THEOLOGY OF HOPE OR HOPE FOR THEOLOGY?

The Fifth General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, September 24 to October 1, 2001, Quito /Ecuador

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'As EATWOT we are thankful for the graces of the past 25 years and are conscious of our inadequacies. We pledge to work together in the spirit to help realise Christian vision of a new earth and new heaven'.1 These words - the final part of the Statement emitted at the end of the Assembly - do not only summarise the theological guidelines of the Assembly in Quito, but do also express in concentrated form the struggles and hopes, which are embodied by EATWOT and its history.

A Jubilee in the Aftermath of 'September 11'

The Fifth Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) has been characterised from the very beginning by a coincidence of strong symbolism and dramatic events. The venue, the beautiful valley of Tumbaco below Quito in Ecuador, is situated just a few miles from a place called by the Ecuadorians la mitad del mundo - the 'middle of the world', referring to the imaginary line of the equator, which divides the world into two hemispheres. After the Third EATWOT Assembly in Nairobi, the Quito Assembly has been the second one taking place in the geographical south, just below the equator.

The Assembly started at a crucial point in human history, less than two weeks after the terrible attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, on September 11, 2001. Women and men coming from all parts of the globe, gathering in the 'middle of the world', were still hypnotised by the images emitted by the television channels again and again, but also concerned about the language of retaliation and vengeance, and even threatened by the possibility of war outbursting in many of the regions they came from. The whole EATWOT region 'US Minorities' was not able to take part in the Assembly, due to fears and restrictions upon international flights.

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1 Message of Hope, Statement of the Fifth General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, 6. This statement exists at the moment only in manuscript form, but will be published shortly in Voices of the Third World. In this contribution, I refer to the document by the term 'Statement'.

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The Assembly in Quito was not only the Fifth General Assembly of EATWOT, but also the Silver Jubilee of the existence of the association founded 1976 in Dar-es-Salam. Only two of the founding members were present at the celebration of EATWOT’s 25th anniversary: Tissa Balasuriya from Sri Lanka and Maurice Assad from Egypt. The absence of some of the most outstanding representatives of EATWOT’s starting years could raise the question if this fact had to do with a natural change of generations or if it reflected an internal struggle for the redefinition of lines and policies. However, many of the founders already have died; Gustavo Gutiérrez was invited to the Assembly in Quito, but could not come for flight reasons. Sergio Torres has retired from any public duties long since.

62 men and women from 29 countries, among them 8 observers and representatives of funding agencies from the North (Europe and North America), came together in Quito in a context of uncertainty and anxiety, but also of hope and celebration. As at former meetings, liturgical celebrations were cornerstones of sharing and empowerment, rich in symbolism and contextual inculturation. In contrast to the Founding Meeting of 1976 in Dar-es-Salam with only one woman taking part, the Silver Jubilee Assembly in Quito had even a female majority: 34 of the participants were women theologians. The Women’s Commission of EATWOT had held its intercontinental meeting just before the General Assembly took place.

The terrorist attacks in the USA had a strong impact on the Assembly, as a frame of contextual reference and as a real theological challenge. In a common statement emitted during the first days of the Assembly, the participants expressed the hope ‘that the global response to the present crisis will help us realize the folly of terrorism and war, and help build an effective human coalition for peace with justice to all’. Referring to the increasing hostility against Islam and Muslims, the statement insists that ‘our worldwide experience convinces us that the basic message and understanding of the two

2 It is not easy to keep consistent the very method of counting the assemblies and conferences of EATWOT. In the beginning, all the meetings were labelled in chronological order, be they intercontinental or continental ones, by ‘EATWOT I’ to ‘EATWOT XI’. This methodology was abandoned after the Fourth General Assembly in Tagaytay (Philippines). As ‘General Assemblies’ are considered: 1. Delhi 1981 (EATWOT V); 2. Oaxtepec 1986 (EATWOT VII); 3. Nairobi 1992 (EATWOT VIII); 4. Tagaytay 1996 (EATWOT XI). The Foundation Meeting of 1976 in Dar-es-Salam is not considered to have been a ‘General Assembly’. For a systematic and (almost) complete overview see: Missionswissenschaftliches Institut Missio (ed.), Von Gott reden im Kontext der Armut, Dokumente der Ökumenischen Vereinigung von Dritte-Welt-Theologinnen und –Theologen 1976-1996, Freiburg-Basel-Wien, 1999, 340f. See also: J. Estermann, ‘Einführung – Die Rede von Gott im Kontext der Armut’, in: ibid., 1-13, especially 7-11.

3 The original list of invited theologians just contained men. Because of the criticism coming from supporting agencies, finally one woman (Beatriz Melano Couch from Argentina) was invited (according to Virginia Fabella, Beyond Bonding. A Third World Woman’s Theological Journey, Manila 1993, note 35 of chapter 1).

4 EATWOT Statement on September 11, 2001, 2 (only in manuscript).