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RADICAL SPIRITUALITY: SOUTH AFRICA AND LATIN AMERICA
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Put yourself in our place. It's July in Johannesburg. Thousands of people have disappeared since a 'State of Emergency' was decreed less than a month ago. The Afrikaans apartheid government is in ruthless control. This night we are experiencing the power of Isaiah's prophecy. The National Symphony Orchestra and Chorus are performing Sir William Walton's, "Belshazzar's Feast."

By the waters of Babylon,
There we sat down; yea, we wept
And hanged our harps upon the willows

...
How shall we sing the Lord's song
In a strange land?

. . .
Babylon was a great city,
Her merchandise was of gold and silver,
Of precious stones, of pearls, of fine linen...
All manner vessels of ivory,
All manner vessels of most precious wood...
And the souls of men.

(Then the familiar handwriting on the wall)

And the merchants of the Earth
Weep, wail and rend their raiment.
They cry, Alas, Alas, that great city.
In one hour is her judgement come

. . .
For Babylon the Great is fallen,
Alleluia.

Johannesburg, 1986

The question is: are U.S. Christians ready for victory in South Africa?

Marjorie and I spent the month of July in Africa. Two weeks in South Africa (Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria), a week in Zimbabwe and the rest in Kenya at the World Methodist Conference. It was her first visit. My only other was 25 years ago.

We viewed our African experiences from the perspective of North American Christians who have been intimately and intensely

related to Latin America for the past 12 years. These two contexts, South Africa and Latin America, furnish the basis for tonight's presentation: RADICAL SPIRITUALITY.

Even before we planned to visit Africa I was disturbed by the question: Why do U.S. white liberals and black civil rights leaders find it easier to protest apartheid in South Africa than to join in solidarity with the liberation movements of Latin America?

My purpose is not to be critical of protests against apartheid. To make sure you believe that, let me recall the mid-sixties when I joined others in leading the Board of Missions (as it was then) in the removal of a \$10 million investment portfolio from a New York bank which was participating in a line of credit to the South African government following Sharpville. That was twenty years ago. I believe my memory is correct. It was the first such action of any church body in the U.S. I am in favor of divestment, sanctions, protests, arrests and anything short of sending 'contras.'

My concern is not to be critical of anyone, but to prepare people of goodwill for victory. This is a pastoral concern. It is a pressing pastoral obligation to help U.S. Christians understand what is happening among the liberation forces in South Africa. Otherwise when victory comes there will be wide-spread frustration and disillusionment. We will be vulnerable to the Reagan factor which will misinterpret what has happened, as grossly as it now lies about Latin America.

For people like us, the danger is a too shallow analysis of the problem. This is the point where a Latin American perspective can help North Americans understand South Africa.

U. S. citizens find it too easy to protest racism in South Africa for a number of dangerously simplistic reasons:

Protesting racism is now popular in the U.S. That is one of the victories of the civil rights movement. People vocally racist in the sixties now seek credence by opposing it 9,000 miles and 20 years removed. White Christians, who were no where to be found when needed, can now claim 'brownie points' by protesting racism in South Africa.

To document this I point to the suggestion recently made by my mayor, Andrew Young, that Herman Talmadge be appointed U.S. Ambassador to South Africa. Bill Shipp, an Atlanta Constitution columnist, commented (Aug. 22, 1986): "Herman Talmadge, like Richard Nixon, may be on his way back to respectability...Who understands better than ol' Gene's boy, Hummon, how easily one can clean up a racist act and let bygones-be-bygones in black-white relations? If you work at

it, even the crudest race-baiting (as Talmadge's was) can be converted over a few years into near-liberalism, and no one remembers the former. Well, hardly anyone."

The assumption is that the issue is the immorality of racism. Racism is more than immoral; it is blasphemous. But racism does not stand alone. It must be recognized as part of a total structure of economic, classist oppression. This is the lesson we can learn from Latin America, most clearly from Cuba: Racism is not cured by changing the human heart, but by replacing sinful structures. For this reason many North American liberals are uncomfortable with the Latin process. Victory is not the eradication of an evil sentiment, but a new society unlike anything which now exists. The oppressed of Latin America know that. The oppressed of South Africa know that. Do U.S. Christians know that?

In other words, South Africa is not a civil rights movement like the U.S. It is a liberation movement like Latin America. Do we U.S. Christians have a spirituality which will welcome this kind of victory in Latin America and South Africa?

I have in my study a wooden plaque carved by a Brazilian worker. A liberation Christology is in these simple words:

In the womb of Mary
Jesus became flesh
In the workshop of Joseph
Jesus became class

To phrase the question of the evening differently: Are we prepared for South Africa to become Azania, as Rhodesia has become Zimbabwe?

A quick 'yes' is easy and hypocritical, until we have done a profound economic, social, political analysis of our situation vis-a-vis Latin America and South Africa.

Beyond Liberalism

To define the present moment in the United Methodist Church as a struggle between conservatives and liberals results, I believe, in a paralysis of leadership. Such an analysis in the church is equivalent to the mistaken analysis the White House makes of the world struggle as East vs. West. The primary issue, in each case, is somewhere else.

The leadership of our church perceives itself as liberal, but so does the leadership of the conservative wing. Both define their liberalism in the classic 1940 sense.

Since this is a personal opinion I must ask your indulgence to document it from personal experience. I'm referring to my own ministry of the past twenty five years - 13 as pastor of the First United Methodist Church, Evanston, Illinois and now in my 12th year as a missionary of the Board of Global Ministries from Latin America to North America.

I have been able to achieve a certain openness to learning from Latin America because of my U.S. pastoral experience. The Latin American struggle to go beyond liberalism to a radical spirituality was what the Evanston ministry was all about.

There I was fortunate to inherit the liberal tradition of Ernest Fremont Tittle and Harold Bosley. I also inherited the opposition of many of their supporters. A reversal not to be expected. What came clear to me, but which some of them could never understand, was that classical 1940 liberalism became reactionary in the radical 60s and 70s. The struggle then in Evanston, now in Latin America and in the immediate future in Methodism, is to get beyond classical liberalism to biblical radical spirituality.

What does that mean? Conservatism and liberalism are alike at the crucial moments.

1. Both differ from radical spirituality in their affirmation of the system. For conservatives and liberals the mission of the church is to call the system to consistency with its own ideals. Both seek to reform the system in a world which demands a radical transformation. Radical spirituality seeks "new heavens and a new earth, the home of justice."

2. Liberalism, like conservatism, is individualistic. Radical spirituality is communal. It results in a radical redefinition of evangelism. The Methodists of Latin America are engaged in a discussion of whether or not Wesley's theology and the Methodist tradition have any relevance for them today. I am committed to the publication in English of a selection from their two volumes, and to the use of their word 'evangelization'. It is preferable to our word 'evangelism.' Evangelism smells of pious individualism. Evangelization is the communal struggle for the transformation not just of sinful persons, but also of sinful structures which deny the wholeness of life to anyone.

3. Liberalism and conservatism are rationalistic and elitist. Radical spirituality is incarnational and popular. It doesn't 'lead' the people. It joins the people. Conservatives and liberals rely on the same strategies for change. The elites train the grassroots how to do it!

Radical Spirituality in South African Liberation

The oppressed of South Africa know this. They didn't learn it from the Latins. The harsh reality of their oppression is the only teacher they need. The Kairos Document, first published in September 1985 by South African Christians, white and black, makes the distinction between 'State Theology,' 'Church Theology,' and 'Prophetic Theology.' Let us listen to excerpts from this document:

1. State Theology

The South African apartheid State has a theology of its own and we have chosen to call it 'State Theology'. 'State Theology is simply the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy.

How does (it) do this?... (by) the use of Romans 13:1-7 to give an absolute and 'divine' authority to the State. The second would be the use of the idea of 'Law and Order' to determine and control what the people may be permitted to regard as just and unjust. The third would be the use of the word 'communist' to brand anyone who rejects 'State Theology.' And finally there is the use that is made of the name of God.

2. Church Theology

In a limited, guarded and cautious way this theology is critical of apartheid. Its criticism, however, is superficial and counter-productive because instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation. The stock ideas used by almost all these Church leaders...are: reconciliation (or peace), justice and non-violence.

It is not enough to criticise 'Church Theology' we must also try to account for it... In the first place we can point to a lack of social analysis... Closely linked to this, is the lack...of an adequate understanding of politics and political strategy.

But we have still not pinpointed the fundamental problem. Why has 'Church Theology' not developed a social analysis? And why does it make a virtue of neutrality?

The answer must be sought in the type of faith and spirituality that has dominated Church life for centuries.

3. Prophetic Theology

Our present KAIROS (Greek word meaning, 'the present moment is God's time) calls for a response from Christians that is biblical, spiritual, pastoral and, above all, prophetic...At the very heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ and at the very centre of all true prophecy is a message of hope...Why is it that this powerful message of hope has not been highlighted in 'Church Theology', in the statements and pronouncements of Church leaders? Is it because they have been addressing themselves to the oppressor rather than to the oppressed? Is it because they do not want to encourage the oppressed to be too hopeful for too much?

Difficult Issues For Us In the South African and Latin American Struggle

However much people like us think we agree with all that, we must now face the difficult issues the South African and Latin American struggle raises for us: Violence, anti-white and anti-capitalism. I will give you no final answers, for I have my own uncertainties at most of these points.

Before we highlight these difficulties, a word about the use of sanctions. The theological analysis just made helps our understanding of sanctions. Again we call on Latin America by comparing Cuba and South Africa.

The use of sanctions by the U.S. against Cuba has been ineffective. Twenty five years of blockade have failed to undermine the Castro government. Because they have been placed against people who have won for themselves a new society. Sanctions will not be effective against an oppressed people who have won their own liberation. Can we, then, expect them to work against South Africa? Yes, for the situation is the reverse of Cuba. In the case of South Africa, they would be applied against a power repressing the people. We would declare our solidarity with the people in their struggle for liberation, and contribute to its realization.

A second difference is that the blockade did not isolate Cuba, but did isolate the U.S. The rest of the world is open to Cuba. So sanctions are neutralized. South Africa, on the other hand, is already isolated. Now by our refusal to use sanctions we isolate ourselves from the rest of the world. Unless we are content with Margaret Thatcher as our only friend.

Aside from their effectiveness, there is no doubt sanctions will in the short term increase the suffering of those already

bearing intolerable burdens. If we ask the South African blacks, they urge sanctions knowing it will intensify the cost to them. They say, however, their present suffering offers no hope for change. Suffering is bearable when it promises liberation. Sanctions will spread the suffering to whites, who now are free of the burdens. They will also extend to the U.S. economy, in a small measure, the price of supporting apartheid (for example, such persons as Donald Regan and his diamond wearing lady friends.)

Beyond all this, they say, sanctions are the only alternative to violence, if there is still an alternative.

1. Violence. U.S. Christians, for the most part using 'Church Theology', are prone to prefer to call for 'reconciliation,' and to work for 'peace.'

But what do we do with Gertrude and Rob Robertson and a Yusuf Surtee? They are South Africans, white and Asian, Christian and Muslim.

Gertrude teaches school in Soweto. She and Rob live in a coloured township, where he is pastor of a church. In the walls of their home are bullet holes and a long line of rocks is displayed on a shelf. They came through the windows.

I was quite unprepared for my emotional response when we then went into their small church building. On one wall was a copy of a painting I recognized as Adolfo Perez Esquivel's, "Christ in a Poncho." Immediately I was transported to Argentina, to the home and studio of this Nobel Peace Prize winner. He was explaining for my video constituency his painting, which now I was seeing in the church of a white pastor in a coloured township in Johannesburg. He won the Prize for his non-violent resistance to the military dictatorship of Argentina.

Yusuf is a highly respected, successful business man, intimately linked with all elements of the black liberation movements. A mother whose 21 year old son is in jail and a 14 year old shot in the back by the police comes to him for help. She says, "We've cried enough. There is only one tear left-revolution."

U.S. Christians are fond of saying we prefer moderates and moderation. My observation is we fail to recognize moderates when they appear, and our government policy is to undercut them. The Sandinistas are moderates; Mugabe and his Zimbabwean government are moderate; Alan Garcia, the remarkable President of Peru is a moderate; the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela are moderate.

What will we do when the revolution sweeps them aside? How will we cope with the day, if it comes, when the liberating forces dispense with a Bishop Tutu and an Alan Boesak?

The simplistic explanation is that the oppressed become oppressors when they win. Historically, that won't wash, and theologically it is naive.

I promised you no easy answers. I also promised not to let us off the hook. The issue of reconciliation, peace, violence and revolution demands more profound analysis from us than a 'head trip', a luxury available only to the uninvolved.

2. Anti-white sentiments. When confronted with anti-white feelings, most of us begin to talk about our credentials in the civil rights struggle, as reason why we should be individually exempted from lumping all white skin into the same condemnation.

Now I must speak very personally and painfully of the suicide of Leanita McClain. We were friends, at a deep level, from the day I met her, as a student in the School of Journalism at Northwestern University. Her extraordinary writing skills, made her, before she reached her thirtieth year, the first black, the first black woman, a member of the editorial board of the Chicago Tribune.

I was aware such rapid success puts pressure on anyone. For Leanita the pressure was more acute. She never reconciled her blackness with her success in the white society.

This conflict came to a head, and her tragic end, as a result of her disillusionment in the moment of black victory in the election of Mayor Harold Washington. In the crucial moment her white liberal friends came down on the conservative side.

She wrote in a Washington Post column: "How has a purebred moderate like me turned into a hate-filled spewer of invective? It makes me feel like machine-gunning every white face on the bus."

Sadly, it was too much for Leanita. I couldn't help. In spite of a long and profound relationship, I am a white man.

The Sandinistas have welcomed U.S. whites in massive numbers. What would we do if they ever held us responsible for the white imperialism of the past and present? The United Democratic Front in South Africa defines itself as 'non-racial', a place for whites, blacks, coloureds and Asians. What would we do if the ANC or some other movement swept us aside, as enemies, liberals who ultimately act out of white presuppositions? And what will U.S. blacks do when black Africans lump them with U.S. whites?

3. Anti-capitalism.

Bishop Tutu recalls the history of many oppressed peoples. "White missionaries came. We had the land. They had the Bible. They said, 'Close your eyes. Bow your heads. Let us pray.' When we opened our eyes, the white man had the land, and we had the Bible." That was not a bad bargain, he says. "The book the government should have banned long ago is the Bible. But it's too late now!"

By now the Latin American experience should have made it clear to us that no liberation movement of the oppressed poor will opt for a capitalist future. The Methodist Bishop of Angola, Emilio de Carvalho, speaks of the future of Third World countries as a commitment to "non-capitalism." The Reagan factor makes use of this to insist that leaves only the Soviet alternative.

We aid and abet this false analysis by inadequate reporting on the Nicaraguan experience. We cannot be grateful enough for the massive influx of dedicated witnesses for peace. Their unmasking of the deceitful reporting by the U.S. press is the single most effective restraint on U.S. policy.

What too often is missing from these testimonies, however, is the nature of the alternate plan for a new society, and the uniqueness of the new biblical reformation among the poor. Most U.S. members of Congress who vote against 'contra' intervention do so only if they can defend themselves to their constituencies by calling on the Sandinistas to be more 'democratic' and downplaying their 'non-capitalism.'

U.S. liberals frequently express the opinion that if newly freed peoples didn't make so many stupid mistakes, or if we weren't so inept ourselves, there would not be the unfortunate loss of capitalism to Marxism. To use "capitalism" and "democracy" as synonyms is a basic mistake. Capitalism is an economic term; democracy is a political term. The U.S. War of Independence never intended to establish an economic democracy—only a political democracy, limited to white, male property owners.

We went from South Africa to Zimbabwe - from night into day. Six years ago Rhodesia was where South Africa is at this moment. Now Zimbabwe is a free nation, a society at all levels in the hands of the black majority and of whites who are able to live and work in a free nation.

Two luncheons, in Zimbabwe, make the point. Former President, and fellow Georgian, Jimmy Carter walked out of a

Fourth of July luncheon in protest to the text of a speech by the Zimbabwean Foreign Minister.

Ten days later we were guests at a luncheon given at the Zimbabwean Parliament at which the Foreign Minister spoke. It was followed by a session of Parliament in which (in the British tradition) the Prime Minister took questions from Members. At the luncheon and the question period, present and participating, were the Rhodesian version of P.W. Botha, Ian Smith and his party and black opposition leader, Nkomo, and his party.

In an effort to understand Mr. Carter's move I went to the U.S. Embassy and talked with an officer who had been present and participated in the walkout. I asked about the announcement that the U.S. was holding up aid. He admitted that a reassessment was underway before the Fourth of July walkout because of the discomfort of our government with the 'Marxist rhetoric' of Mugabe. This incident provided a convenient moment to do what was planned in any case.

I also spoke with a Maryknoll nun, a U.S. citizen living in Zimbabwe. In a letter to the newspaper she wrote: "How is it that the one time champion of freedom and democracy aligns itself, not with those struggling for a more equitable society, but with the oppressor. . ? . . This is the action of a bully, used to being humoured, who is suddenly faced with the fact that the world does not revolve around him."

Theological Method

The churches in South Africa and the U.S. have the same problem: theological method, the direction by which one comes to faith.

We begin with a faith revealed in abstractions, concepts, truths. Then we 'apply' it to life. Latin Americans begin with the life/death struggle and in that struggle faith is revealed. Theological method makes a difference in the nature of the faith experience.

Here a great deal needs to be said about the centrality of the base community in the Latin American biblical reformation and social revolution. Numerous inquiries in South Africa have not yet revealed the predominant and decisive presence of such a movement fueling the liberation process there. I am not saying it should.

The development among and by the oppressed of a new spirituality which can be expected 'to trickle up' as happens in Latin America is just beginning to be visible.

There are many similarities in the South African and Latin American struggle, but there are also crucial differences. We must not expect God to act the same way in all places.

What we can say, however, is that U.S. Christians must be open to a new theological method. Latin America can at this moment help us define a new way of doing theology for ourselves.

South Africa may be even more useful in that it begins at the same point we do. If and when it produces a new theological method, we may be able to see our own salvation being worked out there.

Are we ready for that?

I close with a poem from Psalms From Prison by Ben Chavis:

From soweto to el salvador, O God,
from johannesburg to harlem
thy people are oppressed.
O God, from chile to namibia,
from watts to the philippines
thy people are suffering.

Let the organized masses of thy people
who are oppressed
rise up with thee, O God.
Let the victims of imperialism,
the victims of colonialism,
and neocolonialism rise up unified.

Sometimes, O God, it is difficult
to struggle without fighting back;
it is hard to love the enemy.
Yet, O God, we have faith
that thou wilt help us struggle
from soweto to el salvador.

With apologies to Brother Ben I offer another stanza:

O God, I am a beneficiary of imperialism,
the oppression of sisters and brothers
subsidizes my life style.
I don't know how to be free.
I have not yet been taught to read the bible
by the victims in soweto and el salvador.

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