

SEMINAR ON TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

A. THE TRINITY AND THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

A systematic articulation of an African American doctrine of the trinity does not exist. In part this is due to the influence of the preliterate slave culture inherited from the last century. In its preliterate form the means of communication is not a text, but stories, sagas, songs, dances. Even when individual blacks are highly competent within a literary culture, and can hold their own with the best on their own literary turf, black theologians are eager to honor the wealth inherited.

The experiential base of black theology has insured against taking over the ontological categories of the traditional trinitarian doctrine. The black reaction to the desiccated bones of much trinitarian doctrine has been, "What does that have to do with us?" Meeting no black need, it did not win acceptance. Nonetheless, black theology has not totally isolated itself from academic trinitarian doctrine. For instance, the trinity as "person in community" does find resonances with the black experience and enables blacks to meet the other trinitarian formulations built on similar foundations. Blacks can relate to a theology which theologizes out of celebration.

The tradition which the slaves brought from Africa had perceived one absolute God, and a number of lesser gods. Behind this conceptuality is the perception that God is transcendent (= the one absolute God), and immanent (= the lesser gods).

Whatever trinitarian doctrine among the blacks is, it is functional. Even so, many blacks, especially between ages eighteen and thirty-five, are rejecting black Christian churches for Islam. What attracts them is not theology, but Islamic liturgies, worship, empowerment, discipline, and what they think is a nonracist religious movement. This is true even though in some Islamic nations slavery is still legal, and the enslaved are usually dark-skinned people. Blacks, nonetheless, find Islam an attractive counterculture over against the white-dominated hegemony of Christian churches. Further, blacks understand the cross, but are tired of feeding off of suffering. Blacks no longer buy the gospel of pain.

The trinitarian order (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is understood to be inimical to equality, even though the traditional trinitarian doctrine protests the two are compatible, and must be in order to be viable. What blacks see when passing the open door of a black Catholic church is black people genuflecting and bowing to a white man.

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B. HISPANIC TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

The second session of the seminar was led by Sixto J. Garcia (St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach, Florida) who presented a paper entitled "Hispanic Trinitarian Theology: The Dynamics of Celebration, Praxis and Reflection." Professor Garcia, in collaboration with his colleague Orlando Espin, has been working in recent months to structure a foundational perspective for Hispanic theology using popular religiosity as a (if not the) hermeneutical clue for explicating the Hispanic trinitarian experience.

Hispanic popular piety points to God as the God of Jesus, to the God who sends His Son to be one with us in our experiences of brokenness and rejection. Garcia asks, for example, whether the experience of God's presence in the sense of immersion in "holy space" and "holy time" during the annual celebrations of the Passion Plays may not be a way of experiencing the activity of the Holy Spirit even though such moments usually remain unarticulated and nonthematic. He sees the task of the theologian as that of the poet who is called to thematize the implicit pneumatology which lies at the heart of popular religious experiences. He attempts to address this task in terms of the Marian devotions and theologies among Hispanic peoples. The presence of Mary in popular religious theologies provides a clue for the presence of the Spirit in a Hispanic trinitarian theology. Mary is understood as a central role in the providential and liberating activity of God. Mary as Our Lady of Guadalupe, for example, is a sign of Christian hope, love, and holiness; she is a symbol of the Spirit of holiness and hope present in our midst.

Among the points raised in the discussion which followed was the suggestion that Hispanic trinitarian theologians be attentive to the trinitarian dynamic wherein the Father reaches through the Son and in the Spirit to touch and transform the world so that all creation may be led back to the Father through and in the Son and the Spirit. It was also pointed out that the experience of chaos seems to be (from Genesis onward) a context for the work of the unifying Spirit of the Father and Jesus. The unpredictability of chaos—so inescapably experienced by vast numbers of Hispanic immigrants, for example—may be able to be translated into the unexpectability of Christian hope. Difficulties in articulating a trinitarian theology remain closely tied to the difficulty of articulating a theology of the Spirit.

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