

## HISPANIC-AMERICAN THEOLOGY

### PART ONE: AN OUTLINE ON METHOD

#### *I. Our objective*

Our objective is to explore the possibilities of and a method for an Hispanic-American theology that is both truly "Hispanic" and "American." This theology should also reflect the multi-ethnic reality of the Hispanic-American world, the diversity of its social situations and the cultural pluralism present among Hispanics.

An Hispanic-American theology should equally take into consideration those elements that unite the vast majority of the Hispanic communities in the country: language, religion, values and traditions, minority status in church and nation, and (especially!) the key role of popular religiosity.

It is essential that Hispanic-American theology be developed, because otherwise we would be condemning Hispanics to silence and continued second-class status within the Christian community.

#### *II. Methodological presuppositions*

All theology presupposes method, and all methods are founded on choices made by the theologian. Theological method is never solely made or used on purely "theological" grounds. Culture (with all it entails) and ideology (with its ramifications, roots and its social function) do enter and color all theological methods, their justification, development, and applications. Theological method, as a reasonable quest for truth, is always qualified and marked by the interests and socio-cultural presuppositions about the nature and content of truth (and about how to attain to it). The theologian is always rooted in culture, class, etc., often with the biases, interests, worldviews, assumptions, etc., of his/her socio-cultural context.

In searching for an Hispanic-American theology, the theologian must be aware of his/her context. Only being in an Hispanic socio-cultural milieu in the United States will allow for an authentic Hispanic-American theology, and for methodological choices prior to that theology.

No serious theology can be created today that is not truly aware of its context, ideological motives, social function, and so forth. Without this previous awareness an Hispanic-American theological method would be reduced to repetition of pre-existing North-Atlantic ("Anglo") or Latin American models or, worse, slide into religious demagogery.

#### *III. Methodological choice: popular religiosity.*

Popular religiosity is one common element that emerges from the rich variety of the Hispanic-American world. It is probably the least "Angloed" area of any of the Hispanic-American cultures, the least "invaded" and thus the more deeply

"ours." It can be seen as a font of Hispanic-American worldviews and self-concepts. And for these reasons (among others), it becomes the main source for a true Hispanic-American theology.

The religious universe of Hispanic-Americans is *not* homogeneous, easily identifiable with the Roman Catholic tradition. It is complex and varied, even if we could classify the diversity in two basic categories: "popular Catholicism" and "marginal religions" (the first including those elements more or less acceptable—even if peripherally—to the Catholic Church; and the second including those faith expressions which would be unacceptable at any level to the Catholic Church and which probably can be traced back to non-Christian origins [this second category would also cover the explicit non-Christian, Hispanic-Amerindian or Afro-Hispanic religions]).

In general terms, popular religiosity can be defined as the set of experiences, beliefs and rituals which more-or-less peripheral human groups create, assume and develop (within concrete socio-cultural and historical contexts, and as a response to these contexts) and which to a greater or lesser degree distance themselves from what is recognized as normative by church and society, striving (through rituals, experiences and beliefs) to find an access to God and salvation which they feel they cannot find in what the church and society present as normative. This definition includes the main elements which are shared by both types of popular religiosity: an authentic search for God and for efficacious salvation; the social vulnerability of the people and their peripheral status (in church and society); and the transmission of "wisdom" and "theology" (developed and accumulated in the course of many generations).

#### *IV. Method in Process.*

Popular religiosity (as will be seen in Part II) offers the theologian many of the themes that would need elaboration in an Hispanic-American theology, even if other areas of the Hispanic cultures would also contribute to this effort.

There are two basic moments in the actual theological method. The first one is based on and developed in dialogue with the social sciences (particularly cultural anthropology and sociology). This first moment endeavors to synthesize the contributions of the social sciences, as these describe and explain the socio-cultural Hispanic-American reality. If a theology wishes to truly reflect the Hispanic-American reality in its complexity, then it must listen to and dialogue with those sciences which are better qualified to describe and explain that reality, lest that theology build upon an Hispanic-American "reality" that does not exist.

The second moment of our method is interpretative, in a two-fold process: the material yielded by the social sciences is analyzed by the theologian, thematizing the implicit theological elements within this material; and it is then related to other socio-cultural elements in the Hispanic-American experience, as well as to other scriptural and theological components of the Christian heritage. Thus, this two-fold moment of interpretation intends to connect the main themes retrieved from popular religiosity and from the overall Hispanic-American experience to other dimensions and areas of that experience, and also to the scriptural and theological elements of the Christian heritage. The faith-experience of the theologian can act as "guide" in the process of interpretation, as long as cultural/ideological awareness remains.

## PART TWO: THE THEOLOGICAL PROCESS

### *I. Preliminary Remarks on Theological Categories and the Methodological Choice.*

- A. At this point, we proceed to thematize the theological categories within the popular religious universe, using the resources of Christian theology, and correlating these categories to those found in the popular-religious communities.
- B. We also seek justification for our hermeneutical choice. We offer the following considerations:
  1. No other element in the religious universe of Hispanic-American cultures offers such a wealth of perspectives and realities open to theological thematization: access and encounter with God through myth and symbol, "wisdom" religious stories, a sense of tradition, redemption, salvation and liturgical symbolism.
  2. The very distance from, and challenge to, the normative doctrinal and liturgical dimension of the official church offer a unique opportunity to the theologian to revise and re-think traditional attitudes from the official church toward popular religiosity, mainly, contempt, neglect, and attempts to "purify it" from "unorthodox" elements, rather than taking account of the prophetic challenge these popular religiosities often present to the normative liturgies and doctrines of the official church.

### *II. Theological Themes and Popular Religiosity: A Preliminary Approach*

We proceed to consider these theological categories open to the Hispanic-American theological milieu, in their relation to the world of faith-experience, wisdom and social situation of popular religiosity.

1. Foundational Issues.
  - a. Faith Experience. Both popular Catholicism and marginal religions communicate (in different ways) a sense of authentic encounter with God, with the holy and the sacred. They use sacred symbols and sacred space to signify this encounter. Quite often the "sacredness" and commitment of their faith experience is uniquely vivid, enthusiastic, and immediate to them. The theologian faces the task of relating in a meaningful way the symbols of faith-experiences and liturgical gatherings to the sacred symbols of the "popular-Catholic" community.
  - b. Wisdom, Doctrine, Revelation. Popular religiosity often uses Christian symbols to express revealed doctrine or wisdom. Their groups have a "priest" or leader who functions as the depository of this wisdom. Their παραδοσις, or tradition is transmitted orally or through popular-religious liturgical celebrations. Popular Catholicism has learned to "celebrate what it believes." Here the theologian has several opinions to consider:

- i. To develop a revelation theology that will allow members of popular-Catholic communities to see the church as a suitable place for the celebration and transmission of these truths. The theologian can accomplish this by bringing in the insights of popular religiosity to renew normative liturgy and normative/traditional revelation theology.
  - ii. To accept such a popular-religious tradition of "salvific and revealed" truths as a valid alternative to the normative or traditional concepts. This will depend on the specific contents and form of transmission of such popular-religious tradition.  
It should be kept in mind that the wisdom transmitted by popular-religious revelation theology seeks to provide meaning for life and suffering (unemployment, discrimination, family ruptures). It is salvation conceived in a "here and now" perspective, although the concept of "eternal salvation" is not necessarily absent from popular Catholicism. The theologian ought to keep in mind that revelation overflows the phenomenology of the church and of the Christ-event, and that salvific, graced events take place in "non-orthodox" forms of Christianity as well as in non-Christian religions.
2. Ecclesiology(ies). Here the task before the theologian is not confined to discern "models" of the church in popular religiosity, nor to theologize upon the particular "ecclesiology" of a popular-Catholic group. The crucial issue is to acknowledge the challenge that popular Catholicism presents to the church regarding its prophetic mission, and the need to re-think its language in terms of salvation, redemption and renewal. The theologian, indeed, may well discover that the peripheral, popular-religious group may be closer to the gospel demands than the segment or community of the church he/she is situated in. On the other hand, it may well happen that the theologian will decide that a properly formulated ecclesiology may better reflect the expression of "church" of a particular popular-religious group, or offer this group acceptable alternatives as far as expressing their own striving for meaning. The theologian should also bear in mind that:
- a. There are several ecclesiologies within the Hispanic-American religious universe. Those communities closer to the official church will exhibit a more sacramental dimension in their popular religiosity (in their reality-disclosing symbols).
  - b. Even if both popular-Catholic and marginal religious groups were to remain distant from the official church, they would still challenge the theologian with the often unstated, yet ever-present question: "Why does the official church and its normative liturgy and doctrines not satisfy the existential yearnings of these groups?"
  - c. Finally, the questions of *Covenant* and *Promise*, expressed in popular religiosity through the familial structure of religious groups and celebrations, and through the belief in God's promise of salvific presence, respectively, invite the theologian to ask whether these expectations can be regarded as legitimate provided their use of symbol allows the group to dialogue with the official church's use of similar symbols.

3. Christology(ies). This is a difficult area to thematize. A contemporary theologian might feel tempted to use Karl Rahner's concept of the "anonymous Christian" as a hermeneutical guide. Criticism of this concept in recent years, centered around its (possible) veiled theological colonialism, and the wane in popularity of some of Rahner's transcendental categories, indicate the need for a different approach. The basic issue here is the traditional Christian claim of the centrality, uniqueness and universal decisiveness of the Christ-event. A number of theologians engaged in dialogue with Jewish and non-Christian communities have challenged uncritical claims to universality. Theologians cannot dismiss the salvific and graced dimension of non-Christian religions (cf. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Hidden Christ of Hinduism*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978; and Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985).

The preceding remarks apply to popular religious expressions, particularly to the marginal religious groups. Popular-Catholic christological expressions may at times reflect "orthodox" beliefs, although conveyed through different formulae. More pertinent to our issue would be the following questions confronting the theologian:

- a. Is the concept of a redeeming mediator important, or even an existent theological reality, for the different groups in both constellations of popular religiosity? If so, how is this reality understood?
- b. How can the theologian relate the traditional decisiveness of the Christ-event to the different particular modes that such event (if and when present) adopts within Hispanic-American popular religiosity, particularly when the Christ-event stands simply alongside the cult of Mary or of the saints as just another religious expression? The theologian may well keep in mind two options: One, to remember that the mystery-reality of the Christ of God always overflows our conceptual and verbal expressions. The other option is to look at texts in the New Testament such as Lk. 4:18ff, where Jesus stands as the one anointed by the Spirit to proclaim "the good news to the poor, the liberation to the captives . . . the year of grace of the Lord"; simply put, to prophetically focus on the marginalized and socially vulnerable groups, to which many Hispanic-Americans belong.

4. Grace, Salvation, Worship. Here the theologian may borrow Leonardo Boff's concepts of grace and dis-grace, to connote the justice or lack of it in a community or social situation, as a point of departure. For, after all, many Hispanic-Americans conceive grace (often without using the specific term) as the salvific, social justice-building intervention of God in their lives. The theologians face the question however, whether the popular-religious symbolism of grace does not challenge the more "academic" and socially-detached theologies of grace to re-think their symbols in terms of justice and love.

Worship presents many possibilities, as we have said before. The theologian may well ask:



- a. Whether normative liturgies ought to be imposed on popular-religious groups, given the fact that the latter often celebrate human life and its expression of faith more profoundly than the former, and as such are closer to conciliar and biblical theology (cf. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*).
- b. Whether wisdom-and savaion-texts proper to popular religiosities should not be incorporated into normative liturgies. In this vein, Thomas F. O'Meara has suggested that texts from the *Bhagavad Gita* could be adopted as first readings in Christian liturgies in India (as indeed, Hindu Catholic bishops have already requested; cf. Thomas F. O'Meara, *The Future of Catholicism*, Inaugural Lecture, Installation as Walter K. Warren Professor of Theology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1986).

### PART THREE: CONCLUDING REMARKS.

Hispanic-American theology offers the official American Catholic Church a wealth of religious symbols and expressions which often challenge prophetically traditional attitudes, norms and theological expressions. At the same time, popular religiosity ought to be open to the new possibilities that the church's biblical and liturgical symbols have to offer. It is here that those Hispanic-Americans who are fully committed to the church, yet have developed a prophetic-social awareness regarding the Hispanic-American situation in church and society, have an important role to play. They live their explicit or implicit theologies in two worlds, the world of the official church, and the world of Hispanic-American popular expressions. As such they offer the theologian a locus that he/she cannot afford to ignore.

The theologian ought to be aware that Hispanic-American theology can be built along several possible methodological tracks. The many different Hispanic-American communities, each one bearing its wealth of culture, communities of faith, challenge the theologian to think creatively in formulating different categories to express the faith-experience and the ecclesial contexts of these groups. Finally, a theology emerging from the Hispanic-American milieu must move on from a reflection on the Hispanic-American social and religious situation to a prophetic change of all those situations of injustice and "disgrace," of non-salvation and non-meaning imposed upon Hispanic-Americans through neglect, discrimination and contempt. This task is an unavoidable one, indeed an imperative one, for the full integration, in the years to come, of the American theological community (including the Hispanic-American theologians) and the American Church.

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