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WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM OTHERS

SERIES: ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHER FAITHS

A LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

This four-part series, written by members of The Salvation Army's International Theological Council, looks at meaningful ways in which Salvationists can engage with believers of other faiths. This second contribution is written from a Latin American perspective.

SOME YEARS ago, I did some research that was published as a book under the title *Teologia da e para além das Religiões* (Theology of and beyond Religions).¹ Three reasons guided me in that investigation: firstly, my interest in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue; secondly, my perception that classical theology is no longer responding convincingly to an increasing number of people, especially the new generation; and thirdly, my intuition that there is some interconnection between the many poor and the many religions. The world of the poor is also the world of religions.

TWO WORLDS INTERCONNECTED: THE POOR AND RELIGION

With the experience of having worked for more than a decade in poor communities in suburbs of big cities in Brazil and the opportunity of having visited many zones of poverty and shanty towns in Latin America and in two African countries, it is not difficult to perceive the interconnection between the poor and religion. There is no doubt that religion plays an important role in poor communities, but, of course, we must ask to what extent this role favours life or serves to manipulate vulnerable people. With the experience of more than 154 years working among the poorest, The Salvation Army knows that the greater the state

of poverty with little economic development in the country or community, the greater will be the search for supernatural evasions. We can never forget that God chose a carpenter and not a banker, or a politician, or even a priest to be the father of Jesus. We also can never forget that Jesus was poor, just as his first followers were, and that the majority of Salvationists are ordinary people.

Different to what Karl Marx thought ('religion is the opium of the people') and contrary to what Max Weber stated (religions have eyes only for the 'other world'), religions have ideals and theologies they can apply to issues of this world, act on them and turn it into a better place. Moreover, in places where even the government does not enter, the religions are there. In many violent and miserable locations, The Salvation Army is the only hope and sign of God's Kingdom. We are not there to exploit or take advantage of the people, but because our faith in Christ makes us understand that a situation of unworthiness is not in accordance with the will of God. So, we feel called to be his agents of transformation. Experience leads me to confirm that in places of extreme neediness the fight against poverty is first carried out by micro-social actions of religious individuals or groups, and only in a second phase this struggle reaches the macro level of social politics.

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Consequently, I do not think it’s strange that the world of the poor is also the world of religions. In fact, it is the experience of these two worlds that requires urgent attention from Christians.

THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Two theologies have tried to give answers to these issues: the theology of religions and liberation theology. Both were born in the 1960s and both made an impact on society. The first addresses the problem of pluralism and the second explores causes of suffering, poverty and injustice.

While the liberation theology was born in the context of poverty and is based on the commitment to God and to the poor, the reflection produced by most theologians of the theology of religions comes from the world of the rich. In the liberation theology there is a strong emphasis on the critical reflection of historical praxis, the rupture with the idea of two separate stories (sacred and secular) and the defence that God is present in all historical processes in favour of human dignity.

Both theologies are centered on the defence of human life and the preservation of the planet. They are committed to the search for justice for all. According to

Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, the hallmark of liberation theology is the option for the poor – the fight against poverty and pro life and social justice. In his opinion, the great poor today is the earth. Therefore, within the option for the poor, it is necessary to restore the devastated and exploited earth. In this same line of reasoning, José María Vigil affirms that the theology of religions is placed in a new stage of humanity where the main concern is to save the human species by saving the planet.²

Faced with the realities of today’s world, can we ignore these two theologies?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CHALLENGES OF THE THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

The theology of religions was born in Asia, in a context where Christianity is a minority and needs dialogue with other religions. However, in the West, the vigorous defence of this theology comes from theologians of rich countries. Consequently, it has lost its practical dimension of dialogue between people and attempted mutual understanding. In the past decades, theological reflections led to the view of a God who does not restrict his love to a single religion as the foundation of this theology. Even in the Bible and in the history of Christianity – especially in Patristic Theology³

– it is possible to find testimonies of God’s action among people of different faiths, ‘logos seeds’ in other cultures and religions. In recent times, among Roman Catholics after the Second Vatican Council and among Protestants linked to the World Council of Churches, we can also find a deep theological appreciation of other religions. But, it is undeniable that the theology of religions challenges us as Christians to:

1. A new way of reading the Bible that goes beyond an exclusivist vision;
2. A new perception of the image of God who is above every religion. In fact, God has no religion. He is neither Jew nor Christian, nor Muslim, nor Buddhist... He is the God of all and of no religion.
3. Rethink the way we do mission. In our daily lives, perhaps we are called to have an open and respectful dialogue with others, including people from other religions. This means that we need to strive to get to know each other’s religion, take time to walk side by side, be humble to recognise that all human beings suffer the same deficiencies before the finiteness of life and make an effort to understand each other’s values, beliefs and faith experiences. Of course, such a dialogue requires maturity from all those involved. »

» GROWING IN UNDERSTANDING: FROM JOHN THE APOSTLE TO WESLEY TO BOFF

The issue of many religions has been present in the reflection of liberation theology since the end of the 1960s. Its best-known representative, Leonardo Boff, for example, stated in his doctoral thesis that the grace of God was present beyond Christianity and that the many religions were signs of diversity and human wealth. Such a statement should not frighten us because less than 200 years before, John Wesley defended the concept of 'prevenient grace' – the grace of God which acts on mankind as a whole. Furthermore, the author of John's Gospel testifies that this grace enlightens everyone (John 1:9). Besides, we must not forget that, throughout his life, Wesley underwent a process of maturity and growth in his understanding of the meaning of religions. His experience with people from a different background and his reading of letters and stories from missionaries awakened his global consciousness and contributed to his journey towards maturity. At first, he showed appreciation for the native religions. Then, Wesley understood that religions could be included in the category of 'natural man' and, in his mature phase, he believed in an eschatological hope for humankind.⁴

What about us, are we maturing in our understanding of the meaning of many religions?

THE NEED FOR A THEOLOGY OF ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHER FAITHS

There is no doubt that the grace of God is present beyond the Church. As a consequence, there is a need for a broad dialogue with all sectors of society, including atheists and all religions. As Hans Küng wrote, there will be 'no peace among the nations without peace among religions; no peace among religions without dialogue between the religions; no dialogue between religions without investigation of the foundation of religions'.⁵ We can add, there will be no peace in the cities without appreciation, mutual understanding, respect and peace among religions; there will be no peace in the public spaces without conversation and recognition among the different religious traditions to see the *mysterium salutis* (mystery of salvation) revealed by the Creator, operating beyond institutional boundaries; there will be no peace and unity in the families without freedom for open, honest and respectful dialogue among its members about the role of religion.

As Christians and Salvationists, are we willing to contribute to peace in the world, in our cities, in public spaces and in our families?

A LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

In Latin America, there is some tension regarding the issue of interreligious dialogue. The

most fundamentalist churches do not even accept ecumenical dialogue among Christians and demonise those who do. However, the classical churches – Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian – are more open to ecumenical cooperation which includes the Roman Catholic Church, and some are also open to academic and institutional dialogue with other faiths. In addition, Pedro Casaldáliga affirms that the issue of interreligious dialogue is irreversible around themes such as human rights, poverty and how to save the planet, and that there is a future for dialogue between religions.⁶

Nevertheless, Federico J. Pagura, a Methodist bishop, reminds us that interreligious dialogue usually takes place at grass-roots level in poor communities, without the official approval of institutional hierarchy.⁷ As an example, he cites the friendship between the missionary Stanley Jones (1884-1973) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). In his opinion, the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference can be considered as the kick-off for the study of the relationship with other religious traditions. In poor communities throughout Latin America, I could observe people, members of different religions, helping each other, smiling and living peacefully together. In any case, if we believe that 'religion is man's search for God' (Stanley Jones), then there

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What do you think about it? Have you ever had such an experience?

CONCLUSION

It is evident that the theology of religions provokes a crisis of ‘closed structures’ and calls for ‘open systems’ of knowledge where many religions are seen as sacraments of God and as the third stage of a journey that begins with exclusivism, passes through inclusivism and now comes to pluralism.

It is also clear that the engaged dialogue with other faiths will require of us humility and openness to recognise that the Spirit works everywhere, in all cultures and in a mysterious way. Furthermore, it will demand from us a rethinking of the relationship between the visible Church and the Kingdom of God. Moreover, a real dialogue with other faiths calls us to rethink and seek new ways of evangelism, appropriate for this new time of humanity. For this, we need to delve into Christian theology and deepen our own understanding of it. Are we willing to do this?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, Orbis Books, USA, 1987.
- Gerald R. McDermott, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2014.
- Gavin D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions: An Introduction to the Theology of Religion*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Maruilson Souza, *Teologia de e para além das Religiões*, Associação de Ensino Metodista, São Paulo, 2015.
- ² José María Vigil, *Por uma Teologia Planetária*, EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), Paulinas, São Paulo, 2011.
- ³ Theology of the Fathers of the Church, between the 2nd and 6th century after Christ.
- ⁴ Philip D. Wingeier-Rayo, ‘A Wesleyan Theology of Religions: A Re-Reading of John Wesley Through His Encounters with People of Non-Christian Faith’, in *Methodist Review – A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies*, Atlanta, Georgia, Vol 10, 2018, methodistreview.org/index.php/mr/article/view/201.
- ⁵ Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Oregon, 2004, p 76.
- ⁶ Pedro Casaldáliga, ‘Prólogo’, in *Pelos Muitos Caminhos de Deus: Desafios do Pluralismo Religioso à Teologia da Libertação*, EATWOT (eds) Editora Rede, Goiás, 2003, p 5-8.
- ⁷ Federico J. Pagura, ‘Prólogo’, in Vigil, Tomita and Barros (eds), *Pluralismo e Libertação: Por uma Teologia Latino-Americana Pluralista a Partir da Fé Cristã*, Loyola/EATWOT, São Paulo, 2005, p 7-12.