Are Americans Coming Out of the Fog?

by Karen L. Bloomquist

June 27, 2011

Liberation theology's call for economic justice may gain support in North America as outrage over economic inequality mounts. Here, Pastor David Weasley leads a prayer during the October 2009 Showdown in Chicago, a protest of the American Bankers Association’s annual meeting. Credit: Creative Commons/Heather Stone.

“Life in Just Peace,” the joint statement on liberation theology reprinted in full within Ulrich Duchrow’s article “A European Revival of Liberation Theology” (Tikkun, Winter 2011), is quite commendable but, like other declarations made by religious leaders, it runs the risk of remaining “on high” instead of fueling the struggles of ordinary people. In the interest of broadening this discussion in Tikkun I’d like to offer a response.

I concur with the strong critiques in the statement, which was a collaborative effort of “twenty-six European religious initiatives and networks, including Kairos Europe, Pax Christi (German Section), INKOTA, Christians for a Just Economic System, Pleading for an Ecumenical Future, Winds from the South, and several regional ecumenical grassroots networks, working together in the German Ecumenical Network in preparation for the May 2011 International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in Kingston, Jamaica.”

The statement resonates with what has been said in many statements and events of the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, what is now the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and other religious bodies. Since the 1970s, some of us North American theologians and church leaders, inspired by liberation theologies emerging in Latin America, have also been writing and saying similar things. Biblical critiques of empire have become increasingly familiar to those preaching in churches, even though far too few sermons name and make the connections with how empire is embodied and expressed today in American policies and practices, perhaps out of fear of the repercussions they might face. When the World Alliance of Reformed Churches took a strong faith stance against neoliberal globalization in 2004, the Wall Street Journal actually took note and was quick to ridicule this in an editorial.
However, the shortcoming is that such analyses and stances tend to remain abstract statements “from on high” that are either ignored or viewed cautiously by those in mainline U.S. churches, captive as they are to assumptions of neoliberalism and American exceptionalism, as well as suspicious of critiques that come from outside (for example, from Europe). I would add that in local settings, pastors can be pivotal in helping working folks (who still are present in our churches) to see and name the contradictions between what they have been promised and the actual realities of their lives, and in opening up more politically engaged, liberating faith understandings. I sought to do this thirty years ago in my theological work on American working-class realities (*The Dream Betrayed: Religious Challenge of the Working Class*). But in general on the American scene, it is not the clergy, theologians, and other church leaders who are the vanguard for making these radical changes in American politics and economic policies.

Many of us have been deeply frustrated with how ordinary working folks have often failed to see the glaring realities of classism in American society and have instead supported views and positions that work against their self-interests — such as the choice that so many made when voting in the November 2010 elections. But with the significant people’s movement that has been awakened and surged in my native state of Wisconsin this winter, the confrontation between workers and corporate-driven economic and political power has become blatantly evident.

Suddenly, the populace may be waking up, not just to what radical neoliberal policies are doing to the rest of the world, but also to how they are stripping ordinary Americans of their rights and of the government support essential for the common good. People’s rage has been fueled by their awareness of how corporate power has invaded the political process and now threatens basic democratic values and rights that Americans have long championed. Although religious leaders were prominent among the demonstrators, this spark was lit especially by the impassioned struggles for democracy in places outside the United States (such as Egypt).

Imagine! Americans finally being inspired and learning from others in the world, rather than telling others what to do, and in the process, perhaps even learning from European history how critical it is to confront emerging fascism. Dare we hope for a new era in which the United States, through its ordinary citizens, rejoins the world rather than dictating to the world?

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Source Citation

tags: Christianity, Economy/Poverty/Wealth, US Politics
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