

FOUNDATIONAL ASPECTS OF NORTH AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

In recent years a question of importance in North American Roman Catholic theology has been what constitutes an adequate public theology. As the U.S. bishops enter the public arena via pastoral statements such as *The Challenge of Peace* and *Economic Justice for All*, it appears increasingly necessary that theologians consider the parameters of the church's competence to speak about sociopolitical and economic issues, and how consensus and dialogue are to be reflected in the process by which public pastoral statements are made. The workshop considered resources in American theology—specifically social gospel theology—that can be retrieved as a basis for a contemporary public theology. A number of issues now being debated by theologians writing about public theology, including the competence of the church *via-à-vis* the sociopolitical order and the theological basis for social activism, were examined earlier in the twentieth century by social gospel theologians.

Four papers were circulated in advance of the workshop. In the session each panelist presented a brief précis of his or her paper, and a group discussion of all papers followed. Moderator of the discussion was William D. Lindsey. Alfred Hannelley's paper was entitled "Liberation Theology and the Public Church." Hannelley began with a discussion of the public church using works of Robin Lovin and David O'Brien (*Public Catholicism*). O'Brien sees three dominant approaches of American Catholics to society: republican, immigrant, and evangelical. The paper suggests a fourth important approach is liberation Catholicism, which includes Latin American ideas, religious feminism, black, Hispanic, and other liberation theologies. Hannelley compared liberation theology with the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch and found a significant number of similarities, especially in the area of theological method. He concluded by hoping that Protestants and Catholics can cooperate in a liberationist approach to transforming American society.

Judith Merkle's paper, "Personal and Social Sin: Counterpoint in American Theology," tracked the theology of sin in Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and liberation theology. Merkle found that the social gospel emphasis on the social nature of sin is valuable, since this emphasis is often absent in American culture, but this theology lacks specificity about the forces in society that maintain social sin and militate against social reform. In Merkle's view, Niebuhr is more realistic than Rauschenbusch in his awareness of the potential for sin in human collectives, and he thus better recognizes the need for strategy, rather than education, to achieve social reform. On the other hand, as cold war applications of Niebuhr's realism suggest, Niebuhr's radical doctrine of sin easily coalesces with antiprogressivist social impulses. Merkle finds in liberation theology a new method of thinking about

sin that is oriented less to theological speculation and more to the creation of a public theology that will ameliorate the status of the poor or culturally marginalized.

Charles Moutenot presented a paper entitled "The Voice of God's People: The Genesis of an American Strategic Theology from the Inner City." Moutenot cited John Coleman (*An American Strategic Theology*) and John Paul II (*Concern for the Social Order*) on the importance of solidarity and of listening to those enduring oppression for insuring the hermeneutic vitality of theology. His paper focused on a group of South Bronx Christians who have undertaken a dialogue with God in a situation of chronic poverty, drug abuse, and violence. After an introduction describing the social makeup of the group, Moutenot detailed the method it uses to dialogue with God and to engender concrete actions on behalf of the most powerless in the group, its children. Moutenot showed that the group employs a hermeneutic circle to analyze its social situation statistically and ethnographically, to empower itself to experience the presence of God in its midst, and to make theological judgments based on situational reading of the scriptures and prudential judgments for realistic action. Moutenot chronicles the emergence of an "inner city" theology from within this group as it struggles to live faith and hope through action informed by love.

Jon Nilson's paper, "What Might We Still Learn from Walter Rauschenbusch?" argues that the lack of attention to social gospel theology among American theologians interested in liberation theology is curious, since the social gospel movement can be understood as a liberation movement, social gospel theology is a uniquely American theology, and the social gospel movement was historically significant. Nilson finds patent similarities between the theology of Rauschenbusch and Gustavo Gutiérrez, particularly in their focus on the reign of God. In Nilson's view, if the reign of God belongs to the essence of Christianity and if it comprises the transformation of society in accord with the will of God, then Christian theology must (as Rauschenbusch and Gutiérrez maintain) seek to identify when, where, and how the reign of God comes into history. Nilson urges American liberationist theologians to retrieve social gospel theology and so add historical depth to its call for Christian social action.

An enthusiastic discussion followed the brief summaries of the papers. Both panelists and a number of participants suggested continuing the workshop at next year's CTSA.

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