

Acknowledgment

When I found out I would be receiving the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Divinity from the Huron University College, I started to wonder what I had done to receive this great honour. Later, trusting in the competence and the long tradition of The Honorary Degree Committee that approved my nomination, I concluded that I must have done something to deserve it. So, I would like to say thank you to everyone, but especially to **Dr. Barry Craig**, Principal of Huron University College, **Mr. Ian Jeffreys**, Chair of the Huron University College Executive Board, **Rt. Revd. Linda Nicholls**, Chair of the Huron University College Corporation and Bishop of Huron, **Revd. Canon Dr. Todd Townshend**, Dean of The Faculty of Theology, **Revd. Graham Bland**, Archdeacon of The Saugeens, for his kind words.

On the Public Relevance of Theology

Introduction.

For some time now I have been involved in Theological Education in two distinct ways: in training leadership in Christian Churches and social movements through what we call Popular Education, a movement that began among Christians as a post-colonial response for the training and empowerment of the people¹; and also in formal education carried out in seminaries and bodies recognized by the ecclesiastical institutions.

This involvement with theological education leads me to take part in a recent discussion in Brazil on the public relevance of Theology. To put it simply, it is a question of investigating whether or not Theology is important to the society in which we live. As it is relatively new, the topic has unleashed passions and aroused diverse opinions, but it still requires greater systematization.

For me it is very important to talk about this subject today, because it's always a dramatic task to find meaning in doing theology these days. Last week I had a conversation with some friends from the English course about our academic disciplines. The answers were varied: Computer Science, Mathematics, Business. When my turn came, I said "Theology". The others looked at one other strangely, then someone asked me kindly: "Sorry, I don't understand. Can you say that again?" If I had said, "I'm an extraterrestrial and I'm here to study human behavior", I'm sure it would have been easier.

However, I believe it is already possible to point out a few qualities which make Christian Theology relevant to western societies in the 21st Century; characteristics that should be part of the whole training process, not just incidental to it, but fundamental to learning how to "do theology".

From where am I talking about God.

First of all I would like to underline the need for Theology to be able to interpret reality. Jesus himself warned that we need to "*discern the signs of the times*"². Along the same lines, Karl Barth said that Christians should carry the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

Over the last few years western societies have gone through profound transformations. Fernando Magalhães tells us that "*the dizzying pace of scientific growth, the accelerated development of computer technology, the shift in the axis of the decisions of power towards a single pole and the*

¹ We use the word people with the same meaning as that attributed by Clodovis Boff: "... we use 'people' as a concept that is different to 'nation', unethical to 'privileged or dominant classes', and that corresponds to the 'dominated, oppressed, subordinate classes', or simply the 'popular classes'. So here it refers to 'people' in the class sense and not in the classical sense" (BOFF, Clodovis. Pastoral Care and People Agent. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1984, pg. 03).

² Matthew 16:3.

*economic redirection of the world political system have no parallels in the history of humanity*³. The more enthusiastic defenders of this New World Order, like Francis Fukuyama, declared that liberal democracy and the market economy represented *“the final point in the ideological evolution of humanity”*⁴.

However, a profound economic retraction caused by yet another cyclical crisis of capitalism, the proletarianization of the middle class, the impact of new migratory patterns, have provoked an unexpected rupture in the system. Populist and authoritarian leaders have begun to take on an important role supported by the so-called “silent majority”⁵. Despite its diversity, the most visible consequences of this reaction can be seen in the rise of extreme right-wing parties around the world, in the overthrow of legitimately elected popular governments in Latin America, Britain’s Exit from the European Community and the election of Donald Trump.

Fukuyama was wrong and the neoliberal model was not the end of the story. A new and frightening world is being unveiled before our very eyes, where values like justice, respect, openness, global solidarity and the protection of the environment are being replaced, with absolutely no constraint, by hate speech, disrespect for minorities, the defense of lies, undisguised economic exploitation and *“nationalism accompanied by feelings of white superiority”*⁶.

To whom am I talking about God.

The second determining aspect of a relevant Theology is having a clear idea about whom it is for. At this point I underline the fundamental role of Latin American liberation theologies that courageously identify their audience through the “preferential option for the poor”. I don’t think there is a lot to discuss here, the poor occupy a central place in the Gospels. Nevertheless, I believe there was a certain reductionism in regarding the poor simply as the economically dispossessed. I understand the “poor” to be all who are victims, all who are marginalized by the system. In this category Leonardo Boff includes our planet Earth, which he calls the *“Grande Pobre”* (*the great pauper*)⁷.

Now, in order to perceive who the “poor” are we need to be aware of the reality around us and to remain in constant dialogue with society. We need to practise the prophetic listening of the God of Exodus: *“I have indeed seen the misery of my people (...), and I have heard them crying out”*⁸. Theology needs to be aware of the issues of the day such as ecology, cultural diversity, religious plurality, human trafficking, migration, gender violence, human sexuality ... always with the certainty that *“God and his Christ are present among the poor and the victims of this world”*⁹.

The God we talk about.

Finally, Theology needs to be clear about the God in whom it is grounded. Historian Eduardo Hoornaert affirms scathingly that the God the Portuguese brought to Brazil *“was from the beginning a sick God”*¹⁰. The navigators that crossed the oceans used to abandon their sick seafarers

³ MAGALHÃES, Fernando. *Tempos Pós-Modernos: A Globalização e as Sociedades Pós-Industriais*. São Paulo: Cortez, 2004, pg. 12.

⁴ ANDERSON, Perry. *O Fim da História: de Hegel a Fukuyama*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Ed., 1992, pg. 92).

⁵ Expressão utilizada por Richard Nixon para designar aqueles que apoiavam a sua política bélica contra o Vietnam.

⁶ <<http://www.globethics.net/de/-/point-of-view-trump-election-the-need-to-reassert-global-values> Accessed on May 1st 2017.

⁷ <<http://www.pensarcontemporaneo.com/boff-cristianismo/>> Accessed on May 1st 2017.

⁸ Exodus 3:7.

⁹ *Fora dos pobres não há salvação: pequenos ensaios utópico-proféticos*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2008, pg. 19.

¹⁰ HOORNAERT, Eduardo. *Amazônia e Ocidentose*. In *História e Memória: Cristianismo na Amazônia*. Revista Teológica-Pastoral, Belém: IPAR, Ano III, Nº 5 – Agosto-Dezembro, 2001.

on the beaches so that disease would not spread. Whether they were aware of it or not, they also abandoned here their deity to starve to death, punished by the sun and the salt water. However, this God managed to survive and is still alive today. Maximiliano Salinas depicts him as an authoritarian governor, an exclusive intellectual master, a manager on behalf of an absent father, and as the transcendent image of the modern global project of the West¹¹.

Theology needs to help people cure this sick God, underlining the bias in the Bible where he is presented as a God of sustenance, care and tenderness. He is the one who liberated the people from slavery, who sent prophets to denounce injustice, who had compassion on those who suffer, who wept over the holy city. Maybe radical action is needed to heal this God. This was the understanding of some representatives of the indigenous people of the Andes when, in 1985, they gave the Bible back to Pope John Paul II during his visit to Peru, together with a letter that said: *“we decided to make the most of your visit by giving you back your Bible, because for five centuries it has given us neither love, nor peace, nor justice”*¹².

Conclusion.

By way of conclusion, I believe that a relevant Theology will understand that its mission is, as Jon Sobrino understood it, to take down crucified peoples from the cross. It is the constant struggle to transform the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

On the 28th April we had a general strike in Brazil against the reforms implemented to satisfy the greed of large corporations and to extinguish the few accomplishments of the social movements. What caught my attention most were the demonstrations by Christian Churches and other religions in support of the strike. Religious leaders used the social networks to show their disapproval of the dismantling of the Brazilian people's rights: undoubtedly a remarkable step forward which fills us with expectancy and hope. Theology is on the streets...

Who knows, maybe the evils of this apocalyptic period will show us new perspectives and make us dream like John: *“Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. (...) He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, (...)He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”*¹³

+Saulo Barros, May, 11th, 2017.

¹¹ CAMPOS, Maximiliano Salinas. Gracias a dios que comí: pueblo, religiosidad y banquete em América Latina y el Caribe. In *Estudios de Religião*, nº 28. São Paulo: Universidade Metodista de São Paulo, 2005.

¹² <<http://macroscopio.blogspot.ca/2006/04/o-que-os-indgenas-sul-americanos.html>> Consulted on April 28, 2017.

¹³ Apocalipse 21:1-5.