

INTRODUCTION

Current theological efforts by Third World and racial ethnic Christians are among the most promising developments in Christian theology in recent years. These "theologies of liberation" have raised serious questions about the veracity of Christian theology as formulated and expressed by white Europeans and North Americans. Faced with the reality of massive human suffering and the need to speak of God in the midst of it, liberation theologians are searching for a new way to understand the relationship between reflection and action. The answers they are suggesting challenge the very nature of Christian faith as it has been traditionally understood and practiced.

The Native American experience lends itself to the methods of analysis and interpretation employed by liberation theologians. Native American Christians face challenging and confusing circumstances as they attempt to reconcile traditional cultural and spiritual understanding with the dominant white society. Having accepted the religion of their oppressors, they face questions raised by the dilemma of living in two worlds, questions that contribute to a crisis of identity. And while many Americans view domestic oppression as a thing of the past, the five-hundred-year-old assault on Native American sovereignty,

land, and cultural freedom is a continuing reality. Native Americans survive as an oppressed and marginalized minority living in the midst of First World prosperity and privilege.

The long history of resistance by Native Americans to colonial and U.S. encroachment constitutes the basis for a Native American theology of liberation. While the Red Power movement of the 1960's and 70's may have caught the attention of many non-Indians for the first time, it was only the latest expression of Native American activism. The original inhabitants of this continent have always resisted the efforts of Euro-Americans to expropriate land, restrict cultural freedom, and incorporate individual Indians into white society. The fact that the resurgent activism of the Red Power movement was accompanied by a renewed interest in traditional beliefs makes this aspect of Native American identity doubly important for theological reflection.

Complicating the situation further is the fact that Christianity has played an integral role in the derogation of Native American rights. Not content with the opportunities for proselytization, the Christian churches extended their partnership with the political establishment to include participation in the historic processes of oppression and even genocide. The nature of this cooperative relationship is evident in the plan for education among the Indians, aimed at assimilating them into white society. The

mistreatment and coercive conversion of Native Americans by Christian missionaries also impacts theological reflection.

While liberation theologians writing from a variety of perspectives have made their voices heard in recent years, Native Americans have been conspicuously absent from this worldwide movement. Yet they have much to gain from considering the efforts of Third World and racial ethnic theologians, and a few Native American theologians are today expressing potentially liberating conceptions of faith. Ultimately, however, the problems facing Native Americans have as much to do with cultural and spiritual freedom as with political and economic equality.

The solution put forth by Native American theologians calls for the acceptance of biculturalism in society, among communities, and even within individual Indians. The presence and validity of both Christianity and traditionalism in Native American communities is to be recognized and affirmed. Insofar as the survival of Native Americans depends on spiritual revitalization, biculturalism represents the only viable alternative in the search for community wholeness. Only when the needs of the community are satisfied will the opportunity for constructive and creative inter-religious dialogue present itself. Religious pluralism and spiritual unity--however contradictory the combination may seem--will constitute the foundation for a Native American theology

with the potential to be truly liberating for all Native Americans.