

THEOLOGY BETWEEN YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW

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A number of Latin American theologians began their theological reflection in the context of economic and political dependence, degrading poverty and destitution, and military and police oppression. We in Central Europe have been challenged and inspired by their preferential option for the poor. We have also found that the base communities, as long as they still exist, represent a new and fresh ecclesiological concept.

However, the theologies of liberation worked out by Gutiérrez, Sobrino, and Bonino are not easily transferable, due to our very different historical and socio-political situations. The context in Central Europe is not the same, and thus our theological work cannot be simple reception, imitation, or adaptation of what has been produced in other parts of the world. *Our* theological work is deeply rooted in our *own* everyday situation. It stems from the hopes and frustrations of our people, and is related to their historical experience and to the indigenous culture in our part of the world. Of course, the primary starting point for any theology is the reality of God's revelation. Yet how we interpret God's being on the move in relation to his creation is very much related to the place where we stand and to the context in which we live. We may ask whether it was ever right and justifiable to repeat the formulations of prominent theologians without taking into consideration their particular contexts. We must work toward a local and contextual theological reflection. Theology simply is not easily transferable.

Given the contextual nature of theological reflection, I wish to mention a few issues which, in my view, play an essential role in the theological work being done in Central Europe.

I. WHAT IS CENTRAL EUROPE?

Nowadays it is common practice for journalists to write about Central Europe *and* Eastern Europe, implying that there is a difference between these two regions of the European continent. To put all the countries into one basket and to speak summarily about Eastern Europe was only a shorthand term of the Cold War. Central Europe actually has its own distinct culture and identity. It is basically

the zone of smaller nations between Germany and Russia, a region which was formed and shaped by Western Christendom, whereas Eastern Europe was influenced primarily by the Byzantine tradition.

Why do we stress these factors? Because they have a distinct bearing on our identity. During the previous period, in an atmosphere of exaggerated internationalism, we had the feeling that our unique identity was at stake. Identity, of course, plays an important role in the life of a human community. It is the innermost core of our being. Its components are our historical consciousness, our myths, our religiosity, our folk songs, our fairy tales, and our poems which resound only in our mother tongue. The business of going back to one's roots and discovering one's own identity is a process now taking place in many parts of the world. Since the demise of communism it has been happening also in Central and Eastern Europe.

We may recall several influential people who came from this region, among them the philosophers and scientists T.G. Masaryk, Edmund Husserl, Sigmund Freud, and Jan Patočka; the writers Franz Kafka, Rainer Maria Rilke, Karel Čapek, and Milan Kundera; and the musicians Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, Franz Liszt, and Béla Bartók. If Europe has two poles, then the rational pole lies perhaps in France and the artistic pole is located in Central Europe. Strangely enough, one unifying phenomenon of this area is the presence of church buildings built in the baroque style.

The region of Central Europe has been deeply marked by the presence of Jewish people, who were almost totally exterminated in the time of the Holocaust. Judaism in this part of the world represents a small nation whose future is always at stake. Jews remind Central Europeans and others that a small nation always has to struggle for survival. This anxiety and struggle is unknown to greater nations. Central Europe, though, is a space of common culture where nations find themselves in a similar situation. Central Europe continues to be a challenge and a mission.

II. A CHALLENGE OF HISTORY

Part of Central Europe was christianized by the missionary activity of Constantine (Cyril) and Methodius. Both Greek missionaries were sent by the Byzantine Emperor, and while the original Byzantine influence was not forgotten for several centuries, the Czech lands and other lands eventually became an integral part of Western Christianity.

Under Charles IV (1346-1378) Prague became the political and cultural center of the Holy Roman Empire. Some radical ideas regarding the interpretation of the Scriptures, church organization, and the papacy were suggested by Milič of Kroměříž, Matthias of Janov, and others. A passion for preaching the Gospel, the ideas of John Wycliffe, and the presence of scattered Waldensian communities prepared the soil for the witness of Jan Hus. His condemnation by the council of Constance and his death at the stake led to a nationwide movement and to the creation of 'the Hussite Church. In the heart of medieval Europe an island was created which for two hundred years was no longer controlled by Rome. The Hussites emphasized the free proclamation of the Word of God, the

administration of the eucharist in both kinds to lay people, and the renewal of church life according to the example of the Early Church.

Within the Hussite Church a movement was growing which was to some extent a continuation of a radical Taborite position. Around the year 1457 several groups organized themselves into the Unity of Brethren. Initially, the Unity preached nonviolence, separation from the world, a refusal to take oaths, and the spiritual life of the community in a secluded place. Later, the Unity overcame some limitations and entered cultural life in the sixteenth century. It became prominent especially in the field of education, diaconal activity, church organization, and in church order and discipline. Under the influence of Luther and Calvin the Unity greatly broadened its horizon but never lost sight of its beginnings. Its great achievement was the translation of the Bible (including the deuterocanonical books) and an accompanying commentary. The Bible of Kralice (1579-1593) is the most outstanding contribution of the Unity of Brethren to the national culture, but not the only one. Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670), the last bishop of the Unity, was one of the founders of modern pedagogy; he lived most of his life in exile because of the Counter-Reformation. The Moravian Church after 1722 is partly a continuation of this tradition.

My working hypothesis is that the Waldensians, the Hussites, and the Unity of Brethren represent a Reformation in their own right. We have to take them into consideration if we want to work towards a more inclusive and comprehensive concept of the Reformation. The early Reformation, represented by these movements, put great emphasis on the interpretation of the Scriptures and on preaching. Supported by students, artisans, and peasants, it sought to reform the church and to deconstruct medieval feudal society. The first and radical Reformers therefore rejected the close link between pope and emperor in late medieval Christendom.

III. A CRISIS OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Central Europe has been an integral part of Western civilization. Culturally speaking, in this region we find ourselves at the crossroads between East and West. Our forebears embraced Christian culture and its value system, and this culture in turn shaped our national awareness and identity for centuries. However, after 1945 the vast area between the river Elbe and the Pacific Ocean found itself in a radically changed situation. Christian nations lost their leading positions. The Western liberal value system came under attack. The pillars of the civilization - political, theological and philosophical - were profoundly shaken. The moral authority of Europe and North America could no longer be taken for granted. World Wars I and II (started by Christian nations), their destructiveness, the ensuing totalitarian systems, the Holocaust, and ideological, political and economic tensions during the Cold War - to some extent all this put into question the moral authority and credibility of the Western world.

Dostoevsky compares the West to a beautiful cemetery. He mourns the disappearance of the 'Europe of the knights', regretting its transformation into a market place filled with shopkeepers.

According to Dostoevsky Western civilization is weakened and sick. There is now more wealth in Europe, but the awareness of good and evil is lost. Every human being locates ultimate authority in him or herself. Such autonomy leads to titanism, which ends in despair.

What can still be salvaged from the spiritual traditions of the West? The answer is the Europe of the knights, of believing Don Quijotes, of artistic beauty, the Europe of the saints. The knighthood is one of the most noble elements in the history of Europe, for within the knighthood human beings have an ideal to which they are dedicated, in which they believe, and for which they are ready to sacrifice their entire lives. According to Dostoevsky it is essential to have an ideal and to believe in what is unconditionally sacred. Nowadays we meet very few knights and saints but many greedy, profit-oriented shopkeepers.

IV. A RADICAL SECULARIZATION

In Central and Eastern Europe Christians live to a large extent in a post-Constantinian period. The direct link between the church and the institution of the state has disappeared. Churches have lost their privileged position and for years have been unable to participate directly in shaping social and political life. Christians have lost many benefits and privileges. The religious world view is no longer a binding and integrating power in society. Some understand this development as God's judgment on the failures of Christian civilization. Indeed already certain Reformers saw the religious framework of the *Corpus Christianum* as standing in direct contradiction to the very core of the biblical message.

Secularization is of course a complex phenomenon influenced and determined by many factors. In the North (including Central Europe) secularization is closely linked with the first industrial revolution, which replaced the old means of production. Hard manual work was taken over by machines; the job of humans was to service them. In the ongoing scientific and technological revolution humans are gradually being excluded even from this servicing function. Science has a tendency to replace humans as a productive force. Manufacturing is automated and directed with the aid of sophisticated computers. The unique importance and contribution of humans lies now in their creativity, in the cultivation of creative abilities, in flexibility and adaptability. The scientific and technological revolution respects no boundaries, reaching into every area of civilization, human activity, and relationships. These factors alter our understanding of work, and as our concept of work has changed, we have begun to see that the meaning of life cannot merely be everyday repetitive work. Labor and work may therefore be defined as any kind of creative activity, discovery, or invention. Can this new concept of human work cope any better with the omnipresent experience of alienation?

One result of this process of secularization is that in the realm of Christendom people have become alienated from the church and from the Christian tradition. Some theologians, however, see secularization as a fruit of biblical faith, as secularization seems to be especially strong in the areas where there was a state church or a strong link between church and state. Yet in the former socialist

states the process of secularization was promoted and enhanced by Marxist ideology, which is critical of any kind of religion. Whatever its precise causes, though, secular culture did not bring about a complete breakdown of religion. On the contrary, we are observing a heightened interest in religious matters. Some people who have been estranged from religious belief are returning to the Christian faith and seeking a new orientation. Nevertheless, we should not unfurl the flags of triumph prematurely; we are experiencing at best an ambiguous phenomenon. Perhaps we may simply conclude by noting that both the believer and the secular person are claimed and called by the same Gospel.

V. ENCOUNTER WITH MARXISM

Since the events of 1989 it has become almost impossible to speak about Marxism in a neutral and detached way. I am of course aware that many Christians have always considered Marxism to be totally irrelevant to their thinking, and it appears that the demise of communism has vindicated their position. In the U.S. the anti-Marxist lobby has always been so strong that it seems to be futile to say anything contrary to this position.

And yet I do not wish to ignore this legacy. I quote from Jacques Derrida: "Upon rereading the Manifesto and a few other great works of Marx, I said to myself that I know of few texts in the philosophical tradition, perhaps none, whose lesson seemed more urgent today ... It will always be a fault not to read and reread and discuss Marx ... There will be no future without this. Not without Marx, no future without Marx, without the memory and the inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx ... of at least one of his spirits ... there is more than one of them."¹

What led to the decline of this once so powerful ideology? The problem can be traced to its official standing in social life, which made Marxism appear superficial and schematic. As a result, Marxism as a theoretical basis of socialism stagnated. Further theoretical development of the socialist idea and praxis was minimal. And because the official ideology was often out of touch with reality, it did not tackle real problems. Finally the facts have revolted.

It is regrettable that the slogan "to catch up and overtake the West" has been introduced. This phrase is an indication that the socialist system was fascinated and blinded by a mechanism that is alien to itself. Foreign principles undermined the socialist option. The socialist world should have been aiming at a new model of new quality, but this did not materialize. On the contrary, many mistakes were made and many crimes committed in the name of a new world - a utopia. One external cause should be mentioned. The socialist states were unable to withstand the challenge of the arms race. Some people suggest that it was a premeditated trap into which the Soviets and others were drawn. Whatever the case, one aspect of life was especially negative. In the race with the West ecology was neglected and sensitivity to the environment was not cultivated.

¹Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

Positively speaking, it was possible to achieve a relatively high standard of living without private ownership of the means of production. People were capable of working and being creative without much economic stimulus. Several European countries achieved a reasonable standard of living without exploiting others. Beginning in 1968 an important and growing movement towards democratization emerged.

Is there anything the past fifty years can teach us for our future theological task? One lesson is that we can never be completely free of *ideology*, of a system and a method of thought which interprets our world and our place in it. We are all ideological beings; our existence has a distinct ideological aspect that either legitimates the *status quo* or initiates a process of change. This being so, a Christian faith is marked and colored by ideological factors too. Each interpretation of a biblical text or other text is also the interpretation of the particular situation (including the ideological situation) in which the interpreter finds him or herself. Ideology is therefore under both God's judgment and God's promise as much as any other human undertaking.

We have also been reminded of the social and communal features of human existence, features often neglected by the church in its emphasis on analysis and interpretation. Many Christians, for example, are quick to speak out against violence while remaining blind to the violence of the *status quo* which is embedded in unjust structures of society. Or they advocate political freedom without recognizing the futility of such freedom for people who are economically enslaved. Study and action, reflection and involvement should be kept in balance. Understanding a person, a group, or a movement means knowing the proper historical context. We need to be aware of *our* vested interests, greed, and selfishness; *our* ambition for prestige, power, influence, and domination. We are all determined by our place in a certain social stratum and class. If we want to study racist and sexist discrimination we cannot do without a thorough class analysis. Racism, sexism, and classism represent three different types of oppression which are closely intertwined.

Even if we try to understand the Marxist philosophy *ad optimam partem* (in the best possible way), however, we Christians have to raise our questions and level our critique. Is Marxist anthropology profound enough? Is it not too optimistic? Is the attendant concept of power not predetermined by a lack of realism? A Christian tradition knows that evil is of a radical nature. It is both personal and transpersonal. It cannot be explained away by pointing to social disorder alone. Biblical faith speaks of sin. It knows that evil in its all-pervading subtlety is real, and yet it remains a mystery.

The critique of religion can nevertheless be understood as a useful mirror. We have to ask ourselves whether religion did not deepen self-alienation. Was it not often used as a numbing tranquilizer? Is it not true that sometimes the dominating theology was the theology of rulers? Is it possible that our theology is just a projection of our own anthropological situation as Feuerbach has forcefully contended? And yet, we know that this critique does not touch upon the very depth and core

of the Gospel. The message of Jesus is not an enslaving force, but a liberating power. In the long run, no society can live without the dimension of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In this respect, the presence and witness of a Christian community in a society carries unique importance and is irreplaceable.

VI. A LESSON FOR THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL

In the fall of 1989 the scenery in Central and Eastern Europe radically changed. Many people felt that a change would eventually take place but nobody knew that the transformation would occur so suddenly and would be so radical. But it was, and the economic system based on central planning became obsolete. Through nonviolent demonstrations people opted for democracy, freedom, openness, and pluralism. It became obvious that the so-called Second World (the former socialist bloc) would become integrated into the western economic system. The period of bipolar politics ceased to exist.

With changes which were positive and long overdue new questions arose. Is it possible to modify the trend by which the Northern hemisphere is creating a powerful bloc and becoming a threat to the South? Can a situation be avoided in which the European states linked in the European Union may become a self-centered fortress? With the disintegration of the Soviet Union is it possible to control the nuclear weapons in its possession? With the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism is humankind still in a position to see Islam and its culture in a positive way and not as enemy number one? Coupled with these questions is the fact that in Central and Eastern Europe and elsewhere we are confronted with racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and tribalism. Given this state of affairs, it would be a mistake to believe that the demise of communism will automatically secure the victory of democracy. The pressures of the global market and the spreading culture of consumerism themselves represent the danger of a new kind of totalitarianism.

However, there are some hopeful signs in the new situation. Nations and ethnic groups in the former socialist states are going back to their roots. Increased respect for indigenous culture and religion is evident. There is a distinct longing to discover one's own identity. These are important factors in the process of renewal and reconstruction.

Any attempt at an evaluation of the period before 1989 must take into consideration all those who suffered and were persecuted. It is tragic that people were victimized in the name of a more human and just society. Without minimizing the wrongdoings and human rights violations one should also recall the prolonged period of the Cold War with its poisonous effect. More than once during those years the entire planet stood on the brink of catastrophe. It was precisely in this situation-in a secularized society dominated by official Marxist ideology, suffering the effects of a dangerous standoff between East and West that shaped global realities for more than a generation-that Christian communities learned a lesson which can benefit the church universal. For although this was a time of difficulties and temptations, new challenges and opportunities emerged as well.

In this ideologically hostile environment Christian communities lived without privileges and power. Ironically, powerlessness was often the source of a new authority and credibility. The churches learned to keep a distance from the corridors of power and remained close to ordinary people. The church was usually a little flock but it experienced that a decisive minority can play an important role. It became obvious that Christian existence is always a costly discipleship.

Such costly discipleship is not truly possible without the fellowship of a local church. Whoever swims against the stream of official ideology needs to be sustained and carried by a community. In a situation of censorship and self-censorship a local parish has the potential to become a zone of free speech. Preaching about God's freedom, righteousness, and peace prepared the ground for the radical change which eventually took place.

Such radical societal transformation has driven home the reality that the church is politically active even if it has no overt political power and influence. Each sermon and each Bible Study is a political action. The message about God who is the Ultimate renders every political power and institution in this world penultimate and provisional. The existence of God to whom the prophets and the apostles witness challenges all the totalitarian claims of secular rulers.

It is not true that the world is divided into two realms - the kingdom of Christ and the evil empire. Ultimately a Christian witness and presence does not depend on a social system and external legal safeguards. The fact that the church did not have a fully respected and acknowledged place in society did not destroy the faith. The entire atmosphere in which we were living compelled us to examine constantly whether our faith and spiritual stamina were up to the tasks and challenges before us.

Theologically speaking, the period after 1948 was lived under both the judgment *and* the promise of God, who - popular cliches notwithstanding - did not emigrate to the West. Our Christian perspective, in other words, prevents us from either demonizing or glorifying this epoch.

Now that this epoch is over we can be grateful for many subsequent improvements in Central Europe. However, more than ten years after the wall came down we realize that living out the fullness of Christian calling is not identical with material wealth and affluence. In no way should it be taken for granted that the messianic age has arrived with the advent of liberal democracy, privatization, and the free market mechanism.

To be sure, the new situation is more friendly to the Christian tradition and more conducive to the witness of Christian churches. However, there is a danger that churches will become passive, complacent, and even opportunistic. New idols are emerging that must be identified and addressed. It is a prophetic task of a Christian community to distinguish between the God of the biblical message and mammon, between God and the idol of consumerism. A community of faith will affirm freedom, participatory democracy, sustainability, openness, and pluralism. However, the issues of alienation,

exploitation, exclusion, hunger, violence, war, and ecological devastation must not escape the attention of Christians as we enter the new millennium.

VII. GLOBALIZATION

Another aspect of the background for doing theology today is the ongoing process of globalization. Globalization is a trend which the world economic system created through the internationalization of markets and the transnationalization of big corporations. Some people see primarily promising possibilities. Those who strongly criticize this development, however, suggest that the process of globalization even now threatens humanity, culture, and the environment.

Several activities have been globalized: finance, trade, technology, communications, and the ideological conceptualization of the world. We are confronted with the global problems of health and of the natural environment. What is viable? Whether or not a certain action benefits the least of the human family is the criterion which will help to determine what is defensible.

The process of globalization needs to be evaluated in connection with the concept of sustainability. Sustainability describes a process which meets the needs of the present without weakening and limiting the capacity of future generations to satisfy their own needs. Sustainable development is also a just development which takes into consideration the needs of the poor people in the world.

Regarding the future we must also recognize our limits. We need to adapt our claims and expectations in order to reduce the exploitation of unrenewable resources. The problem is that globalization is based on the ideas of limitless growth and utilitarianism. The principle is that what is economically profitable should be promoted. Sustainability, though, is an ethical imperative which prefers justice, responsibility, and participation to raw economic interest.

What makes the move toward a more just economy so difficult in the face of global market forces, however, is that the state does not have sufficient political control over economic life. National political power and sovereignty are weakening, and no transnational political authority is in a position to define the limits of market activity. Rather, international financial exchanges limit the control of national authorities. Transnational corporations easily move elsewhere if governments do not make the necessary concessions on taxes, environmental standards, and labor regulations.

The technology that accompanies and in fact propels globalization both enhances and destroys. Positively, new technologies can facilitate human communication in an unprecedented way. Financial transactions and the sharing of information about markets occur almost instantly. Negatively, the dominating power of financial capital impacts every aspect of our existence. Those without financial means are simply excluded from the mechanism of the market, such that the name for injustice today is exclusion. Coupled with this financial exclusion are painful reminders that the world is *globalized* economically but *fragmented* culturally. Independent cultures and specific traditions,

values, and identities-including religious ones-are in jeopardy. To many, in fact, globalization has nothing to do with religion, theology, and ethics. Religion is not considered a force that could be effectively mobilized against globalization. Yet the emerging global civilization requires a fresh examination of theological and ethical questions, the principal question being how God wants us to live in the new global era.

VIII. A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Against this background we need to read the Bible and to listen to our faith stories in search of orientation. We must ask, Who is our God, and what is the 'good life' that the triune God provides for us? In asking these questions again we are reminded that "the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell in it" (Ps 24:1). The common *oikos* as the household of life is the model and vision for our understanding of economy and ecology. Through Jesus Christ, God gives life in abundance to all people and to the whole creation (John 10:10).

Jesus Christ, though, is always beyond the status quo. It is a dangerous ideology which makes us believe that there is no alternative to the present situation. The vision of *oikos* teaches us about an economy that enables life for all and is guided by the principles of equality and inclusivity, justice and solidarity, care for human beings and for all of creation. The economy of God's household promotes inclusion, cooperation, and sharing. It struggles against oppressive structures such as racism, patriarchy, and caste. It discloses the counter-productive and destructive character of exaggerated competition. Nor is this a uniquely Christian vision. The major religions all share key principles regarding the "good life" and the inclusive economy, including life-centeredness, respect for nature, the option for the poor, justice through sharing, the concept of simple living, and the recognition of people as the subjects of their own lives.

Our churches and we ourselves are entangled with the economic system. We therefore need to approach our tasks in a spirit of repentance and humility, cognizant that *we* remain in need of liberation and renewal. Our own Reformed understanding of economics, for example, has actually reinforced economic values that separate the physical from the spiritual and place production values above human dignity. We have believed that the fruits we bear attest to the reality of our election and salvation, and we have been suspicious of the celebration of life. And while the Sabbath was given to link our lives to God's dream of a peaceful community, we have not allowed the message of jubilee to free us from captivity to accumulation. Instead, the emphasis on success has implied that humans must be highly efficient. Anyone not making certain productivity targets has been considered inferior, which shows that too much emphasis has been placed on work. We need to rediscover the true meaning of the Reformed principles *sola fide, sola gratia, soli Deo gloria*. Finally, a narrow understanding of election and predestination has led to a spirit of intolerance. Reformed believers have separated the elect from the excluded. It is therefore somewhat ironic that the Reformed synodical structure contributed to the

introduction of modern democracy, the goal of which is that all people are included and play a role in decision making.

The theology of grace is in contradiction to the ideology of accumulation, unlimited growth, and the theology of prosperity. We do not live from our own deeds, but from God's gift of grace. We should counter the ideology of competition, the culture of complacency, privatism, and indifference. Our democratic institutions should work for social responsibility, justice, and the preservation of nature. The Holy Spirit empowers us to live and work towards the vision of the *oikos*!

IX. A CHALLENGE OF POSTMODERNISM

It seems that postmodernism challenges any kind of theological reflection today. A new mentality is spreading in consumer societies. The ultimate value, tolerance, prompts us to accept the veracity of several noncommittal truths. In the moral sphere we are encouraged to embrace diversity and radical openness. It seems that the time of absolute claims is over. In the absence of such claims humans are expected to live in the jungle of what is relative and penultimate.

It is suggested that we have entered this jungle as a consequence of the reaction by postmodern thinkers to the shock of totalitarianism. The basic rule of thumb now is that anything that claims to be leading and determining is suspect. Whenever a discourse becomes a master discourse and claims a special authority there is a danger of terror. Lacking any larger story in which the world is situated, the world becomes a market and the market is god. The prevailing system then tends to eliminate all that is noble and sacred. What really matters is the liberation of the individual. Let us be concerned primarily about our individual life and its success. Concepts such as suffering, solidarity, and the struggle for justice should be put aside. To ask about what is true, genuine, or profound is irrelevant. It seems that the postmodern culture has cancelled any meaning. In the situation of all-pervasive commodification one should become an uncritical consumer guided by the market mechanism and by the flood of advertisements. Shopping malls are the cathedrals and temples of postmodern times.

However, the very core of the biblical message is opposed to many of these emphases. Biblical reflection is based on memory. "You have been strangers in the land of Egypt." We are supposed to refresh a memory, to remember, to retell and reread the story of God's people. This story generates a utopia of the future, an anticipation of freedom, and a common hope for a more equitable life. We would be impoverished if we forgot the great designs of the past-theological and philosophical. We must not resign ourselves to the idea that there is no reason in history. Humans cannot give up seeking for truth and asking about God. Our unique and irreplaceable task remains: to tell the story of God's liberation and salvation with Christ at the center of this story.

We shall continue to cultivate the memory, to rediscover the infinite value of dignified life - human life and life in general. We have to resist the temptation to sanction the mechanism of

postmodern society. The Christian community is constantly seduced to bless and to legitimize the ethos of society. Against this background, what does it mean to be *in* the world but not *of* the world (John 17:14ff.)?

X. CHRIST HIDDEN IN HIS LOWLINESS

Theological thinking today needs to recognize the existence and the contribution of other faiths and religions. In the following I quote from a book by John B. Cobb, Jr.:

The story we Christians learn begins with that of the ancient Jews. Christians are today attempting to learn that story. We must learn it first as their story.... It must become part of our story as Christians and Jews The broadening of our internal history to include Judaism does not-for us Christians-displace Jesus from the center of our history. On the contrary, it is because Jesus is the center that we are moved toward the more inclusive history

Can Muslim history also become part of our internal history? ... As long as Jesus is the center of the history in which we live, there will be a strong impulse for us to expand that history to include that of Islam as well....

The expansion of our internal story is proceeding in another direction as well. Our critical study of the Scriptures was long directed toward isolating pure Jewish and Christian strain from the many other influences that gain expression there. We celebrated our history largely by contrasting it with paganism. That is now changing. We continue to celebrate the creativity of the Jewish people in weaving together the many strands of influence into a creative and dynamic faith in one God, but we no longer view the strands that are woven together as something to be despised. Our Jewish heritage leads us to reclaim our Egyptian, Canaanite, Mesopotamian, Persian and Greek heritage as well. Our internal history expands.

There are other histories, those of India and China and Korea as well as Africa and the indigenous peoples of the New World I incorporate into my internal history a wider one....

What draws me in that direction? Whenever I draw the line between “us” and “them” I seem to discern wisdom on both sides of the line.... I understand that wisdom to be the divine Wisdom, present in the other, [which] focuses and intensifies this need to overcome the barriers that separate.²

Metropolitan George Khodr (Church of Antioch) said in his paper to the WCC Central Committee in 1971: “Christ is everywhere hidden in the mystery of his lowliness It is Christ alone who is received as light when grace visits a Brahman, a Buddhist or a Moslem reading their Scriptures.”

XI. THEOLOGY IN A NEW KEY

Robert McAfee Brown reminds us that what we consider to be normative theology very often proves to be parochial. Even a biblical theology can be parochial if the Bible is read from a white, male, western, and intellectualistic perspective. A new emphasis is formulated by those who are

²John B. Cobb, Jr., *Transforming Christianity and the World*. (New York: Orbis, 1999), 81-83.

oppressed and marginalized. These are women, colored people, people who are physically and mentally handicapped, peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Equally, we cannot forget the genocide of Jews and the Holocaust. "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children."

We used to be accustomed to register how the Bible was read in Tübingen or Marburg. Nowadays we have to pay more attention to how the Bible is read in Solentiname or Soweto. Two different Bibles emerge, depending on the perspective from which one reads. One perspective justifies the prevailing culture. The other questions the foundations of this culture. What does that mean for theological work? McAfee Brown highlights three points:

- (i) The geographical aspect is related to the Third World. To be open to the cry of the Third World presupposes openness to those who are discriminated against in my neighbourhood.
- (2) The historic-cultural aspect has to take into consideration Judaism after the genocide.
- (3) The third component is methodological. Faith comes to us primarily through narratives and stories. If we are to renew faith for our times we have to rediscover a story (narration).

XII. THEOLOGIA SEMPER REFORMANDA

(i) In Reformed understanding theology is a reflection of faith. The starting point is God's revelation in Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures.

(2) Theology is a function of the church and is primarily in the service of the church. The ecclesial character of theology should not limit its freedom. Theology is bound by the object of its work. Its task is to purify and to deepen the church's witness to the triune God.

(3) Theology examines and analyzes to what extent the church and its members are faithful to the living Christ who is the primary focus of preaching. Theological reflection is entrusted to every church member.

(4) Theological work is undertaken in obedience and unceasing listening. In the first place we listen to the prophets and apostles and thereafter to the cloud of witnesses throughout the history of the Christian church.

(5) Theology stems from faith and seeks a rational expression. It is a scientific effort and communicates a rational knowledge. Theology does not flee before science but welcomes scientific critique. By its endeavour theology contributes to scientific research and is part of a broader cultural activity.

(6) Theology is free and ultimately responds to the calling and claim of the Gospel. However, it is not self-sufficient nor does it feel superior to other human activities. It is a gift of grace that God reveals himself to us and that we can give an account of the hope that is in us.