LATIN-AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL JOURNALS AND THE CULTURE DEBATE

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The significance of the cultural history of Latin America lies in the comparison between three different civilisations, as well as their confrontation and the mixture of them. It is not only in Europe that such material for comparison is lacking. In the other areas of European colonial expansion, to be sure, confrontation and mixture never occurred on such an extensive scale. In Asia and Africa south of the Sahara, Europeans remained isolated minority groups. In Australia, New Zealand and North America the indigenous cultures practically suffered defeat. Therefore I say after Slicher van Bath: “What happened in this area in Latin America and the Caribbean is a unique historical process”.¹

Latin America’s development is only to a limited extent a reflection of the European development. The substantiation of this leads us immediately to the Church. Her dominating position was continued well into the 19th century. Ostensibly, during the colonial period, she seemed to be the king’s handmaid. The actual situation, however, was far more complicated. Rather she was sovereign in a great many areas. As a result of the development of national states that situation had to change and the problem of Church versus State was the first great national question. It was around this issue that the formation of the political parties took place. The politicians and the Church referred to European views and philosophies for legitimizing their views with the result that the specific character of the Latin-American situation was violated. The 19th century stagnation led to all kinds of problems of a political, economic, social, cultural and religious nature, also resulting in an experimental field for all kinds of European political and social ideas.

Whatever may have been the precursors of the dependencia theory and liberation theology which was at first connected with it, from the end of the 1960’s the latter two at any rate emphasized what was unique about Latin America. For that matter they were preceded by institutions of a continental stature such as the Latin-American Episcopal Conference (CELAM).

The debate on the relation of Gospel and culture or on inculturation originates from the view on culture in the conciliary document Gaudium et Spes and in the concern of Paul VI with the separation between Gospel and

culture. In circles of the World Council of Churches this issue was especially
given general attention at the 1990 Canberra assembly.

Viewed as such, it seems to be for Latin America a debate which was
brought up from outside. Therefore, in this presentation of the debate on
culture in theological magazines on Latin America of the last twelve months,
I have first of all paid attention to Latin America's own sources of this
debate. We shall look, successively, (1) at the debate within liberation
theology around the liberating or alienating significance of popular culture
and popular religiosity; then (2) to the developments which caused a change
in the missionary work among the Indians, away from the traditional
assimilation; to (3) the fourth General Assembly of Latin-American Bishops
1992 in Santo Domingo, where in vehement discussions the Vatican cultural
offensive determined the view on the mission of the Church, while also
producing texts which sometimes speak of "evangelization of culture" and at
other times of "inculturated evangelization". We now cross the confessional
border to (4) the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism held in
Salvador da Bahia from 24 November to 3 December 1996. Beforehand, its
theme, "Called to One hope: the Gospel in Diverse Cultures", prompted only
few editorial staffs of journals to pay attention to the theme of culture. I shall
have this assembly of world christianity, as it was rallied by the World
Council of Churches, followed by (5) an earlier Catholic Latin-American
assembly, the so-called COMLA V, July 1995 in Belo Horizonte. Its theme,
"The Gospel in the cultures, way of hopeful life" gives a rough sketch of the
road from a monocultural to a multicultural christianity.

After this long introduction we arrive at (6) the further reflection in Latin-
American journals on the cultural debate which actually always refers to
culture and religion. From 6.4 to 6.8 we selected studies which successively
go into the indigenous Indian religion and culture, into those of the Afro-
Americans, and into the issues raised by modernity and post-modernity. In
6.1 up to 6.3. more general approaches of our theme are reviewed, namely
of the ambiguity of the concept of inculturation, the hermeneutics of the
poor, and Latin-American christianity as an imported reality.

In 7 it is not even possible for me to arrive at a tentative conclusion,
although the theological task seems clear to me: without an inculturation of
theology itself, a theology of inculturation lacks the necessary foundation.
Among the journals studied hardly any journals may be found which are
meant for the elite of the theologians themselves. The journals all have close
connections with educational institutes of the church, religious orders,
ecuménical, missionary or pastoral movements. The theology they offer is
reflection on action, on new initiatives, not written for eternity. I did not find
contributions by members of the Pentecostal churches. After the publication
of "Neither Angels nor Devils", 2 I had expected more about this most