Hennelly has read the original official Puebla document, so some of the limitations under which we were laboring yesterday are removed. [The seminar papers of Rosemary Ruether and Alfred Hennelly follow *infra*—Ed.]

SUMMARY OF THE SECOND DISCUSSION

The question of the applicability of the model of “base communities” to the North American situation sparked a great deal of discussion. In the many repressive political regimes of Latin America, the “CEB’s” (*comunidades eclesiales de base*) fill a vacuum left by the crushing or dissolution of other voluntary and mediating organizations such as labor unions, professional associations and the like, whereas there is a plethora of voluntary associations in North America. Further, it was suggested that the tradition of close-knit families in great segments of Latin America permits the CEB’s to build on that family structure—something which does not seem possible in North America. John Coleman pointed out that there are already available a number of empirical studies of the base communities in such countries as Brazil.

Because of the leadership role that women hold in many base communities, the question of the ordination of women lurks in the background of any discussion of base communities.

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