

Vatican II and Catholic Theology in the Caribbean

by

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Abstract

What is the impact of the Second Vatican Council on theology in the Caribbean some 50 years after its reception? One can argue that Catholic theology in the Caribbean now has a more decidedly local flavor and has come into its own, especially since we now have a regular conference that promotes and heralds these local reflections and activities. On the other hand, one can also argue that despite these attempts over the 50 years since Vatican II, the local churches don't seem all that much "local" and still remain outposts, at least in terms of their ecclesiology, of a Roman church that is content, and in some cases, intent, on keeping the region a missionary outpost, a localized image of Euro-American hegemony. How are we to gauge our theological journey in the region since Vatican II? This paper will give brief overviews of the historical and methodological journeys of our theological production and indicate some markers for assessing our theological journey.

My friends, as I reviewed the abstract that I sent in with much vigor and hope I now cringe at the thought of being so audacious...but you know me...so anyway I am going to put a spin on this presentation by presenting some of my thoughts on the issue and because habits are hard to break I will introduce some concepts and ideas, as I am wont to do, for your reflection and comment.

Eclectic

As I was going over our theological production in the region since the 1960's I remembered that Jason Gordon already did a critical overview in his doctoral thesis up to the early 2000's. He basically pointed out the epistemological lenses through which theological reflection had been done in the region (socio-economic, literary, cultural anthropological, philosophical mainly Marxist, various versions of Latin American liberation theology, and decolonization) and how they seemed to neglect a rigorous historical reading of the region in a long time span which could unravel the many layers

of the geographic, cosmological and varied mentalities that created and comprise the region. Jason titled the section that did an overview of theological production in the area “From Colonization to Globalization” indicating that colonization gave way to, and prepared the ground for, globalization. Perhaps if he had to do it over again he might have flipped the title and called it “Globalization and Coloniality” because the latter is not possible without the former, but the real import of what he presented was that here in the Caribbean we do not have homogenous and defining epistemological or methodological views. To my mind, we tend to be eclectic and I think this is good. When we look at the works subsequent to the early 2000’s, with Michael Miller’s push for a phenomenological/process point of view, as well as what he calls a realistic libertarian way to understand the notion of God, Malzaire’s work, Anna’s and Theresa’s work in *Groundings* as well as the other works that we will look at in this conference, and Glynn Jemmot’s work among those that find themselves marginalized because of their color, one gets a strong sense that we in the region are not tied to any one ideological and/or theological perspective. We give eclecticism a good name! And we make it a way of doing theology! My colleague and friend, at Duquesne, Elochukwu Uzukwu, who is considered to be one of the pioneers of African theology, understands his method to be eclectic in style too. He calls it having the freedom to cast “a second look” at things. This gives us the freedom, which we have embraced in the region, to reinterpret, adapt and adopt what may seem extraneous to existing models of imperial Christianity. I think this eclectic way of doing theology is something to be cherished and not eradicated in disguised colonial or oriental (using Said) attempts to create some mythical and exotic Caribbean theology.

The power of eclecticism is the drawing on a multitude of varying methods and sources in order to better understand and describe the loci of research. This is welcome and necessary to my mind if we are to address the complex realities of our communities and their search for truth. Eclecticism has been traditionally criticized because its transgression of disciplinary boundaries seemed to not allow for continuity and consistency in theory and thought. However, since we have come to realize that “continuity” and “consistency” are oftentimes synonymous with control and domination I think we have become aware that what has passed for “sound method” is itself based on discontinuous and inconsistent theory that maintains and perpetrates domination. Eclecticism in fact is more consistent and grounded in the nature of involuntary associations that make up human living. As method, eclecticism allows for a greater range of insight and recognizes the impurity and interrelatedness of our traditions and faiths.

In this manner, eclecticism is a form of relativity similar to what Maria Pilar Aquino calls respectivity. We engage our work relative to, in respect to, other persons, cultures, faith traditions and epistemologies. Understood in this way I think relativism has been unfairly stigmatized. We are all relative to one another and our theologies and epistemologies are also done in respect to one another. This can only be dangerous to imperial discourses and totalizing narratives. The macro-narrated nature of our world, evidenced by the many, even contradictory, narratives that belie homogenized narratives of diverse peoples

in common spaces, presents us with the challenge and need to engage theological reflections that address these changing realities. Eclecticism allows for this.

Transgressive

As eclectic I also see our theological endeavors as transgressive. Allow me to add here some reflections I penned for an EATWOT article on trying to wrap my mind, and hopefully others, around what this could mean.

Can one speak of transgressive theology, one that implies and encourages transgression, or is it theology itself that needs to be transgressed? The former holds out hope that theology is capable of transgressing boundaries and can engage and generate transgression as a constitutive part of its endeavor. The latter recognizes the imperial and oppressive activities of theologizing and perhaps suggests that we might be better off leaving what we call “theology” behind and involve ourselves in analyses and activities that better express and address the injustices rampant in our world. I will admit that setting up the issue like this is a binary polarization that may not be helpful (though familiar to theologians) in looking at the issue for it is clearly apparent in our social and individual relationships that categories of interaction are not neatly compartmentalized and discrete. In fact, the “impurity” of our thoughts and activities, as the condition of our lived realities, forces us to recognize that perhaps theology should be understood as both in need of transgression as well as able to transgress. I therefore read, or understand, transgressive theology as occasioning the need for theology to be transgressed as well as to transgress. It is reflexive as well as active.

The term transgression itself means and implies a crossing over of some limit or boundary. As going beyond the limits of what has been accepted as the norm and thereby transgressing boundaries that are either regulative or perceptually imposed upon our thinking and living. I understand limit here not primarily nor necessarily in the negative manner of a boundary that limits thought or movement but more along the lines of a participatory activity. I initially follow Paul Ricoeur in this regard by understanding limit as “an act and not a fact”. To quote him:

The concept of “limit” implies not only and even not primarily that our knowledge *is* limited, has boundaries, but that the quest for the unconditioned *puts limits* on the claim of objective knowledge to become absolute. “Limit” is not a fact, but an act.

Limit understood as such is a descriptive act and a mediative tool used in the search for the unconditioned within the conditioned. So it is not primarily a defining concept of understanding. We place limits on our thinking as we try to express in conceptually clear language that which goes beyond such conception and thereby try to find alternative ways to conceptualize and express (sometimes in figurative and metaphorical ways) that which we seek.

This looking for alternative ways to conceptually express what we seek is important for a transgressive and transgressing theology if one also understands transgression as an activity that engages that which lies beyond the limits of adequate conceptual expression. I hasten to add that this does not necessarily indicate engagement with divinity but a willingness to engage that which we do not normally encounter within our normal boundaries. So limit acts as a *limiting* force and not as an end or *telos*. In this sense limit is a shifting boundary that, much like a territorial border, changes over time as various civilizations and groups of people lay claim (in convincing conceptual fashion they believe) to its space. Of significance here is that no limit is absolute and therefore no transgression is the/a final act of transgressing. Going beyond limit therefore is not, nor primarily, a search for “ultimate reality” but an act of engagement, conceptually and practically. Reading limit as a boundary beyond which we ultimately find answers, tends to absolutize this other space/place and more often than not leads to what Edward Said terms *orientalism*, our exoticizing of the other to serve the ends we have imagined/created for ourselves. I sometimes wonder, in the vein of Ludwig Feuerbach, whether institutional theology and religion overly subscribes to this. Transgressive and eclectic theologies may well curb theological overreach.

Created among Involuntary Associations

I remember a diocesan priests meeting held in San Fernando, Trinidad many years ago where Fr. Sebastian Madhosingh, now deceased, got up and said that the priesthood was the only profession in the world where members were expected and forced to be friends, and friendly, with people they may not even like. You could imagine the uproar after his remarks, with most of those present decrying his remarks and claiming that he was not being collegial etc. But Madhu was right. I would characterize his analysis a little differently by saying that we have many instances in our region where people have had to live in and with involuntary associations. I would claim further that our very theological production is done in this manner and is generated by, and in response to, these involuntary associations. These associations occur on personal as well as structural levels and I continue to be shaped by the abiding structures of coloniality.

Now, from the perspective of the colonized it is easy to speak of the colonial relationship as an involuntary one, but one can also understand that the colonizer finds him/herself pressed into relationships with the “natives” and even uneasy “friendships” that create complex relational realities. These complex relationships are inscribed in historical readings that either debase or destroy the history of the colonized, or include the colonized as the noble native. So how are the colonized, especially in an area like the Caribbean that has no discernible “indigenous” population like Africa, Asia and Latin America, to construct their history? Guyanese writer and thinker Wilson Harris would argue that it has to be based on what he calls the native matrix, the narratives generated not only by the peoples of the region but by relationships that have taken place in its space, even and especially the involuntary associations that occur amongst peoples. Historiography becomes a way of arriving in tradition, a sort of “creolization of the chasm within illuminations drawn from, or nursed from, the fabric of involuntary associations embedded in humanity”. In other words, traditions, and native cultures are

never “pure” and one unearths the “native” in the transcultural associations that involuntarily take place routinely. The native is not an archetype of purity and involuntary associations become the basis for the genesis of “native” expressions.

To me, this explicit recognition of how our epistemologies, relationships, communities, histories and possibilities are shaped and forged by the involuntary associations of our lives, privileges transgression. It shatters the homogenization of worlds and realizes the founding creolization of our spaces, physically, mentally, and spiritually. If we take this to be worthwhile, or at least the genuine point of departure for our forays into understanding and undertaking what it means to transgress and to be transgressed, then we begin to see the eclectic way in which we actually come to reside within the spaces we inhabit. The nature of involuntary associations generates and privileges transgression and eclecticism.

Rehash

So I think what we have accomplished since Vatican II is to create theological spaces that have been generated by involuntary associations and which are transgressive and eclectic. This is quite an achievement and perhaps not what one expects or wishes when thinking of constructive theological endeavors especially along the Euro-American lines in which we were and are being trained. However, our forays into many and varying strands of theological insight and activity signal very real and serious theological development with no end in sight. In light of this I want to revisit the remarks Bob Schreiter made at our first conference in St. Lucia in 1994 giving his own overview of our endeavors.

Bob, the only international observer invited to our first conference, posed and answered the question “Why a Caribbean Theology?” He makes three points in terms of what he considers the region to uniquely offer to the rest of the world by means of faith and theology. First, the complex way our identity has and is being put together and our engagement and encounter with one another in the many hybrid forms we take. He claims that this understanding and language of mixture is becoming significant for the rest of the world. In his subsequent text *The New Catholicity*, Bob relates this to hyperdifferentiation and points out the multiple belonging (socially and religiously) that this also describes. While I agree that creolization does create and offer opportunities for the mobile and interactive world (also technological) that we inhabit we have to remember that these amalgams were created involuntarily and with great violence. These hybridities were not chosen, they were forced contexts that changed worlds and civilizations and were maintained (and still maintained) with the threat of violence and occupation. They also instilled in the creolization process structures of coloniality that created a *telos* in hybridity as a movement toward dominant cultural, social and financial norms. The hybrid has become the exoticized and eroticized other that requires integration into the dominant ethos. So whereas the creation of hybridity and creolization in this region originated out of violence and involuntary associations it has now become a fashionable choice that to all extents and purposes play hand in hand with coloniality. From this point of view I would caution against our thinking of creolization as a possible prescriptive model for understanding our world and the production of knowledges that come out of

this process. Creolization, though fact, is really a descriptive category that allows for the recognition of the violent collision of peoples and civilizations through conquest, rape, plunder and colonization. This should be further investigated, understood and lived through but is not to be held up as a model.

Bob's second point was about our cultural influence on the rest of the world through music, art, literature etc. While it is true that we have impacted the world in the manner Bob mentions, it always seems too easy to pull this out of the hat when speaking of the Caribbean. I have two stories I want to narrate in relation to this. The first was during my time teaching at Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans, which is a historically black and Catholic school. In my early years teaching there was a young African American man who decided to grow what he termed as dreadlocks. His hair was kept and taken care of and the strands were braided in some places and just long in others; and of course he was into Bob Marley. So one day we got into a conversation and I mentioned to him that the term "dread" in dread locks was to be taken literally. The hair should be unkept, matted and basically looking real dread as a sign of resistance and lack of acceptance of dominant social norms. I further went on to tell him that authentic dreadlock Rastas also dress (or undress) and live in a very different manner as a sign of their non-conformance to the rules of Babylon. He listened intently, and the next time I saw this young man his so-called dread-locks were gone and he had the customary low cut of his peers. The exoticization of Caribbean culture is too easy to do.

My second story comes out of my time studying in London. I stayed at St. Mary of the Angels rectory in Bayswater in the 80's and there was a St. Lucian cleaning maid at the rectory. I would catch a bus to Heythrop College, which was in those days at Cavendish Square right in the heart of downtown London and sometimes she would share the bus ride with me. At that time the West Indies cricket team was engaged in the famous "blackwash" of the England cricket team. After the WI won the first four tests, as a good colonial boy, I mentioned to my St. Lucian companion on the bus that we should let them win one. She looked straight at me and said very quietly and firmly, "doh give dem none, we should buss dey arse right through, you know how much pressure dey give we in dis country?" The production of the Caribbean culture that Bob correctly says has impacted the world arose in resistance to a dominant culture that consistently and through all means possible devalued Caribbean people and dehumanized our very beings. One cannot and should not divorce the two. So, saying we have impacted the world with our cultural expressions should be the same as saying that we have impacted the world with our notions and activities of resistance, but this is the other side of the coin that does not go hand in hand when people think and present Caribbean culture. I would like perspectives gazing (to use a term of Fanon) upon Caribbean culture to also see in the mirror the reactive and resistive nature of these art forms and recognize these latter features as the real treasure of the cultural expressions.

Bob's third point was our history of encounter with different religious traditions. He wanted to indicate how our theological journey was and is done in the midst of differing world and regional religious traditions. However, his perspective on this is also along the lines of hyperdifferentiation. It allows for the creation of new and unheard of

combinations. But to my mind, this again looks at these encounters as choices by those who have the ability to choose. It is not driven by what I call forced contexts and it does not recognize the underlying involuntary associations that create these possibilities. Furthermore, it seems to move in epistemological mode from the Christian formerly autonomous context to a heterogeneous activity that still sees these other traditions as in the end giving Christianity “new life” through various (and formerly rejected) cultural and traditional means. It still sees Christianity as a very distinct and “pure” tradition that relates to these other traditions as extraneous to Christian identity. This can help to explain why some 32 years after *Fashion Me a People* was published in the Caribbean we still have not taken up its mandate in full and still do not offer in our churches on a regular basis education about other Caribbean religions. So Bob’s supposition that because we have lived among varying religious traditions translates into understanding other religious traditions is not necessarily the case. If anything, there are still the demarcations left by the colonial structuring of the involuntary *religious* associations that we have the Caribbean. It is difficult to claim that we have any edge on other regions when it comes to inter-faith dialogue.

Finally, Bob goes on to encourage a theology in the Caribbean “that is true to the kind of Church you hope to be...the kind of Church you want to be.” Now as I have talked about coloniality before at this conference I won’t go into it again here but hope and desire in post-colonial regions tends to be very orchestrated ideals. The psychology of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized does not lend itself to hopes and desires that are true to either the colonized or the colonizer. As one of the triad of authors writing on this topic in the 1960’s in northern Africa (the other two being Fanon and Said) Tunisian Albert Memmi in his early text, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, writes:

We have seen that colonization materially kills the colonized. It must be added that it kills him spiritually. Colonization distorts relationships, destroys or petrifies institutions, and corrupts men, both colonizers and colonized. To live, the colonized needs to do away with colonization. To become a man, he must do away with the colonized being that he has become. If the European must annihilate the colonizer within himself, the colonized must rise above his colonized being.

How does one remain true to the kind of church one hopes and wants to be when these hopes and desires are consistently perpetuated in personal and social structures in which we have not yet risen above our “colonized being”?

These comments on Bob’s overview are meant to tease out from a different epistemological space how, since Vatican II, our theology does not fit into neat systematic categories and maintains eclectic, transgressive, characteristics that have been forged out of violent involuntary personal and structural associations. If we take these associations seriously, in the past and present, I think we come to a space that recognizes out theological endeavor in the region as a sort of tower of Babel (using Everard’s analysis) where we become empowered to speak many different languages along with their attendant epistemological and cultural perspectives and which also seems like

foolishness to those who want to consolidate power and recreate empire in our midst, even using the name church to do this.

The whole world had the same language and the same words. When they were migrating from the east, they came to a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, "Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire." They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky,* and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the people had built. Then the LORD said: If now, while they are one people and all have the same language, they have started to do this, nothing they presume to do will be out of their reach. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that no one will understand the speech of another. So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel,* because there the LORD confused the speech of all the world. From there the LORD scattered them over all the earth. (Genesis, verses 1-9)*