

The Shadows of Yesteryear: The Antilles Bishops and History after Vatican II

by

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Abstract

Gaudium et Spes (GES), the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, epitomizes the Council's new approach to history, its new historical consciousness. In *GES*, history is viewed as "a place of ongoing revelation" rather than a static reality susceptible to the application of universal principles. Such increased historical consciousness meant relying on the tools of the human sciences and understanding salvation history in human terms. Indeed, it acknowledges that the Church, in order to understand God's activity in the world, needs a deepened understanding of its historical environment. Nonetheless, the Constitution, in spite of this progressive vision of history, is limited by its perspective; it presents the world through the eyes of "[male] reform-oriented Christians of Western, developed, capitalist countries". Recognising this privileged perspective from which the Council treats with matters such as history has led to critiques from several groups, including those who say the vision of the Constitution does not go far enough or has not been realized. This paper explores the idea of history from a Caribbean perspective, one which is has been described as "having no history for having not created anything and therefore having nothing to write (home) about". In describing the negative historical experiences of the Region's people, the bishops speak of the "shadows of yesteryear," clearly to be contrasted with the "light" of some missionaries and the values of the enslaved African people. The presence of such stark contrasts points to the interpretive lens used in viewing Caribbean historical experience. Taking as a launchpad, ***Evangelisation in a New Caribbean***, the pastoral in which the Antilles Bishops present perhaps their most clear cut if somewhat brief analysis of the history of the Region, tracing from the arrival of the Europeans to enslavement and indentureship (another form of slavery), it surfaces and critiques the main hermeneutical principles in the historical approach of the Antilles Bishops. The hope is to present a renewed vision of history taking account of the ambiguity of shadows and light in the Caribbean experience.

“There is no objective history; historical interpretation is always driven by current values” – Raymond T. Smith, p. 257

“The place where one can discern the real outlook of the people, and hence the proper outlook for church activity, is the history of the people, the national experience in history and the events contained in it” – Juan Carlos Scannone, p. 222.

Gaudium et Spes (GES), the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (1965), epitomizes the Second Vatican Council’s new approach to history, its new historical consciousness. Historical consciousness gives more importance to the particular, the contingent, and the changing while maintaining continuity (Curran 2002). GES, with its emphasis on the signs of the times illustrates this more historical consciousness at work. History is viewed therefore as “a place of ongoing revelation” rather than a static reality susceptible to the application of universal principles. The Pastoral Constitution recognised the human family as living in a new stage of history, where profound and rapid changes are spreading across the world (4). “History itself speeds along on so rapid a course that an individual person can scarcely keep abreast of it. The destiny of the human community has become all of a piece, where once the various groups of men had a kind of private history of their own” (5). Such increased historical consciousness means relying on the tools of the human sciences and understanding salvation history in human terms. Indeed, it acknowledges that the Church, in order to understand God’s activity in the world, needs a deepened understanding of its historical environment. The Caribbean Church presents its own particular articulation of historical consciousness in the pastoral and theological enterprise of the Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC).

This paper explores the idea of history and historical consciousness from a Caribbean perspective. Taking as a launchpad, *Evangelisation for a New Caribbean*, the 1992 pastoral in which the Antilles Bishops present perhaps their most clear cut, if somewhat brief, analysis of the history of the Region, my exploration surfaces and critiques the main hermeneutical principles in the historical approach of the Antilles Bishops. In so doing, I am conscious that no pastoral can cover every issue or concern and that hindsight is twenty-twenty. The AEC penned their pastoral in a climate of regional turmoil. Arguments were afoot on such “simple” matters as making a case for the Grand Turks Island as the site of Columbus’s 1492 landfall to the more radical movements among indigenous peoples or their descendants, who vociferously rejected heroic portrayals of Columbus and his impact on the region as positive, to the sabotaging of plans for the commemoration of Columbus’s landing in the region (Nettleford 2003). The lasting impact of such strident responses to the advent of the “Genoan Wanderer,” as Walcott calls Columbus, has resulted in movements of “counter-memory” from below and much discourse on the “politics of memory”. That was also the year when Francis Fukayama wrote of *The End of History and the Last Man*, celebrating the triumph of market liberalism while ignoring the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and other forms of tribal nationalism such as was demonstrated in the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. The reverberations of such universalist, triumphalist readings

of particularist histories go beyond 9/11. All being said and done, 1992 was not the most auspicious time for leaders of the faith most indicted by critics of European claims to “discovery” to speak. But speak they did.

The title of the paper is drawn from the pastoral. In describing the negative historical experiences of the Region’s people, the bishops speak of the “shadows of yesteryear,” clearly to be contrasted with the “lights” in the form of certain missionaries and the values of the enslaved African people. The presence of such stark contrasts points to the main interpretive lens used by the bishops in viewing Caribbean historical experience, as will be discussed further below. The pastoral is littered with contrasting pairs alongside lights and shadows, “then and now”, “sugar and slavery”, “strengths and weaknesses”, “salvation and hope”. Some pairs are contrasting and carry peculiar weight in the interpretive framework; others do not.

Doing History in the Caribbean

Any discussion of history in the Caribbean takes place with the question of the meaning of history for the peoples of the Caribbean always in mind. As Jamaican cultural critic extraordinaire, the late Rex Nettleford (2003) reminds us, we do history against the notion noised about by some like VS Naipaul, whom he describes as “a talented disenchanting maroon of a creative writer hanging out at the metropolises and given to castrated metaphors” (p. 277) that Caribbean people have no history for, not having created anything, therefore have nothing to write (home) about. In defence of Naipaul, who has not been able to shake that inopportune, oft-quoted, oft-misunderstood statement, historian Bridgette Brereton, in *Created in the West Indies: Caribbean Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul*, argues that Naipaul, far from dismissing the possibility of a historical project for the Region, is validating the need for sound historical scholarship and for the critical self-awareness that such scholarship helps to develop (Brereton 2010, p. 205). Likewise Jennifer Rahim, in the same volume (2010), describes Naipaul’s “richly cultivated ‘historical sense’” (p. xxi), which facilitates “an informed consideration of history’s **ongoing making** that is essential for charting a meaningful course forward on the individual and collective levels” (p. xxi). This history around which there is so much contestation cries out for definition. As Brian L. Moore (2003) passionately proclaims:

[History is] not just the study of long past events (and dates), no longer an esoteric exercise. This is *our* history, *our* past – a past that we were no longer simply spectators to but the principal participants in, a past that our ancestors actively shaped. *We* were at the centre of our own history. (p. ix)

What is clear is that Caribbean histories have been “distorted and submerged in official historiographies oriented towards the lives of Western subjects, their cultural codes and knowledge systems” as Guyanese writer Wilson Harris reminds us (Rahim 2010, p. xxi). Recognising this distortion and submerging (some would say erasure), Nettleford (2003), in paying tribute to Elsa Goveia, iconic female

Caribbean historian, speaks to the responsibility of West Indians to first find *form* and *purpose* in “their own backyards and, by extension, in the wider world” (p. 276). Caribbean historians have a duty to challenge other interpretations of their past and the implications for the present. Indeed, Nettleford claimed that Guyanese-born Goveia, in her pursuit of history, exposed her students (and us) “to the dialectical reality of human experience, the *multifaceted* nature of historical and, for that matter, all social phenomena, the *contradictory omens*...both in our stars and in ourselves, the varying densities, spans and velocities of the flow of narrative that constitutes human history” (2003, p. 276; emphasis added). Indeed, attention to the distorted histories of the region, of the “Dark Continent” Africa and teeming India, from whence the fore parents of many a Caribbean person was brought into enslavement and degradation, continue to call out for reflection and redress. This is increasingly so in the face of “the reinforcement of destruction of [Caribbean societies] by persistent ideologies that up to this day underpin the policies, programmes and priorities of contemporary power structures throughout the Western world, which was itself shaped by the events of the last five hundred years” (Nettleford 2003, p. 278). Recognising how much the current Western world has been shaped by those events should lead to a critical stance vis-a-vis current structuring of world power that creates categories of nations based on ability to consume or command and control the products of science and technology. It is a historical fact that being allowed to play in the game of international economics does not equate to having a say in the rules of the game, as many Caribbean nations know all too well.

There are three key ideas that are evident in this discussion of West Indian history from Nettleford and other Caribbean historians that find echo in the perspective of the AEC Bishops:

a) History as evolutionary, ongoing making, a process that shapes its products; the products of history in turn shape the future. Indeed, we are “creatures of history, and the story of the human race has been the struggle to become . . . the creators of history” (Crossman in Nettleford 2003, p. 280). The specificity of a people’s history then becomes the driving force in the process of creating history. To create a people’s history based on the experiences of others opens up to disaster. At the same time, history as evolutionary is “unfolding”, a dynamic and unceasing enterprise. The past continues to shape the present in shadowy ways that are often unnoticed or unremarked.

b) History self critical reflection – presenting a new critical vision and perspective from the inside; this is not history that is objective but recognises that in speaking for ourselves, historians participate in creating the history they reconstruct and interpret.

c) History as universal continuity – human beings shape the narrative flow of their particular histories within the wider current of human history. In so doing, it is necessary to maintain the linkages with the rest of the humanity while refusing to be simply an appendage of imperial Europe or America (or even Rome?). The homogenizing tendencies of the North Atlantic are to be resisted as the specificity of the Caribbean experience is validated. These notions have brought West Indian history out of the shadows of history.

(This sense of the importance of history is echoed in the historical consciousness of the Vatican II. It is not to be forgotten that The Council took place in a context marked by movements for independence in

colonies like those in the Caribbean. These played an important role in the change in historical consciousness that found expression in the Second Vatican Council, which in turn influenced the development of our own Bishops' Conference, the Antilles Episcopal Conference.)

In the Shadows of Yesteryear

In 1992, on the Quincentenary of the coming of the Roman Catholic faith to the Caribbean Region, the Antilles Episcopal Conference issued a pastoral letter called, "Evangelisation for a New Caribbean". In their preface, the Bishops identify their observance of the five hundredth anniversary of the coming of the faith to the region as a being about "the handing on of th[e]... apostolic faith as directed by Christ" (2.1). The pastoral, in their view, is part of the response to the Great Commission to proclaim the good news to succeeding generations (Mt. 28. 18-20). So, as Catholic Christians the bishops are firm in their conviction that the spread of the faith is a good and necessary and divinely-commissioned process in which the Quincentenary calls them to participate. At the same time, they acknowledge some "burning issues" that were on the minds of many Caribbean people regarding the observance of five hundred years of Christianity in the Region. What was there to celebrate many asked at that time? Conscious of these concerns, the bishops sought to "reflect...on the lights and shadows of our salvation history from 1492" (2.2). The contraposing of lights and shadows signalled early the lens with which the Bishops chose to view the history of the region – a lens that favoured equanimity, balancing of perspectives, neither fully blessing nor wholly condemning the actions they describe. Their approach can perhaps be described as conciliatory, some may say overly so. Perhaps the tenor of the time called for that.

Casting Shadows

The pastoral claims to place the anniversary in its historical context while pointing out the changes that have occurred in the status of the Americas and Europe since the coming of the faith. It acknowledges that the history and ethnic composition of the region was drastically changed with the arrival of Christopher Columbus, who the bishops identify as the medium through which two Worlds encountered each other, for good and ill. The bishops echo Bartolemo de Las Casas, the man of his time, who saw Columbus as "God's chosen instrument in the propagation of the gospel to the heathen" (in Nettleford 2003, p. 284). As the bishops tell it, Europeans ignorant of the existence of the "New World" "discovered" indigenous peoples and intruded on their lives in a fashion that brought destruction and unforeseen change: "It was as much an unwanted intrusion as it was an encounter of two worlds and several cultures, bringing death to many and destruction to age-long traditions" (3.2). The balancing of perspectives is clear in that latter statement; the coming of the Europeans was both intrusion and encounter. There is a reverberation of the notion of a clash of civilizations at play in the encounter between the Old and New Worlds that the bishops do not hear. Perhaps not reflected on enough by the Bishops also is the creation of a new and distinctive civilization arising from this encounter. In this regard, the charge that "the germ of an Atlantic civilization which is the product of the past five hundred years of varied encounters between civilizations from both sides of the Atlantic is yet to be fully

acknowledged and given the sort of historical pedigree it clearly deserves”, is worthy of much consideration (2003, p. 283). Caribbean historians have wrestled extensively with the nature of this new civilization which was born at that fateful crossroads of 1492.

Among the shadows that the bishops identified are the dehumanisation of slavery and indentureship (which they call “another form of slavery”) fuelled by the greed of colonial masters who valued money and material goods more than people. The bishops implicate Africans in the sale of their own race without acknowledging the ambiguities of conflict and power dimensions of the African involvement in the practice (4.2). Nettleford would perhaps dismiss my concern as “infantile romanticism for denying the connivance of Africans themselves in the successful triangular trade” (2003, p. 278). My response to him would be the same: the ambiguities of power must be considered in the critique. The AEC further point out that many slave owners and other Europeans questioned whether Africans had souls without any direct refutation; later they condemned the false Gospel of some missionaries and the attempts that they made to dominate on the basis of these false interpretations. But the Gospel of Christ sees every human person as made in the image and likeness of God and so cannot be reduced to mere objects. The AEC reiterate this as the message of the Church which must be put into practice by the faithful in every age. Nonetheless, Caribbean history is but part of the European history of conquest of lesser peoples deemed beyond God’s grace and therefore subject to despoiling and ill use for European benefit. Christian conversion and European civilizing were but an afterthought. No glossing over or enumerating benefits can get beyond that. Living with ambiguity is all that is possible.

Quoting Eduardo Galeano, they acknowledge that the history of sugar and slavery is a bitter harvest of accumulation of wealth for Europe and North America, the mutilation of the economies of Brazil and the Caribbean, consummating in the historic ruin of Africa (4.2). The cost was extreme human misery, loss of land, damage to the environment and countless deaths. They also quote Eric Williams in support of their assessment of how capital/wealth was valued over people under Slavery. In so doing, the bishops validate Williams’ controversial thesis that British capitalism was built on the backs of African slaves (Joseph E. Inikori has presented data to substantiate Williams’s thesis). Walter Rodney’s trenchant argument about how Europe underdeveloped Africa finds echo here also.

They categorically condemn these shadows of 1492 and the long shadow the cast in later centuries up till today. They recall their words in their best-known pastoral, *Justice and Peace in a New Caribbean* (J&P), in which they claim they spoke of “these ‘shadows’ of yesteryear” (a search of that document does not turn up that phrase or the word shadow). However, they do enunciate in J&P many of the contemporary shadows that darken the history of the Region. While they mistakenly identify the origins of this phrase in their previous pastoral, they also do not clarify the meaning of this phrase; nonetheless, it is clear that they intend that it be a cipher for “history”, and its impact on the present. Their evolutionary vision of history plays itself out here and throughout the pastoral. Yet, nowhere in

Evangelisation for a New Caribbean do they define what they mean by history or aver to the ambiguities of historical interpretation. In line with J&P, they reiterate their call for “repentance and reconciliation for our past and present insensitivity and cruelty to each other” (5.1). They continue to deplore the violation of the human person naming such violations as unacceptable whether it happened as it did in the past on plantations or in the factories or businesses of today. They included in their examples of places of cruelty and insensitivity public offices and abortion clinics alluding to growing concerns about corruption in government and right to life issues (very live issues for us even today thirteen years later). Later, they summarised these very dark shadows that accompanied the coming of the faith in the words of John Paul II as cultural oppression, disrespect for native ways and traditions, and genocide (7.6).

As they did in J&P, they identified the early missionaries as themselves influenced by “the mentality of the time, and sided wittingly and unwittingly with the establishment” (5.2). They see the Church in the colonial past as acting as part of the establishment, “condoning either openly or by its silence, the existing order” (5.2). The close dependency of the clergy of the New World on the patronage of the state often curtailed the Church’s pastoral freedoms and led to an inability to curb the colonists’ attempts to dominate. Without saying it, the bishops call us once again to J&P and their rejection of a close alignment between clergy and politics. Unlike J&P, the pastoral does not renew its own condemnation of the current failings of the Church.

The Lighter Side

They then trace the radical demands of the Gospel that were captured in the Church’s teaching from as early as Pope Paul III’s 1537 denouncement of the treatment of the inhabitants of the West Indies as irrational animals and exclusively for profit and service (6.1). Urban VIII’s seventeenth century excommunication of those who kept Indians as slaves was also referenced.

Happily, the picture is not all covered in shadows as some early missionaries did accept the radical call of the Gospel; among these, the Bishops listed Bartolome de las Casas, Peter Claver and Raymond Breton, Petrus Donders, Miguel Hidalgo and Josh Maria Morelos. Such missionaries are claimed as “lights” shining through the darkness of 1492 and beyond. (Again, the Bishops are not alert to the ambiguities of a Bartolome de las Casas who argued for the importation of Africans in place of the Amerindians.)

This highlighting of the work of ministers of the Church was seen before in their 1969 Black Power Statement. In that statement the Bishops say:

Looking at the past history of our territories, we might do well to recall and not to reject the constructive and selfless dedication of many Christian ministers, both local and foreign, in the cause of racial justice and equality. Many of them spent their lives for this cause, precisely because they saw the same problems as do some of the founders of Black Power. In fact, it might be said it was the work of such dedicated men which created the climate in which the nobler aspirations of this movement might be realised.

Today there still remains much to be done. Emancipation from slavery and political independence have now come to most countries. But, still, in too many areas, the God given dignity of the black man is not being recognised. It is regrettable that we have to admit not only the historical involvement of Christians and Catholics in the evils of slavery but also the refusal by not a few today to embrace fully the lesson of the equality of all men. (AEC 1969)

The bishops do not shy away from the self critique necessary in the historical project. Evangelisation for a New Caribbean takes account of Protestant missionaries had a role of introducing Christianity to the region; such Protestants were themselves products of their time. This taking account of the Protestant contributions speaks to the ecumenical approach of the Catholic Church in the Caribbean, especially in Jamaica. Some of these early Protestant missionaries were “light” as they ministered to the Africans and taught them to read and write and acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Then into the mix, is thrown the fact that Catholicism was prohibited in some territories for many years and so could not be practiced freely until the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century. The implication might be that there were less opportunities for being light or shadow in such circumstances.

In presenting such “lights” the bishops were responding directly to those who see nothing worth celebrating for five hundred years of Christianity being present in the Caribbean. In addition, they credit the values – moral, social, and religious – brought by the Africans, East Indians and Indonesians as “lights shining in the darkness”. Those values sustained these people throughout their experience of oppression and dehumanisation. In so doing, the Bishops validate the historical and cultural experiences of the oppressed from within.

They celebrate the resilience of Caribbean people, which they see as born out of the struggles of 1492 and beyond. The divinely-inspired gifts of resilience, love for freedom and self-determination are identified as values to celebrate. These values are underscored and the bishops exhort Caribbean people to emulate their fore parents in the struggles in which they found themselves. They called upon us to reject the negativity and despair that can invade our minds as we struggle against oppressive systems and corrupt governments.

In their final exhortation to Priests and People, the bishops encourage the observation of the Quincentenary in the spirit of their pastoral: contemplating the changes that have occurred in the encounter of two worlds; repentance and reconciliation for the atrocities that accompanied the encounter. Such repentance embraces the idea that the Church is always in need of reforms - yesterday, today and forever – because of the sinfulness of the human beings who are a part of the Church and society. The church is called upon to claim and redeem its past through repentance and reconciliation to allow for growth-producing missionary action. The present is also to be claimed as a challenge from God.

Concluding Thoughts

Since Vatican II, history has been an important category for framing theological reflection and pastoral activity within the Caribbean, as elsewhere. However, history is perhaps an even more significant category for the Region given its history of denial, denigration, silencing and submerging. The importance of history as a category was the subject of the AEC's 1992 Pastoral Evangelization for a New Caribbean, as it wrestled with the five hundredth anniversary of the coming of Christianity to the Region. This coming was acknowledged as both shadowy and light-filled, although one is left to question if on average there were more shadows than light. Nonetheless, the cause of to wrestle with the nature of history as a theological category.

The historical consciousness of the Pastoral could have been deepened by an appreciation of the historical nature of Christianity itself. Indeed, Robert Moore reminds us of the historical nature of Christianity itself. Christianity is historical because its main event took place not at the cosmic level but on a local time-bound plane. That alone ought to guarantee history a central place in the life of Christianity. "There is a sense in which this historical religion in contact with the peoples who became the object of imperialism, forgot its own historical antecedents; and what is more, forgot that perception and questioning, and the stand from which a relationship in theology proceeds is the product of a peculiar history' (Moore, pp. 4041).

Salvation History

In penning that pastoral the bishops took account of the work of one named Caribbean historian, the late Dr Eric Williams. However, unlike secular historians like Williams, the AEC narrated a salvation history rather than a secular one. In fact, they reject "sheer secularism" and "champion the sacredness of life in a Region where death is becoming prominent" (9.2). To that end, they made Christ a central figure in understanding evangelisation in the past and the Church's response of a new evangelisation to the current historical reality. Christ is the Lord of history. God is claimed as the God of history who continually acts and is revealed through historical and political events. Thus do the discuss salvation history. The meaning of this salvation history can be fleshed out by a consideration of insights from Liberation Theology.

History is recognised as an important category for reflection in the theological canons of Liberation Theology. "Theology is critical reflection on historical praxis 'in light of the Word'" (Scannone, p. 216). Liberation is seen as a historical project undertaken by the people. History has a mediating role and a historical hermeneutic is important in means for exploring national experiences. Argentinian liberationist Juan Carlos Scannone rejects pondering history in terms of dialectics of opposites. He prefers the dialectics of "already and not yet", which recognises that the liberation praxis did not begin in recent decades but was present in the past history. At the same time, Scannone warns against romantic interpretations of history. It is well to reflect on the relationship between history and salvation history. "The mystery of history and its structure is not satisfactorily handled by either dualism (e.g., distinguishing between the spiritual and the temporal as two different planes) or monism (whether it be

the sacralising or dialectical type). History is at once profane history and salvation history in some unconfused and indivisible way, just as Christ himself (and humankind in and through him) is at once Son of man and Son of God" (Scannone, p. 228). "As Christian faith sees it, history has an incarnational structure thanks to grace" (Scannone, p. 228). "[H]istory involves the interplay between the transcendent gratuitousness of God's liberative intervention and the freedom of human response to it: even God respects that freedom, and the resultant sphere of freedom is the locale where human beings exercise discernment concerning God's freely proffered and liberative will for human salvation" (Scannone, p. 229).

I close, with the words of Nettleford, on whom I have depended heavily throughout this reflection:

It is history to which one turns to remember that one is less than the angels however unscientific such a formulation may appear to some of us. But non-believers have a way of calling for last rites on the way out. It is to history that one turns to remember that humility has a place in human interaction, however pious this threatens to sound to the hard-nosed cocksure intellectual fired with the fuel of Anglo-American empiricism. (2003, p. 290)

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