

A CARIBBEAN SETTING FOR A THEOLOGICAL MEET

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Introduction

In the 18th- and the early 19th century the Caribbean islands were at the center of the contentions, intrigues, and wars of the principal European powers. The sugar, tobacco, coffee, and indigo (produced in large measure by slaves) made the islands' masters rich and constituted the engine of the expanding commercial wealth of the European powers. Up to 1815 the maneuvers of Great Britain to obtain control of the richer or potentially productive islands resulted in a continuously changing political map of the area. After the Congress of Vienna (1815), however, there was little change in that map. More important, the gradual abolition of slavery and the production of tropical goods in other parts of the globe shifted attention away from the Caribbean. After the abolition of slavery, the islands lapsed into relative obscurity. Their peasant-propelled agricultural production was no match to their former glories. Except for Cuba, which held on to slavery until 1886, the Caribbean by and large became a backwater in the global economy.

In the 20th century the situation did not change substantially with the efforts to diversify production. Manufacture was given priority, notably in Puerto Rico, and eventually in other islands, but the brief success of these attempts promptly faded, as China and southeast Asia became the main centers of manufacture. In the new global economy that has taken shape since the 1990's the Caribbean has been allotted the niche of rest and recreation for Northern vacationers. Tourism, casinos, and a variety of ventures to attract patients to medical facilities, students to local universities, and conventioners to professional or pastime gatherings have been the steady offering of the islands, which compete against each other for the same markets. The cruise ships, especially in winter, one or two days a week release a plethora of money in the port cities, but the profits stay largely in the hands of those concerns connected with the cruise industry. Even the cheap souvenirs sold are often made in China or elsewhere. Thus only a fraction of the population in each island derives a steady sustenance from tourism.

In this situation the young migrate to the metropolises. Britain and Canada receive the flow from the English-speaking Caribbean. The United States absorbs the Puerto Ricans and part of the Cubans and Dominicans. Haitians seek opportunities wherever there is an opening, notably in French Canada and the States. Spain has received Cubans, Dominicans and some Puerto Ricans. Other young people explore working opportunities in the Gulf Emirates, West Africa, and central Europe, but the opportunities are limited.

The islands, in their effort to provide more facilities for vacationers and congress attendants, have invested heavily in infrastructure, sometimes getting in debt over their heads. Often the construction projects are damaging to the environment. The opportunity for cooperation between islands is small, since they are competitors. Their economies, moreover, do not complement each other: their manpower is redundant; local capital is scarce, since those who have money invest abroad; and high crime rates and fiercely entrenched political parties exacerbate the problem.

The Christian Heritage

How has the Christian message interacted with these realities? A history of the Christian heritage of the Caribbean peoples would find on the one hand the recurrence of fear, dependence on, and mimesis of northern models and, on the other hand, the search for justice, the aspiration for peace, and the practices of solidarity. The original evangelization of the Amerindians in the Spanish Caribbean needed to be complemented each generation by the insertion of new arrivals, whether from Europe, Africa, the Americas, or Asia. In most of the other islands the original inhabitants died off or were expelled, and a steady introduction of African and indentured laborers configured the majority of the population. The religious beliefs and imaginaries they brought with them melded with the settled mentalities and rites of the islanders. A constant flux of people meant a steady adjustment of the values and the attitudes on each island.

There was ample opportunity for the growth of the Kingdom of Heaven because the initially embedded institutions stood in such sharp contradiction with the gospel. Conquest, slavery, indentured servitude, deportation, convict labor, and extended garrison duty were common features of the islands' history. It took centuries to eradicate some of these evils, and those who labored to relieve them suffered recurrent persecution and even death. Amerindians and Africans who resisted slavery were flogged, mutilated, or executed. Moravian and Methodist evangelizers of the enslaved populations in the Eastern Caribbean and in Jamaica met with the scorn and the harassment of the plantations' overseers. In the French Caribbean, disapproval of priests who were actively concerned with the conditions was no less fierce. In all the islands the connivance of much of the clergy with the institution of enslavement was evident, but outstanding figures, like Antonio María Claret in Cuba worked to mitigate some of the worst excesses of the plantations.

Other great figures illuminate the story of Caribbean struggles for justice, from the resistance to dictatorship in Santo Domingo, the efforts to achieve just labor conditions in Jamaica and Barbados, equality of rights in Trinidad, to the campaigns for full citizenship in Guadeloupe and Martinique and the right of free worship on all the islands. Many writers have dedicated thousands of pages to memorialize these heroes, and I won't pretend to summarize their efforts. But I want to make it clear that the peoples of the Caribbean, besides their keen sense of justice, have blazed trails for others to follow, whether in the denunciation of racism, in the search for equality between men and women, and in the universal education of children.

The Ambivalence of Secularization

Rich and inspiring as this heritage is, new challenges, stemming from the contemporary context, test the resilience of the Christian communities of the Caribbean. These communities arose and took shape in a European-dominated world, in which the inherited symbols, rites, and imaginaries were being directly challenged by the rationalities of the expanding Atlantic market. Thus, most of these Christian communities generated a resistance syndrome to the secularism that threatened to erode the Christian calendar, customs, and values. In practice, this enduring resistance mode has prompted the younger generations in the Caribbean to identify

Christianity as an adversary of modernity, Christian preaching as intolerant, and Christian morals as hopelessly entwined with a patriarchal society.

The gradual secularization of public institutions and the dismantling of the Christian discourse in public life have prompted considerable anxiety in many Christian communities, which do not fully understand the implications of the separation of church and the state. These communities can see the advantages of not having the state bound to one church, be it the Catholic or the Anglican, and they can appreciate the freedom to preach and publish which that separation guarantees. Nonetheless, they still expect the state to uphold the Mosaic code and its embedded interpretations.

Of course they would be startled if the state legislated the stoning of adulterers or the bashing of the heads of Moabite children. They would not fall in the trap of literal applications of the holy precepts, which have handicapped other societies, but they are reluctant to see that, just as they have drawn a line between the claims of the old law and what the New Testament's law of love has established, others can draw a line too. It is in the realm of the imaginary that these battles are fought in the Caribbean, but the byproduct is a stifling of Christian thought and creativity.

Secularity has gradually delivered Caribbean societies from the mythic and magical outlooks that accepted sickness, droughts, and hurricanes as manifestations of divine retribution, saw portents of doom everywhere, and consigned individuals to a life of misery on account of their "illegitimate" birth. Secularity has enabled resistance to injustice and delivered women from a divinely-ordained male-dominated society. Poverty is no longer seen as one's foreordained state in life. A sacred shield no longer protects clergy who have abused children. All in all, one can argue that the passing of the enchanted, old order has rendered plenty of benefits to the people.

Although these developments may be accounted as progress by most of us, the inherited attitudes to change still make it difficult for many Christian communities to come to terms with secularity. Although their leaders may grudgingly accept some or all of the changes, they find it difficult to give up the inherited discourse against the secularization of society. Thus the questions of justice and mercy that the changes stir are often glossed over as incidental concessions to public opinion, and not as the essential cogs of the Christian praxis that they are.¹

Ecology and the Imprisoned

There are two liminal issues, here in the Caribbean and elsewhere, for which the Christian meditation of the gospel has not yet produced sufficient institutional and attitudinal changes. One is the ecology. The magic veil that enveloped nature in the old sacral conception of reality has been torn asunder by the exigencies of the market's priorities. The ravaging of the coastlines, of forests, and of wetlands in the name of progress is a common feature of the islands. Here and there some reserves

¹ On liberation theology's relevance to the questions of justice in the region see Samuel Silva Gotay, *El pensamiento cristiano revolucionario en América Latina y el Caribe: Implicaciones de la teología de la liberación para la sociología de la religión* (2^a ed. San Juan: Ediciones Sigueme, 1982).

and sanctuaries have been established, never enough and seldom adequately protected. By and large, the public's indifference has allowed the deterioration of the environment. In most of the islands the churches seldom have committed themselves on ecological issues, in part because the religious thinkers have not considered it a pertinent matter.

A second justice-related issue is the miserable situation of the imprisoned on most islands. The economic contraction which the islands have suffered has led to increases in the crime rates. This increase has in turn produced public outcries demanding higher sentences for convicts. Detention centers built for a previous era become inadequate to hold the present inmate populations. Budget limitations enfeeble the capacity of government authorities to expand existing facilities resulting in the sorry state of incarceration on most Caribbean islands. If to this situation we add that the death penalty is still in force on some of the islands, and thus hundreds of prisoners are lodged on death row awaiting the resolutions of their appeals, the scenario becomes gruesome.²

The tendency of Christian communities has been to define work among the imprisoned in traditional pastoral lines: catechesis, sacraments, and some material assistance to the convict populations. The deplorable situations in Caribbean prisons have not been defined by Christians as a justice issue, and the weight of theological reflection on the matter is sadly lacking. The churches cannot shake off the retribution-to-sin model in favor of one that emphasizes unequal opportunities in society improvement of living conditions in prison and eventual reinsertion in the free community.

Solidarities

This reflection on prisons brings us to the larger theme of Caribbean solidarities. As each island society represents itself in terms of the differences that set it apart from the other Caribbean communities it becomes harder to elaborate a common project. Historically there have been marked instances in the exercise of solidarities, in times of hurricanes, earthquakes, epidemics, and social upheavals. But in the present situation much more is needed. The Caribbean islands need to develop a sense of unity and a pattern of collaboration in the search for regional solutions. If the churches foster awareness of the common realities and the pertinence of the Gospel in the search for a sustainable regional economy they would fulfill their mandate for justice.

Part and parcel of these concerns should be the promotion of peace, which the region, and the whole world, badly needs. Following the Augustinian maxim *Pax Opus Iustitiae* est, it is not hard to see that the straightest path for that promotion is the commitment to integral justice.

² In Jamaica, for instance, the legislature won't abolish capital punishment, but the executive has not applied it since 1988. The case is similar in Saint Vincent, where the last execution took place in 1995. See Cornell Law School's searchable database on capital punishment worldwide, available at <http://www.deathpenaltyworldwide.org/search.cfm> (accessed on May 20, 2016).

Conclusion

Those are the perspectives of a Caribbean reflection on the Christian mission which, in my opinion, should guide the pastoral care of our people. Unfortunately such concerns are often absent in the formation of priests, deacons, religious men and women, and pastoral agents on our islands. Too often we have trained people to perform rites, and to prefer the symbols to the realities symbolized. We form pastoral agents who, in the face of any situation, immediately think of saying a mass, organizing a prayer service, or even writing a pretty variant for the prayer of the faithful, but cannot address the problem itself. They wait for directives that never come, or come ten years after the event. They cannot think outside the box in which their training has enthralled them. They have reduced Christianity to a ritual system.