

Theologischer Zwischenruf

To say a general word about the task I was asked to do: to provoke some further reflections on the issues on the table today, with some biblical and theological “gems”, “pearls”... “Stones”? I will try to be fair to the request. I like the German word of “zwischenruf” – it is a necessary task and place for theology to be... to provoke interjections, interruptions, and exclamations; or cries. I long for a theology that provokes and incites ... a theology of surprise!

Let's go to our 1) **Zwischenruf!!**

The need to SEE, to FEEL, to MAP the soil under my feet – where are your feet? Where do you stand? The place where you stand defines your commitments! Here I stand, said Luther when he was asked to deny his affirmations. The context where you belong, the realities you are inserted are guiding your theological and ideological belonging, your life stand.

What I am affirming is that every – all – theology is CONTEXTUAL. The theology we do in Brasil, in Colombia, in Zimbabwe, but also the one done in Switzerland, Germany or USA. The theological reflection done in the middle of the mud or sand in Nigeria, or the theological reflection done in the smelly-fluffy carpets done in a theological academy in the northern part of the world... it's contextual. Full stop.

Now, how to define, deal and negotiate about the contextual definition of our theological production? Let's point some ways: I want to follow a Brazilian theologian to define contextual theology.¹ He says something like this: Context comes from a Latin word meaning – the weaving together of words – “a text is something that has been woven together” ... “What comes together are the surrounding circumstances that affect and allow the weaving to take place”. (p. 107) The result of this is a tapestry, a fabric done with the resources and materials that the weaver, the author has at his or her disposal. So, the art of the weavers in Switzerland is made with the material and contextual views of the people from this specific context. The work done with wool, wood, clay, coconut palm, etc.. is according to the cultural and climate geographies and lands where these resources are found. So, it is for theology, for the reflection of the production of sense of life.

One short note is that “context” must be taken in a much more flexible sense in our world today; we can find coconut in the mountains in Switzerland; our world is globalized and this has enormous influence in how to define context. Let us take a fluid, a more porous understanding of boundaries is needed in our approach to context and its influence in our way to read the bible, to do, to weave our theological reflections, to live out our faith, to build communities and church structures.

¹ Vitor Westhelle. Exploring effective context – Luther's contextual hermeneutics. In « *You have the words of eternal life* ». Transformative readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran perspective. Mtata, Kenneth (Ed). LWF, Geneva, 2012. P. 107-120.

It is in that sense we pray with the psalmist:

Psalm 119:105

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Dein Wort ist meine Fußes Leuchte und ein Licht auf meinem Wege.

The prayer is to shine light to our path, not to our eyes and face – this is for those who make religion a show... let us see where we walk, where our feet are, the soil, the ground, the journey!

2) Theologischer Zwischenruf

Our third zwischenruf is just in a time when our stomachs are dictating our mind. I should think in something very creative to compete with empty „ruf“ of stomachs!! Maybe something tasty! But, spice, provocative, food for thoughts, sure! Why i am evoking stomach here? Because i also believe that our theology is embodied. Our bodies, with pains, pleasures, rigid thoughts, or liquid feelings, are influencing and shaping the way we formulate our theological grammar – shaping is a good word for an embodied theology. It is with Ivone Gebara, a feminist catholic Brazilian nun, with whom I have learned how to articulate some of my theological thoughts and arguments about theology of the body – *teologia del cuerpo*, o *una teologia corporal* – which is closer to the English embodiment of theology.

What does it mean? What has the body to do with the way we reflect about our faith, we give or seek sense to our life, and we live our spirituality? It is about God incarnating in our world, which teaches us about vulnerability. Incarnation is God's option for vulnerability in a world that strives for power, security, and perfection.

Hunger, vulnerable bodies, suffering violence, exploitation, bodies that are commodities define the way we reflect about God, justice, salvation, and dignity. A table, with plenty and a variety of food, with equal access to those who have hunger is a wonderful way to discuss about solidarity, power, structures of “aid” “development”, etc.

A theology of “*buen vivir*” – good life/living – is a theology of healthy and dignified bodies. To do theology from our contexts and with and from our bodies is an invitation to re-arrange our way of thinking about God differently. It is a movement that will have consequences in how we arrange the structures of church, of our organizations, or the way we define “community”, “humanitarian aid”, “international cooperation”, etc.

And in it is in this way, that theologians and churches can contribute to the discussion about religion and development. Our contribution should not be only because churches have the capacity to be in each village, in each remote town. It is because of that capacity to weave words – to articulate hope, to ensure sense of life. It is because of the role religion can play in building peaceful, just and dignified societies. Again, I need to borrow words from another brasilian poet-theologian, Rubem Alves to express the what I want to say about religion and theology.

Religion is a language; it is a way to talk about the world. In everything... the presence of hope and sense of life. Religion is the tapestry that hope weaves with words. And it is on these nets (or hammocks) that people will rest, lay down...on the words bound together/tied words...and how these words are tied to each other? Very simple! It is with desire... Everything can be done with these words and desires...those nets can be woven with fear and with death... or they can produce hope, life, dignity and justice. (O suspiro dos oprimidos)

3) Theologischer Zwischenruf

Now our third intervention is really before lunch. It will be short and direct. And it will talk about practice. Our reflection about God, the way we weave words together to produce sense in life, to give hope and bring people together in community must lead to practice, to action.

The gathering here today is reflecting about **solidarity**. And this is the word that I want to highlight at this point. Eduardo Galeano remarks a very deep difference between charity and solidarity. Charity is vertical, is something that assumes hierarchical relation between a giver and a receiver; while, solidarity is horizontal, open to dialogue to learn from each other. It is this intrinsically shared knowledge we acquire or we benefit when working in actions of solidarity. We learn from each other life; solidarity implies openness to listen, more than talking; to receive more than give... solidarity promotes a balance in relations, where power is relative and redefined.

Solidarity goes together with justice! And this is the prophetic role of faith and religion in our societies today. This is the task for churches... to promote a spirituality of hunger for justice!

So, let us sing before we eat:

Bendice señor nuestro pan, y da pan a los que tienen hambre y hambre de justicia a los que tienen pan. Bendice Señor nuestro pan! (Federico Pagura)

God bless to us our bread, And give bread to all those who are hungry And hunger for justice to those who are fed. God bless to us our bread.

Elaine Neuenfeldt
LWF
October 2016