

Theology and Liberation in the Quebec Context (provisional version)

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My remarks will be both descriptive and interpretative. I shall first deal with the societal and ecclesial context of Quebec in relation to the movement for an alternative way of being society and church. Then I shall say a few words about the general situation of theology in Quebec. Finally, I shall mention the progress and the difficulties of practising a contextual theology in this situation. At the risk not to do justice to the complexity of the situations, I will try, for each issue, to emphasize what seems to me to be the major characteristics. The general picture could appear to be rather paradoxical.

The societal context

Today Quebec, with its mostly French speaking population of 7 millions, seems to suffer a societal *tsunami*, if this metaphor be permitted, slowly sweeping over it and flooding it at every level: economic, ecological, political, social and ethical, including even anthropologically. Several tremors have punctured the history of Quebec, fragilizing its identity and capability of resistance. The last structural one, neo-liberalism, was global and produced in Quebec a flood that mingles its waters with the flood that is threatening all nations. The tremors of our history are these: (1) the French settlements on Amerindian lands beginning at the dawn of the 17th century; (2) the British conquest of 1760 and the flight of the colonial French elite leaving behind 60 000 peasants who clung to their language, their faith and their ethnic inheritance and, forbidden to define themselves politically, engaged in “the revenge of the cradle,” producing abundant offspring to assure their survival and identity; (3) the insurrection of Lower Canada in 1837-1838; (4) The “Quiet Revolution” of the 1960s, making the State the main agent of development through concertation (the “Québécois model”), rejecting traditional religious authority, and creating a progressive social and political movement that called for national sovereignty and generated a new collective identity, concerned in integrating the arrival of immigrants in great number; (5) The sudden and cruel halt produced by the defeat of the referendum of 1980, which was followed (6) by the irruption of neo-liberalism in the harshest manner operative to this day; (7) and finally, the new defeat of the referendum of 1995⁴.

We are presently suffering an ongoing erosion of our social achievements, including employment and democracy itself. More than 20% of the children live in poverty and the food banks spread. The North-South “frontier” now passes within this society in disarray which no longer produces children and which detains the highest young people suicide rate in the West. Taking advantage of the disintegration of our no longer deeply-rooted values and references, the market offers itself as the transcendent Other of our social relations, and to impose competition as the ultimate form of the latter, thus devoid of symbolic meaning and abandoned to the immediacy of monetary gain to draw

⁴ A mirror of these of these historical jolts are the names by which we have called ourselves: Habitants (Settler), then Canadian, then French-Canadian and finally Québécois.

from them. People are left without any dream or project, nor for society nor for the excluded. A dynamics of anthropological dissolution is on its way.

Yet this context has also a brighter side: a civil society is being re-constructed by the community movement, born of the solidarity among and with the people excluded by the dominant neo-liberalism. The movement presently numbers 9000 organisations, the largest proportion among the North-Atlantic countries. These groups are not simply making claims; they provide people with various skills, offer them participation in wider networks and thus create empowered citizens. They improve the conditions of life, strengthen the social bond, and generate social and economic innovations. The main fields of activities are: fight against poverty⁵, defence of social rights (housing, welfare,...), assistance and services offered to people in need (women who suffered violence, young people, the handicapped, poor immigrants,...), critical evaluation of government policies organic agriculture, ecology, consumer protection, day-care centres, women's situation⁶, peace activities (giant manifestations against the war in Iraq), international solidarity, the social economy (6000 enterprises and co-operatives), etc⁷.

In the manner of the World Social Forum, except on a much smaller scale, these groups while differently structured, learn how to unite their efforts. They constitute a social We which, on account of the withdrawal of the State and of the main economic actors, also bears the Quebec's political We and puts pressure on the latter to assume their *raison d'être*, which is the promotion of the common good and the responsibilities derived from it. From this movement has emerged "Option citoyenne," a political movement presently negotiating with other groups the formation of a new political party of the left aiming to create a Quebec that would be egalitarian, ecological, feminist, altermundialista and, possibly independent. An alternative to neo-liberalism is emerging in Quebec, and I think it can be said that it is rooted in the strong tradition of social Catholicism in Quebec, presently largely secularised.

The ecclesial context

During the Sixties, under a strong current of secularization and of political maturity, the Catholic Church, which till then, had assumed the social services, agreed willingly to give up its responsibility to the State. But because the religion had been so authoritarian and moralizing, and even if Vatican II had brought great hope to laymen and women, a strong resentment developed against the Church that lasts until today. In addition, *Humanae Vitae* (1969) massively alienated the lay people from the Church. In the Seventies, the Church failed to accept the recommendations of the Dumont Commission to renew itself by fostering base ecclesial communities⁴ and opening itself to the social milieu following the model of Catholic Action.. Instead the Church returned to the faith understood as a private experience and to its almost exclusively internal activities. The people, confused by this restoration, were unable to hand on their faith to next generation. Many Catholics who became socially involved did so without reference to the official Church. Bishops published progressive social messages, but the communities paid no attention to them. Today,

⁵ A bill for the elimination of poverty, worked out by popular regional assemblies, was supported by 215 000 signatures and, after a lively debate, was adopted by the National Assembly.

⁶ The World March of Women in 2000 came about from the March of Women in Quebec in 1995.

⁷ For a more substantial presentation of this movement, I refer to the that the French Review *L'Express* published about it in December 2004, and also to a subsequent article of Michel Venne in the news paper *Le Devoir*.

⁴ During Vatican II, Jean-Paul Audet, a Québécois theologian, specialist of the first Christian communities, was more successful on the same subject with the Brazilian bishops.

francophone Quebecers seem almost indifferent to the death or at least to the fast decline of this traditional Church: dying numerically⁵ by the desertion or the aging of its members, and dying spiritually by the theological weakness of its propositions. Parishes are consolidated, churches are closed and sold, lay pastoral workers, once numerous, are leaving, discouraged and unable to breathe in a pastoral environment limited to sacramental or liturgical practice and increasingly guided by the Roman project of a conservative restoration. The discourses and the practices of the latter seem alienated from today's spiritual experience and disarray .

On the other hand, a minority of organisms or youth groups promotes a faith in touch with the present context and its culture. This is the case of about fifty Christian, socially committed organisms or networks, which are united in the *Réseau œcuménique Justice et Paix*⁶ (the *Ecumenical Network for Justice and Peace.*), an outcome of the Jubilee Coalition. With the exception of Catholic Action, these groups were born from the end of the Sixties on the initiative of missionaries, religious communities, bishops or lay people. They are strongly involved in the social movement mentioned above and, at the same time, they are much concerned in deepening their Christian identity. They try, albeit with difficulty, to give visibility in the public sphere and in the collective imaginary to an alternative way of living the Gospel, different from the traditional ways, or confined to the private sphere or in collusion with the system. This search for a way of being Church that is different and meaningful in the local context, finds little attention or support from pastors and bishops.

Theology

In Quebec, professional theologians are usually professors at secular universities. Three francophone faculties out of six were recently closed due to lack of students. The remaining ones also suffer from a decrease in the number of students, revealing the disaffection from the Church. These faculties are not yet threatened, but , as the university itself, they are submitted to efficiency criteria, and they must enter the race for students, for research grants and for “markets” or their knowledge. There is the risk that the precariousness of the situation would dictate the priorities. A certain revival has occurred through the integration of religious studies into the theological faculties, following a renewed interest in the sacred. But where does this leave theology itself?

After a long period of copying and developing European theology, Quebec theologians have increasingly turned to questions raised by local events or by the local incidences of issues such as secularization, the personal experience of the believer, faith and culture relation, ecclesiology, pastoral practices; theology, bioethics, sexual ethics, spirituality, the religious phenomenon, pluralism, interreligious dialogue and, needless to say, biblical studies with an emphasis on exegesis and interpretation methods. This theology is competent and well integrated into ecclesial concerns. It also seeks to remain in dialogue with contemporary thought and science. However, it seems to regard its actual context as merely an incidental matter: for example, its public pronouncements limit themselves to religious current affairs, and its approach for the analysis of the practices limits to the micro level. While it is true that the socio-political excitement of the

⁵ Quebec has more bishops than seminarians!

⁶ Among some of these groups, there are le Centre justice et foi, Développement et paix, le Comité pour les droits de l'homme en Amérique latine, l'Entraide missionnaire, les Journées sociales du Québec, les services diocésains de pastorale social, le Centre de pastorale en milieu ouvrier, Camino de Emaüs de l'Église unie, etc. See website: www.justicepaix.org

Seventies has marked everyone's theological sensitivity, neoliberalism's structural dynamic, emerging in the Eighties, is neither taken into account nor studied except by those few individuals who are identified with the "social" sector. The *tsunami*, or the societal emergency is not generally acknowledged. In fact it continues to be largely ignored as a theological challenge and to remain external to the hermeneutical approach.

Yet the dynamic thrust of Contextual Theology continues. This approach of the heology is practiced by Christian organisations that are socio-politically engaged and by a number of academics, some retired⁸, others not, who work closely with these groups. At the *Réseau oecuménique Justice et Paix-ROJeP (Ecumenical Justice and Peace Network)*, the groups are re-reading the Bible and reflecting theologically from their practices and analysis upon issues largely common with those of the social movement such as neoliberalism and globalisation, the environment, the situation of indigenous peoples, immigration and refugee policies, governmental agendas, free trade proposals, the situation faced by different groups of excluded persons, human rights, the situation experienced by women, war and peace, national independence, international solidarity, sustainable development, the personal and collective journey experienced social commitment, etc.

There are other experiences as well, such as that of *L'Autre parole (La Otra palabra)*, which over the past thirty years has developed a Quebec feminist theology and ecclesiology. This year also, the *Groupe de théologie contextuelle québécoise* will celebrate its 20th anniversary. Different gatherings, such as the annual congresses of *L'Entraide missionnaire* and the biennial *Journées sociales du Québec (Quebec Social Study Days)* provide opportunities for substantial theological reflection upon issues of social priority. Certain organizations offer formation sessions specifically in Contextual Theology.

During the Seventies, the involvement of Christians in social movements was rather anonymous due to the widespread resentment in progressive circles towards the Catholic Church. However, starting in the Eighties, due to the harshness of neo-liberalism and to the disappointment caused by the referendum defeat, the Christian organisations and networks had to return to the sources and foundations of their commitment. Contextual Theology emerged from this process as well as from the inspiration provided by Latin American Liberation Theology. This way of doing theology is now gradually integrated into daily practices.

Though their numbers are declining, certain academics⁹ still identify with this kind of theology. In Montreal, four of us¹⁰, have just founded the *Centre de théologie et d'éthique contextuelles québécoises (CETECQ) (Quebec Contextual Theology and Ethics Centre-QCTEC)*. This Centre will facilitate the coordination of our efforts and of our different approaches. It will also give greater institutional strength to Contextual Theology. Above all, the Centre aims at providing a space for freedom and creativity, encouraging partnerships with academic circles and field networks as well as fostering greater international collaboration. Already member of the *Réseau oecuménique Justice et Paix*, the Center want to assist grass-roots groups who are re-discovering,

⁸ For example: Gregory Baum, the biblicist André Myre, Guy Paiement, Yvonne Bergeron, Monique Dumais, Florent Villeneuve, Guy Côté, Louis O'Neill and others.

⁹ Such as Jacques Racine and Robert Mager in the City of Québec.

¹⁰ Lise Baroni, Denise Couture, Jean-Marc Gauthier and myself.

through their activities, the revolutionary and salvific character of the biblical perspectives in our own times.

I will conclude by this statement: does not the current situation demands that, along with our solidarity with excluded persons, we collectively retrieve a stand point from which we could still express our indignation about the increasingly pervasive inhumanity and its on-going normalisation? Such a perspective would enable us to invent the “socio-logic” which would correspond to the “theo-logic” to which the Spirit summons us as the foundational graciousness of any social life.