TRINITY, POWER AND CHURCH IN BRAZIL

INTRODUCTION

Trinity is not just the external form of Christian theology. The renewal of the theology in Brazil has in the dynamism of Trinity one of its main paradigms. The life of the Church finds its source in the Trinitarian life of God. Some time ago, the 6th Encounter of Base Communities chose as its theme “Sacred Trinity is the best community.” This choice in the life of the popular church drew attention to the theme.

Our community experience is a reflex of the divine life. Especially the community life of the Church and worship are better understood through the images of the Trinity as a form of community. Trinity supplies an image where we can think about the sources of personal life. The other, and possible communion, are ontological elements of existence that are born from a profound source. We find the expression of this divine source of the subject, of the person, of communion, in Brazil, in some works on Trinity that have acquired special importance among us. In first place, two books by Leonardo Boff. The first, Trinity and the Society (1987), and the second, Sacred Trinity is the best community (1988). Ivone Gebara, feminist theologian, published a small and interesting book with the title Trinity, word on old and new things, an ecofeminist perspective (1994). Félix Pastor offers us four essays on Trinity in his Semantics of the mystery. The Theological language of the Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Loyola, S.Paulo, 1982. Gustavo Gutierrez contemplates the experience of marginalized people in relation to God the Father, in relation to Jesus the Son, and in relation to the Holy Spirit, as liberating powers of the
Kingdom of God, in The God of Living, Loyola, S.Paulo, 1990. E. Dussel has been approaching the theme in some of his writings. Beyond this, we have to consider important works translated into Portuguese, such as Bruno Forte Trinity as History, Paulinas, Saint Paul, 1987 or to Spanish, such as Jürgen Moltmann Trinity and the Kingdom of God, Sigueme, Barcelona, 1986 and others of lesser importance.

The study of the Trinitarian existence of the people of God opens new ways for the development of theology in Brazil. These ways are contributing to liturgical renewal, to interreligious dialogue, such as between Indigenous and African theologies, for feminist theology, and for a better understanding of ecology and of the new cosmologies. In these studies, beyond community and culture, the theme of Trinity involves political and social subjects.

In the foreword of his book Moltmann points to the opposition of a particularistic interpretation, that we call abstract (for its lack of concretion with the whole) and the global and ecumenical, that we prefer to call concrete, for promoting a concretion with the whole. That observation is important because Trinity is exactly the Christian doctrine that summarizes in itself the totality and the particularity with inclusion of all reality. If a doctrine does not have concretion it results in a schismatic and apologetic reductionism.

In this essay, our larger emphasis is not the relationship Trinity-community but the relationship Trinity-power. We should observe that our fundamental experience of reality experiences what we call dynamism and power. This same reality that shows in its essence dynamism and power also reveals structured groups, elements and forces that limit things and persons, groups of order and of sense. We ourselves weave, partially, the net of power in which we live. We consciously manifest a certain power. We consciously
structure relationships of power. What does have to do this with Trinity? This is what we will try to see, taking as an example the Brazilian context.

I. HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF TRINITY AND REVELATION

Our human experience of God reveals a prehistory of Trinity. "To limit trinity to the Christian expression is not to remember the thousands of years previous to human history." (I. Gebara, Trinity, Word on old and new things, Paulinas, São Paulo, 1994, p. 17). There is a long historical gestation that prepares the revelation of the Trinitarian God of the Bible. That gestation accompanies the anthropogenesis and the cosmogenesis of religious myths. According to some specialists we have an arché that constitutes the basic conditions for cultural and mental unfolding.

For us, of importance is our experience of the Trinitarian revelation. We live our Christian faith in a Trinitarian way. Our life of faith is in continuous relationship with the Trinitarian God. The triune God is present in worship, in sacraments, in the Word, in prayer, in the confession of faith, in hymns and in liturgy, in the life of the community's, and in mission as a whole (an excellent example of Trinitarian vision of mission is the document of the Methodist Church of Brazil called Plan for Life and Mission).

In the Trinity we experience God as subject, as person and as Other. Trinity is a form of revelation that shows the dynamics of God as personal foundation of reality and,
especially, of human life. We have before us complex questions of sense and of its
foundation in reality itself, prior to that in our mind or in our systems or codes. We weave
a net of meaning and a grammar of images and symbols that follows the experience of
Trinity. God as subject and as economy of relationships is a God of whom we can think.
As such He is understandable as foundation of our personal life, of our life as subject and
as society. “The plurality that constitutes us as a human group is Trinity, that is to say, it is
symbolic expression of that constituent reality of our vital fabric.” (Gebara, op. cit., p. 45).
We find the best expression of these foundations in Master Eckhart.

Eckhart thought the Trinitarian life of God as previous to form. In a very personal
vision this mystic experiences God as life, as power, as ‘dynamis’. The Trinitarian
‘dynamis’ of God is inclusive. It embraces all reality, everything that is and everything
that is power of being or non-being. God is the Alive in the fullness of the power of life.
According to Eckhart, Trinity is the divine dynamism that is revealed historically as
Trinity (Gott) as the unfolding of the unspeakable divinity (Gottheit), inexpressible, pure
negativity in relation to existent things. Trinity is auto-revelation of the unutterable/
inexpressible divinity. The divine power is revealed as Trinitarian life. Two movements are
fundamental in the ‘fermentation’ of the divine life (“bullitio”, the internal life of the
Trinity itself, that other authors call ‘perichôresis’; and, “ebullitio”, that is the ‘dynamis’
of God when he leaves from himself, as creative action, for creation (Cf L. Boff, in his
introduction to the Brazilian edition of selected texts of Master Eckhart). The divine
power in its historical expression reveals the triune God: God leaves himself (essence of a
mystic God) and God breaks barriers (the liberator God). The power of God appears in
two forms, one aimed at himself and another aimed at the world. The power in the
world, in spite of coming from the ‘ebullitio’ (God leaving himself), is different from God. Our experience of human power, in spite of its divine source, is something that we received in an autonomous way. We are subject of transformations and of structuring of power. Those transformations of power in us and for us are a source of deep ambiguities, and this power appears to us as a source of good and of evil, historically structured. Our historical experience of God provides an axis of the power of life, in overcoming contradictions and historical prisons that provoke death, oppression and despair. One of the most important dimensions of the experience of God, although not exclusive, happens in the form of the experience of divine power. Paul Tillich, in his small masterpiece Love, Power an Justice (1954), criticizes theism that neglects power and divine majesty. In this context “God as the power of being was discarded as a pagan invasion. The Trinitarian symbolism was dissolved. The kingdom of God was reduced to the ideal of an ethical community. Nature was excluded because power was excluded. And Power was excluded because the question of being was excluded.” (op. cit., Oxford Univ. Press, N.Y., 1967, p.12). We cannot neglect the dimension of power in man and its transformations by man.

Aténágoras uses the expression virtue or power (dynamis) to characterize Trinity, the word difference, separation (diairesis) to mean power in different people, but conserving a unit (énosis) of an order (taxis) founded in love and in justice. According to Gregory of Nyssa the man is eikon (image) of God, eikon of the power of God, especially of spiritual power. In relation to power we are image and likeness of Trinity (Boff, L. Sacred Trinidad is the best community, Voices, Petrópolis, 1988, p. 25, 75-76). It is in the sphere of power that we can understand the sense of evil and of sin in the human being in a more concrete way. We establish orders of things that are our own prisons and that destroy
authentic human possibilities. It is in the sphere of power that we can understand God as the power of salvation and of liberation when God leaves himself and breaks down the prisons that kill us. Trinity is the power of God and of his liberations. The three persons of Trinity give us historical experiences of the divine power as liberation. The power of God in Trinity supplies the content and the sense of liberating Grace in the Kingdom of God. This is the conclusion of Moltmann when he relates Trinity and the Kingdom of God. The Father's kingdom is a world open to the future, it is the potency of the future of the world. The Son's kingdom consists of liberating sovereignty of the crucified in the communion of the multitude of brothers and sisters. The kingdom of the Spirit is experienced in the forces that the Holy Spirit releases to those liberated by the Son (Cf. Moltmann, op. cit., p. 226-229)

Tillich questions how divine love relates to divine power, especially the power that accompanies the demands of justice (Cf, Systematic Theology, Paulinas / Sinodal, S.Paulo, 1984, p.236 ss.) and the answer is the power of the liberating Grace that breaks the barriers of human orders. The power of Grace maintains our future open. The divine Other comes to us as subject, in the dynamics of leaving himself and questions the human being creating conditions for communion and new orders. Salvation also appears on the horizon of historical liberations, as in the Son, that breaks the barrier of separation and makes himself one of us (ho lógos eis sarx egeneto). The excluding codes of sanctity and the social codes of oppression can be questioned in the horizon of the liberating power of God. The New Testament reveals to us that the Holy Spirit exercises the power to break mental, cultural emotional and religious barriers that limited the first generation of Christians.
II. HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIPS OF POWER AND TRINITY

Power is a multifaceted reality that is difficult to define. Here we follow Tillich who proposes an ontological-phenomenological definition. Phenomenologically Tillich defines power in relationship with being. Being is power. "Being is the power of being." (Love, Power and Justice, Oxford Univ. Press, N.Y., 1967, p.37) Power is actualized in relation to other powers: "power of being becomes manifest only in the process in which it actualizes its power. In this process its power appears and can be measured. Power is real only in its actualization, in the encounter with other bearers of power and in the ever-changing balances which are the result of these encounters. Life is the dynamic actualization of being." (Id., p. 41) Power, theologically, has its source in God, it comes from God. But, power while it is created, especially while human, is subjected to the limitations and ambiguities of time, of situation, of history. The axis to Trinity-power is the source of the interpersonal dynamic of power in relation to the cosmos, in relation to others, to society and to history. Power is the source of the new and the capacity to establish, maintain, modify or transform the order of things. As image of Trinity man participates in this power and he weaves a series of relationships that establish an order of domination. The ambiguity and evil in human power it is in the tendency of this order to
close. Within this human social and historical order we are inserted in a ‘grammar of power’ (Cf. I. Epstein's book, The grammar of power, Atica, São Paulo, 1993) Human power, and with it dominance, develops via entanglements of this grammar that are accompanied by rhetoric and practice that extend the ambiguities of human power in all its senses.

Evil and sin are revealed in these transformations of human power. We can also speak about a grammar of sin, of a grammar of violence and of exclusion. This grammar of power and of sin appear in well structured forms, for example, in the emergence and sacralization of a global system of economy, that determines good and evil in relation to the system. Human beings close in premature order, starting with those of privilege. This order of things is experienced on the periphery of the system as sacrifice and suffering of the people. Churches in Brazil are close and live with the situation of growing unemployment, the suffering of families, leaving home to live in the street. It is interesting to note how the rhetoric of the state relativizes its responsibilities. Crime, official impunity, and the protection of those that use the system appear smoothed over by legal structures. A good example, in Brazil, is provided by the ‘landless’ that fight for agrarian reform. There is no other way for these peasants to fight for their survival and for the land other than infringing on the system and invading unproductive lands. In these conflicts death and slaughter happen. Usually, the tillers are punished and great owners, even when guilty of murder, are protected. The dominant rhetoric says that those who violate the law are the invaders. Power and the ‘lobby’ of the rich land owners impede any important agrarian reform. It seals an order that sacralizes oppression, exclusion and violence.
In the same way, we build closed orders in the ‘kingdom of the church’. The rhetoric of sin in the churches builds two worlds that no longer meet. The churches in Brazil take the risk of forming abstract ghettos when they dissociate the grammar and the rhetoric of sin and of salvation from the grammar and the rhetorics of the society (look at the misunderstandings and the connotations of the word “world”). God is power not only for the Church and the saved, but is power in the world, Lord of Creation, above all historical powers. God is Lord of history. A redimensioning of Trinitarian theology in relation to its internal dynamism, in relation to power, to community and to world, becomes an urgent task in the sense of overcoming the ideological limitations and the reductive rhetoric of power. And it is this type of reductive rhetoric that abounds today in science, in techniques, in the market system and in a certain post-modern relativism.

III. TRINITY AND THE REDUCTIVE RHETORIC IN THE CHURCH

Latin-American theology is characterized by an including vision of liberation. Base communities were constituted in the spaces where this inclusive liberation had been cultivated. However, as the rhetoric and the pragmatic of liberation became a menace to the established order, it woke the fear of more conservative sections of the church. On the other hand, the new religious mass rhetoric invaded means of communication, and influenced Catholic and Protestant churches in such way that we have seen born a new discourse whose characteristic is to reduce the liberating power of God to momentary manifestations or within a limited and specific sphere of action. They return to ‘religious
wars' against spiritual enemies”. The fight against heresies or idolatries has transformed itself into a war for spiritual power, where what matters less is, for example, the destruction of nature, or those excluded from the economic order.

The opposition between a rhetoric that seeks a concretion with the whole and a rhetoric that particularizes and abstracts clearly appears in the present.

When Leonardo Boff wrote Church: charisma and power (1981) he dealt with the subject of the Catholic hierarchy as a formation of power that was particularized and closed in an unmovable order. He sought to open this order of power through the recognition of charisma as redistribution of the power granted to the Church. In the experience of the base communities power comes by charisma. “If charisma means the concrete way the Spirit and the Resurrected make themselves present in the world, then we should say that charisma belongs to the structure of the Church. ...Charisma is the pneumatic force (dynamis tou theou) that establishes the institutions and keeps them alive.” (op. Cit., p.242) Boff opposes the hierarchy God> Christ> Holy Spirit> Apostles> Bishops> Priests> Faithful to another one where power is primarily recognized as the power of the Trinity for the community: God-Christ-Holy Spirit> Community (people of God)> Bishops and priests. The result of this new grammar of power was known well in advance. After several punishments Boff left the order of the Franciscans.

We can say that among evangelicals we are seeing the appearance of a new rhetoric. It strengthens reductionistic rhetoric that abstracts divine power and particularizes it to specific moments, spaces and people. A good analysis may be found in the supplement “Debates” from the magazine Pastoral Context, with the title “Language, a way of being
evangelical” (May-June of 1997). What follows is the free use of some of the indications contained in that text.

In first place, evangelical groups accentuate the influence of the logic of the market. The spiritual goods are now ‘ministered’ by one person to another. Blessings, prayers, songs, cures, sacraments, liberations of malign powers that attack the people are ministered. “Ministrar” is a Latin verb that approaches the connotation ‘to administer’, in the sense of disposing of goods for somebody. Spiritual goods become matters of ownership and power. The person that administers the blessings, the goods, is inserted between the liberating power of God and the community. This form of power remains within the church. But, another form of reductionistic discourse relates spiritual goods with material goods. Its better know form is the “theology of prosperity.” Without questioning the powers that dominate the economic order, the administration of spiritual goods is redundant in material benefits, in a correspondence that has nothing to do with love, justice or grace. This transmutation of spiritual goods in material goods happens through a peculiar form of articulation: the material blessing dignifies the ‘son of the King’ that possesses it by a spiritual force that commands material force. The spiritual power is affirmed in a private and abstract way without critical consideration of the articulations of economic, political and social power.

One form of legitimating power in this form of discourse is sanctifying particularity in opposition to enemies. These enemies are reasons for authentic crusades. The sanctification of particularity against the different is the best way to close the circle of power and of the order that is created. The enemies are varied, but some are more permanent. In this type of rhetoric the preferential enemies are ecumenism (especially
when related to Catholics), African religions, mystic syncretists such as New Age, and semi-religious societies such as the Masons.

For the conscious Christian a reconsideration of the source of power and its more open and more concrete manifestations becomes an imperative. The Trinity provides the locus for this analysis. Divine power for us is the uniting and total power of the Father, the power of the Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit over the whole of reality. All articulation of power needs to be confronted with the divine power as the power of liberation.

CONCLUSION

We find in the Trinity, besides the most perfect example of community (perichóresis) the foundations of a dialectic that involves being subject, person, community. This dialectic (as already perceived in Hegel) is also a dialectic of power that unfolds between the particular and the universal, between limitation and openness, between opposition and inclusion, between the whole and the part. The sense of power only becomes manifest in this dialectic. It is in the concretion of the parts in the whole, and the differentiation of the whole in the parts that allows us to walk in a direction. The Trinity and its internal and external, immanent and economic dynamism, supplies the theological paradigm to distinguish the theologically abstract and the theologically concrete. The Trinity reveals universality even in particular actions. The Trinitarian dynamic, its life, its action and its revelation, involves the horizon of a concretion with the whole.
John Wesley progressively and pragmatically discovered this concretion when his formally Trinitarian theology faced the contradictions and oppositions of ecclesiastical power, of economic and social power, of political power. His theology progressively acquired a concretion and an openness around the doctrine of the power of Grace. The dialectical movement of weslyan theology should be repeated not in its form, but in the movement that gives it life. It is in this movement of concretion that weslyan theology maintains its sense even until the present day.