

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REALITY IN IBERO-AMERICA

(Reaction to paper by Wilfredo Canales)

By Marco Antonio Velasco Sosa

Country of Origin: Mexico

Serving in: Mexico

INTRODUCTION

A “an integral situational analysis” is from my point of view an important point for our first theological conference and for an honest reflection in Latin America, the Caribbean, with our Hispanic brothers in the United States, Spain and Portugal. All of our discussion and dialogue comes from this point if we want to be congruent with our Wesleyan heritage. It is a “*situational analysis*” because we must take seriously the cultural, economic, political and social situation in our context and reality in Latin America, the Caribbean, and with the Hispanics in the United States and Iberia. And, it is with “*integrity*” because we must be congruent with our Wesleyan holiness heritage, remembering that Wesley did not know a holiness that was not a “social holiness”.

We have been invited to reflect and dialogue about the “social, economic and political reality in Ibero-America”. The purpose in itself very ambitious, but necessary. We must attempt it if we want to be relevant as a church in our historical, political, social and economic time in history in our geographic and/or economic regions. If it is as Wilfredo Canales points out, the “‘reality’ as a category of analysis in social investigation points to something dynamic, changing and complex”, I think that, it is also certain that there is a concrete reality of a social and economic dynamism but in the end, *concrete, material and real*. How can one negate or hide the 25 million Mexicans that live in extreme poverty? Isn’t this a precise and current statistic?

This same reality also has the quality to explain something about itself, precisely because it is not something inert, but is changing and because of that, speaks for itself. I, as subject, explain this reality but only partially. If I as subject can change this reality, it is equally certain that this “reality” has the capacity to transform the surrounding and this includes me as subject.

To summarize, I (a human being, person and individual), transforms the reality, but it also changes me. We do not think then, that we face a reality or state of passive “things” (institutions or persons) this same reality has the power to face me as subject. We are prepared to enter into dialogue with “our economic, social and political *reality* in Latin America and Ibero-America” and we will give the importance due to the statistical data, with precision and honest interpretation.

AN APPROACH TO THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ANALYSIS IN LATIN AMERICA

In a study about “Poverty levels and socio-economic development in America”, Francisco Lazcano classifies *the level of development and poverty* in all of Latin America including the Caribbean. All of the classifications made cluster the countries mentioned in *five levels: very high, high, middle, low and very low*, which has to do with *socio-economic development: very favorable* (the lowest level of poverty), *favorable, intermediate, unfavorable* and *very unfavorable* in relation to the least to the highest incidence of *poverty*. This procedure not only

allows establishing the differences in the interior of the American continent, but also to place such distinctions in the global context.¹ Lizcano writes:

To undertake fitting together (not an easy task) the three classifications that were just presented with respect to poverty, I obtained the following result that takes into account 35 States [countries]. Included in the very favorable level are United States and Canada. Located in the favorable category are the following 12 countries: Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Costa Rica, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Granada, Saint Christopher and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. In the middle or intermediate category are the following 15 republics: Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Mexico, Panama, Cuba (with a high level in relation to the human poverty index, but with low incomes as we will see later), Dominican Republic, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica and Suriname. In the unfavorable level: Bolivia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. Lastly, in the very unfavorable category is Haiti.²

Lizcano gives in his article a very detailed explanation of the criteria used in his analysis to make his classifications with respect to the levels of poverty and which I briefly present in textual format in this paper's footnotes.³ The data regarding the population that lives on less than one dollar per day has been divided in the following four ranks: less than 10% (favorable

¹ F. Fernández Lizcano, "Niveles de pobreza y desarrollo socioeconómico en América", *Espacio Abierto* (Vol. 11, No. 2/Issn 1315-0006, abril-junio, 2002), 205-226.

² *Ibid.*, 103-140.

³ To measure poverty in the countries in America, in this work I have used two types of indicators. More specifically, the first refers to economic income and tries to reflect the percentage of persons or families that live below a line or a determined threshold of poverty. The second type—the index of human poverty—conjugates numbers relative to health, education and housing, taking into account income. With respect to the first type of indicators, I used both the percentages made by the World Bank and those used by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [CEPAL in Spanish], although these are less comparable than the first ones in the world scene. The first ones determine the proportions of the national population that live on less than one or two dollars per day, adjusting the value of dollar in relation to buying power (World Bank 2000a). The second ones emphasize the percentages of the population (also it is used in respect to homes) catalogued as "poor" or "indigent".

The "indigent line" is established in accord with the cost of the basic food basket and defines as indigent or extremely poor the individuals that reside in homes whose income are so low, that even though all of the income is designated to buy food, they are not able to adequately satisfy the nutritional needs of all the family members. The value of the "poverty line" corresponds to the estimation of the resources required by the homes to satisfy the set of needs considered basic, which include, along with alimentation, other types of requirements such as clothing and housing.

In this way, the percentage of the poor includes the indigent (CEPAL, 1999). The second type of indicator, made up of the human poverty index (IPH in Spanish), different from the first, is composed of and measures the lack of three essential dimensions of human life: longevity, knowledge and a respectable level of life. The first refers to survival, to the vulnerability to death at a relatively young age, since this represents the percentage of people that are estimated will not live past 40. The second lack or privation alludes to the exclusion from the world of reading and writing, and reflects the percentage of illiterate adult. The third privation is related to a respectable life in terms of general economic provision and is represented by two more indicators: the percentage of people without access to drinkable water and the percentage of children under the age of 5 moderately or severely underweight.

Due to the lack of recent reliable data, the last annual report from the United Nations Development Program [PNUD in Spanish] omitted the last three indications.

level), between 10% and 30% (intermediate level), between 30.1% and 50% (unfavorable level) and more than 50% (very unfavorable)”.

LEVEL OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The level of development⁴ (see Lizcano in footnotes) can be established based on certain criteria such as the HDI (Human Development Index or IDH in Spanish) that takes into account fundamental aspects of human development: *educational level* and *a respectable or adequate level of life*, measured by GNP per capita.⁵

According to these ranges, the 35 independent American states are divided as follows: In the very high level, Canada and the United States. Those with a high HDI are three in the Caribbean (Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, and Saint Christopher and Nevis), one in Central America (Costa Rica), and three in the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile and Uruguay). Twenty countries have middle or intermediate HDI levels: Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, Panama, Antigua and Barbuda, Cuba, Granada, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago, and others in South America: Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela. In next to last place are four of the least favored countries in Ibero-America: Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Bolivia. Lastly, the lowest HDI level is found in Haiti.

We can make some conclusions, according to Lizcano⁶ on what was mentioned above regarding the levels of poverty and the level of development:

America is a continent of great contrasts, and they are manifested diachronically as well as synchronically. In actuality, these extreme realities live together in a world setting. Some of these countries are among some of the most developed in the world, and one of them, Haiti, is one of the poorest. Although it is also certain, as I have had the opportunity to sustain earlier, in respect to Latin America (Lizcano Fernández, 2000: 30-34), that the continent as a whole has an

⁴The level of socioeconomic development was established principally on the human development index, a combined index that evaluates the “advances measured in a country in the three basic aspects of human development”: longevity, measured on life expectancy, educational level, measured on the literacy rate among adults and the combination of net rates of enrollment in elementary through high school, and the level of an adequate life measured by GNP per capita (PNUD, 2001a). This last indicator is defined by “GNP per capita of a country converted to dollars on the base of parity of buying power of the currency of this country” (PNUD, 2000:280). Besides the HDI two other indicators are the infant mortality rate and the “traditional” GNP per capita (calculated in accord with the exchange rate of the dollar in every country, so that it ignores the differences in buying power that U.S. currency has in the different countries), which was only considered if there were not reliable numbers for the GNP mentioned earlier.

In this book, the HDI equal or superior to 0.900 is considered very high; between 0.800 and 0.899 as high; 0.700 and 0.799 as middle; 0.500 to 0.699 as low and anything lower than 0.500 as very low. If you compare this classification of independent American states with that of last year (Lizcano, 2001), there are some recent changes, not of great magnitude, but indicative of certain tendencies. Dominica, Saint Christopher and Nevis, Costa Rica and El Salvador moved up one level, but at the same time, Antigua and Barbuda fell one level. In the high level, probably Greenland, Bermudas, Anguila, Netherlands Antilles, Guadalupe, Turcos and Caicos, British and American Virgin Islands, Martinique, Montserrat and Puerto Rico. In the middle level, French Guyana.

⁵ Ibid, 214.

⁶ Ibid, 205-226.

intermediate position in the world setting in regard to socio-economic development: worse than that of Europe but better than that of Asia and Africa. Taking into account these disparities is fundamental to elaborate a detailed poverty and development map of America, which is indispensable to reach a precise comprehension of these issues that with frequency, has been seen in an excessively general and homogenous manner.

HOW THE CHURCH IS SITUATED IN ITS CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REALITY

The Church does not know itself outside of these social changes; it participates in and with them, for good or for bad; for a good or bad testimony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And, this is the way it has been throughout history, for at least the last 500 years. The Church is not separated from the political, economic and social changes that take place in our world. Actually, on the contrary, because it is inserted within them, actively or passively participating; helping political, economic or social strategies with its active participation or the lack of it. I say, "lack of it" (or, the lack of participation) because "neutrality" or passivity is nothing more than a form of helping unjust and indignant systems maintained by dominant or oppressive groups or ideologies. There is no neutrality for the Church that seeks to be relevant to a world that is within the economic, political and social reality in which it is immersed, knowing that it has the task to proclaim the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with faithfulness and integrity.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this last part I want to contribute some reflections regarding some of the data from Wilfredo Canales's paper that in my opinion seem to be very significant. "Retreat" is how Wilfredo Canales expresses the common mistake of the contemporary church. This retreat is synonymous to "escapism" and running away. The church can not continue this course any longer. For a change, we need as a church within our reality, this change that begins with the transformation of the individual, and then the family, and later, wider levels of our society (in the political and the economic).

"The pastoral" Wilfredo expresses as: "We need to take the pulse of worship, of communion, of the teaching, the proclamation and service, as vital functions of the church in the framework of a heritage and a context that can not be taken lightly." But, I would like to stress here, this framework is one of "a Wesley heritage and in a context of a contemporary reality". Both have to be part of a creative and critical dialogue at the same time.

"The present hour is marked by crisis...the present is an hour of hope." With this phrase Wilfredo Canales ends his paper. And this is, what we can not forget at the start and end of this the First Theological Conference, as we go home. We must place ourselves in a dialogue and a land of hope in "an hour of hope". It isn't our good proposals that move us but the God of "all hope." If we leave here with the idea in our minds that things will continue being the same then there is no hope and our labor has been in vain. I hope that the main motor that moves us today is not this Theological Conference but the God of all hope that always moves us and moves us against all hopelessness. And let us remember that, our prayer should be this: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth in to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1:3).

The church must constitute itself in a community with values and alternative social relations, and even more, it must walk transformed by the power of the Spirit in an alternative society against the “Empire” of the governing world order that is a globalizing monstrous neo-liberalism that is destroying almost all of Ibero-America. We need to remember the words of Jesus to John, “They are not of the world (empire), even as I am not of it (the empire) (author’s paraphrase of John 17:16).

It was “this empire or world” that brought Jesus to the cross, that had converted into his archenemy, but his crucifixion converted his disciples in a source of inspiration to become a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17) or a community of salvation, created by God, becoming a new community of an alternative life.

The Church of the Nazarene needs to be conscience of its place in Ibero-America within its economic, social and political context; assume its function which I believe should be a prophetic function and finally become a community that offers an alternative life that is reflected in its relations, whether they be interdependent, interdenominational, or transdenominational, promoter of the transformations of the Gospel on an economic, social and political basis, as much as on the personal level as on the community and social levels.