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THE PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF JOHN CALVIN AN OVERVIEW, FROM THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT*

A TEOLOGIA PÚBLICA DE JOÃO CALVINO. UMA VISÃO PANORÂMICA BASEADA NO CONTEXTO BRASILEIRO

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ABSTRACT

It was in 1974 when the expression “Public Theology” was first used, by American scholar Martin E. Marty. Since then it has been used more and more. There is a great interest in Public Theology in the world today. The goal of Public Theology is to think about different public issues from a theological perspective. This article intends to present John Calvin’s theology as a public theology as such. Calvin wrote about different aspects of social ethics and politics. Therefore, the aim of this article is to present Calvin’s thought as a kind of public theology *avant la lettre*. The vantage point of this article is the Brazilian context.

KEYWORDS

Public theology; Martin E. Marty; Calvin studies; Social ethics; Brazilian context.

RESUMO

Em 1974, a expressão “teologia pública” foi usada, pela primeira vez, pelo erudito americano Martin E. Marty. Desde então, tem sido usada cada vez mais. Em todo o mundo, há atualmente um grande interesse nesse tipo de teologia cujo alvo é pensar a respeito de diferentes questões públicas com base em uma perspectiva teológica. O presente artigo tem a intenção de apresentar a teologia de João Calvino como uma teologia pública, já que ele escreveu sobre diferentes aspectos de política e de ética social. Portanto, o objetivo é apresentar, com base no contexto do Brasil, o pensamento de Calvino como uma espécie de teologia pública *avant la lettre*.

Teologia pública; Martin E. Marty; Estudos em João Calvino; Ética social; Contexto brasileiro.

1. A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY

To begin with, it is necessary to present a very important question, albeit it is a too obvious one: what is public theology? In order to answer this question I think it is necessary first to remember that for centuries theology has been seen as a theoretical discourse, a reflection on metaphysical matters. The use of philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* helped to reinforce this view of theology¹. For common people, philosophy and theology are like quite strange siblings, whose minds are up there in the clouds, and know nothing about daily life. Theologians (and philosophers) themselves many times have been seen as weird people concerned only with heavenly or stratospherical matters, not with down-to-earth subjects. Discussions on subjects like the *ordo salutis* or the origin of the soul helped to create such a view of theology. Even Practical Theology – as the title itself of this particular field of theological research indicates, intends to be “practical” and not so much theoretical – Practical Theology by and large has a focus only in ecclesiastical matters. It is a kind of theology *interna corporis* of the Christian church². The point here is: even Practical Theology has been not too much concerned about public matters.

To be fair, one has to admit these criticisms are harsh. Theology as a whole should not be futile or sterile discussion

¹ As an example one can remember the complex terms borrowed from Greek philosophy that were used to formulate the classic Chalcedonian Christology.

² It is very well known the joke that tells about the young seminary student who asked to his teacher: “What is Practical Theology?”. The teacher answered him: “It is practically (viz., almost) theology”. Needless to say this joke is very silly – if theology is not practical, it is not theology at all, but only a theoretical reflection, perhaps a kind of philosophy of religion.

and theologians should not be the modern anchorites, who transformed the offices of the universities where they teach in their ivory towers, living completely far off common life and common people³.

What is called today “Public Theology” appeared as a reaction to the described way to do theology. After all, theology has to do with life, in all its complexity, and not only with “spiritual” matters⁴. Theology can be understood as a reflection on life from the data of the Scriptures. Public Theology is concerned with the relevance – as a matter of fact, the public relevance – of Christian faith, of Christian beliefs and doctrines. It was in 1974 when the expression “Public Theology” was first used, by American scholar Martin E. Marty, from the University of Chicago. Since then the term has been used more and more. There is a great interest in Public Theology in the world today⁵. The goal of Public Theology, as indicated by its title itself, is to think about different public issues from a Christian theological perspective. Public theology is no more theology for the sake of the church (as it used to be for centuries) but theology for the sake of the world. For instance: the Christian doctrine of creation has implications for the whole of humankind, and not only for Christian believers. Another

³ In the modernity some theologians (from late nineteenth century onwards) have understood theology as a hard science. However, if we understand theology as a kind of art, it is wise to remember what is said in a beautiful Brazilian folk song – “Nos bailes da vida” (“Balls in the life”) which says: “every artist must go where the people are”. In the same way, every theologian must go where the people are.

⁴ In Brazilian Evangelical churches at least it is very strong an understanding of life in terms of a dichotomy – what is considered “spiritual” is good, what is considered “material” is bad and does not deserve attention or too much consideration.

⁵ See for instance the academic work done by the Centre for Public Theology (<http://publictheology.org>), a research initiative located in the Faculty of Theology at Huron University College, at the University of Western Ontario (Canada), or the Center for Public Theology (<http://www.centerforpublictheology.org>) in the USA. Brill, the prestigious Dutch academic publishing house publishes the International Journal of Public Theology (<http://www.brill.nl/ijpt>). The Global Network for Public Theology (<http://www.ctinquiry.org/gnpt/index.htm>), founded in 2007, whose headquarter is the Public and Contextual Theology Strategic Research Centre, Charles Sturt University, Australia, is “an academic research partnership that promotes theological contributions on public issues, especially those issues affecting the poor, the marginalized and the environment in a global (global-local) context”. The GNPT has at the moment twenty four participating research institutions: four in Africa, four in Asia, four in Oceania, one in Brazil, one in the United States and ten in Europe.

example: Christian ethics has serious implications for economy and politics and not only for the individual behavior of the Christians⁶.

By and large it can be said that there are two obstacles in the way of thinking Christian theology as “Public” (in Brazil at least⁷), which must be overcome. These obstacles are⁸:

1. In classical evangelical theology, a super emphasis in the question of personal salvation. “Individual soteriology” (as traditional conservative systematic theology calls it) has been the very center of attention of Christian life. There has been little concern with “general soteriology”. In the circles that embraced this particular type of theology, the main concern is the acquisition of salvation of the soul, and the mission of the Church has been seen as “winning of souls”. According to this perspective, it is not necessary to worry about public questions.

2. In recent neopentecostal theology (the “wealth and health gospel”), propagated through mass media, the only concern is the acquisition of riches and affluence. In Latin America (including Brazil and also the Spanish speaking countries of that area) it is possible to go to churches and to watch TV and radio programs from Sunday to Sunday in which this emphasis is preached. Where there is such a comprehension of Christian life, where the gospel is reinvented and transformed in a magical panacea to solve all problems of life, where there is a strong individualistic emphasis, there is no room for thinking about public questions or for a theology of citizenship.

⁶ In Brazil there is a great emphasis in what is called micro ethics (the ethics of the individual). Unfortunately, for the time being, macro ethics has not received so much attention of Christian theologians and church leaders in the country.

⁷ For the time being there is no history of the concept of public theology in Portuguese. As far as I know, the very only historical description of public theology in Portuguese is von Sinner (2007, p. 43-67). For a history of this concept see, inter alia, Breitenberg (2003, p. 55-96). For an understanding of public theology as such, see Moltmann (1999, passim).

⁸ It cannot be overlooked that this paper reflects the Brazilian context. The *Sitz im Leben* represented here is the not the one of the world of North Atlantic (USA and Canada, British Isles and Continental Europe). Rather, it is the existential, political, social and economical context of Latin America, a true representative of the two thirds world.

Public theology has the capacity of oxygenate theological reflection in Brazil and in Latin America⁹. And, as it will be defended further, the theology of John Calvin, specially his thought on political and socio-economic matters, might well be understood as a public theology.

2. THE RECEPTION OF THE THEOLOGY OF JOHN CALVIN IN BRAZIL

How the theology of John Calvin has been received in Brazil? The question presupposes that Calvin's theological thought arrived somehow in the country. It might seem too obvious, but many authors, speaking about the world influence of John Calvin, make no reference to Brazil. According to these authors, it is as if never there was any of Calvin's thought or calvinian influence in Brazil¹⁰. See for instance Reid (1990, *passim*). Reid's "western world" does not include Brazil¹¹. In the same way in R. Ward Holder's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (2004, p. 245-273), about Calvin's heritage in the world, there is no reference to Brazil and/or to Latin America¹².

Contra this strange silence it is necessary to state that there has been and there is some influence of John Calvin's theological thought in Brazil. For instance: as early as 1555 the *Confessio Fluminensis* was written in Rio de Janeiro – it was the very first Reformed Confession written outside Europe. Nevertheless, this influence is limited. There are six Presbyterian

⁹ There are, for the moment, very few texts in Brazil concerning public theology. One of the few is von Sinner (2007, p. 43-67).

¹⁰ In this text the word "calvinist" is used in order to make reference to the followers of John Calvin, and "calvinian" to make reference to his thought.

¹¹ In Reid's book there are chapters about Calvinism and Calvin's influence since sixteenth century in Switzerland, France, the Low Countries, Germany, Hungary, United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and South Africa, but not even a single word about Latin America and/or Brazil.

¹² Holder's chapter is absolutely very good. He did very extensive research, including even the influence of John Calvin in Equatorial Africa. Holder is the very only one author who ever included this particular area of the world in a research about the worldwide influence of John Calvin. However, it is strange to note that there is no reference to the Americas south of Rio Grande.

denominations in the country: the Presbyterian Church of Brazil (PCB) is the largest and oldest. It was initiated by an American missionary enterprise which started exactly 150 years ago, with the coming to the country of the Rev. Ashbel Green Simonton. The other Presbyterian denominations in Brazil are dissidences of the PCB and, in some cases, splits of earlier splits¹³. All these denominations, in greater or lesser degree, embrace, foster and claim a Calvinist and Calvinian influence. The first translation of the Institutes in Portuguese appeared only in 1985 (Books I and II; Books III and IV were launched four years later). It was a very learned version – a translation from the Latin 1559 edition, with a comparison to versions in English (John Allen, 7th edition, 1936, and Ford Lewis Battles, 1961), Spanish (Cipriano de Valera, 1967), German (Karl Muller, 1928) and French (Pierre Marcel and Jean Cadier, 1955). The worst problem with this Brazilian version was the final result itself: the translator wrote in so erudite and difficult a Portuguese that it was very hard to read¹⁴. Therefore, this version didn't become so popular among Brazilian readers. Trying to solve this problem, and in an endeavor to make Calvin known to the Brazilian heirs of the Reformed movement, Cultura Cristã (“Christian Culture”) the official publishing house of the PCB launched in 2006 another version – this one was translated from the French edition of 1541. This edition is commented by Dr. Hermisten Maia Pereira da Costa, one of the Calvin scholars in Brazil. But recently something very interesting in the history of the *magnum opus* of Calvin in Portuguese: the publishing house of São Paulo State University launched a version of the Institutes, a translation from the Latin 1559 edition. The interesting point here is the fact this effort was done by a “secular” publishing house, not a denominational one, as it always was until then. As far as this point is concerned, it must be said this translation of the Institutes by a state publishing house was not the very first time in Brazil that Calvin was published

¹³ These churches are: Independent Presbyterian Church, Conservative Presbyterian Church, Fundamentalist Presbyterian Church, Charismatic Presbyterian Church and United Presbyterian Church.

¹⁴ As early as in 1985, when volumes I and II of this version were launched (volumes III and IV were launched four years later) there was a joke, saying that version should be translated from Portuguese to Portuguese...

by a non-religious publisher. In fact, in 1995 Martins Fontes, a big Brazilian academic publishing house, published a series of collected writings, organized by Harro Höpfl of Martin Luther and John Calvin on secular authority¹⁵. The launching of these two Calvin's books is a very strong evidence that Calvin has interest not only for theologians in Brazil, but for scholars in general.

In 1988 the General Assembly (“Supremo Concílio”) of the PCB took a decision that all the theological seminaries of the denomination would include a course on the Institutes. However, this decision was never implemented. If one take the PCB as an example of an evangelical denomination in the Calvinistic tradition, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that in its theological education, much more attention has been given to systematic theology than to Calvin studies¹⁶. As it has been given through the twentieth century (and the beginning of twentieth first century) the theological education of the PCB is a course with major in systematic theology, with two traditional systematic theologies being the textbooks: Strong (1954) and after that Berkhof (1990). Brazilian seminary students had to read Strong in English, and a Spanish edition of Berkhof, and later on, a Portuguese version of this book which became very influential. Traditional Reformed systematic theologies like these ones are, without a shadow of doubt, very good. However, studying early 20th century U. S., conservative systematic theology is not exactly the same as studying Calvin himself. Just one example: if one takes the theme of prayer, it is interesting to observe that it is completely absent in Berkhof, and receives little attention in Strong (Strong 1954, p. 433-438) talks about prayer in his chapter about the doctrine of providence). However, prayer is quite an important subject in Calvin's theological thought. He dedicates a whole chapter of the Institutes to the subject of prayer (III, XX, p. 314-383). With such a super emphasis in systematic theology, (viz., on doctrine as formulated in a later period) Calvin's theology might continue as an unknown to many Brazilian Presbyterians.

¹⁵ This book is the Brazilian version of a volume of Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought.

¹⁶ For a more detailed account of the history of theological education in the PCB, as far as the role of Calvin studies is concerned, see Caldas Filho (2002, p. 49-59).

As far as other Calvin's texts are concerned: there are some Calvin Bible commentaries that were translated into Portuguese¹⁷. This is a wonderful work, the almost heroic individual initiative a pastor, full of desire that his fellow Brazilian colleagues and church members could read Calvin in their mother tongue. However, these are second-hand translations, because the commentaries were translated not from the original French or Latin, but from English translations. Notwithstanding, they have received considerable attention from pastors, seminary students and even lay people in several Brazilian evangelical churches.

A word must be said about texts related at any extent to Calvin's theology. Some of these texts are translations (e.g., HALSEMA, 1968; BIELER, 1970; KLOOSTER, 1992; DOUGLASS, 1995); some are academic works of nationals (e.g., LESSA, 1934¹⁸, FERREIRA, 1988¹⁹; FERREIRA, 1985²⁰; MATEUS, REILY; BERG, 1991; LOPES, s. d.; VIEIRA, 2008) some are Master's Degree Thesis and a few doctoral dissertations in Theology and/or Religious Studies, defended at some accredited Brazilian universities (SILVESTRE, 2001; MORAIS, 2002; SOUZA FILHO, 2004; WING, 2005; GONÇALVES, 2006; MÓDOLO, 2006; SOUZA, 2006; AZEVEDO, 2007; BATISTA, 2007; RUPPEL JUNIOR, 2007; SIFOLELI, 2007; SILVA, 2007; ALMEIDA, 2008; ANDRADE, 2008). Recently a very interesting and innovative book about Calvin was published, by a Brazilian Presbyterian scholar – it is a kind of “Calvin Dictionary”, and it is pretty good as an introduction to Calvin studies (COSTA, 2006).

In sum: the theology of John Calvin is undoubtedly present in Brazil. However, it is practically a contradiction. Even there are a quite good number of works about Calvin, written by Brazilians and some translations, and some of Calvin himself works translated into Portuguese, and academic as

¹⁷ The complete relation of Calvin's Bible commentaries in Portuguese is: Pastoral Epistles, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Hebrews, Daniel 1-6, Ephesians, Galatians, Psalms 1 (1:30), Psalms 2 (31;68) and Romans.

¹⁸ This one was the very first biography of Calvin ever written by a Brazilian. It is still today a good source for studying Calvin's life.

¹⁹ This is a Th. M. thesis, defended at Union Theological Seminary, Virginia, that was published as a book by the Presbitério de Pernambuco (Presbytery of Pernambuco), Recife, Brazil.

²⁰ This Ferreira and the other one are namesakes. They are not relative to each other.

well works as dissertations and thesis, it is possible to state that, even though the aforementioned works by and about Calvin in Portuguese, his theological thought is not so well known to Brazilian academy and to the people in the churches. For many people Calvin is still known by his famous stereotypes, viz., the man who talked about only one subject – that is, the doctrine of predestination – and he is seen as a pure rational theologian, someone with a huge brain but no heart, more a tadpole than a true man, a kind of theological Mr. Spock²¹. He is also remembered and sometimes cited in history textbooks in the country as the cruel dictator of Geneva, the man who ordered Servetus to be burned at a stake, and was completely opposed to any kind of leisure. Such a vision of Calvin is obviously one-sided and biased. Even though it is not correct to practice a “Calvinolatry” (as some pastors or members of churches within the Reformed tradition do in Brazil) at the same time it is not correct as well to practice a “Calvinophobia” (as many scholars do). This difficulty in understanding Calvin, and at the same time, this big ignorance about who Calvin was and what was really his theological thought lead us to the conclusion that his theology still needs to be truly known in the country. Many very important themes in Calvin’s theology are still virtually unknown to many ecclesiastical leaders, church members and even to some scholars. Among these it is possible to quote as examples Calvin’s doctrine of the sacraments, Calvin’s understanding of ministries in the church, Calvin’s doctrine of prayer, to name only a few. Therefore, Calvin studies is a field of academic research which still needs to grow very much in Brazil.

3. THE PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF JOHN CALVIN IN THE BRAZILIAN CONTEXT

The second aim of this presentation is to present the theology of John Calvin, specially his thought on political and

²¹ The reference is to the well known character of Star Trek, the TV science fiction series. Mr. Spock is an alien (a native of planet Vulcan), who never expresses his emotions or feelings.

socio-economic matters as a public theology *avant la lettre*. If this hypothesis is confirmed it is a point of high ingenuity of John Calvin's theology.

I would like to start this point quoting Andre Bieler (1990, p. 1), in the beginning of his *O pensamento econômico e social de Calvino (La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin)* when he said "the Calvinist reform was a reform that was integral to society". In fact, the branch of the Protestant Reformation that was later called "Calvinist Reformation" was characterized by a concern not only with religious or "spiritual" matters, but also with down-to-earth subjects. That is, as far as I understand it, the very essence (*das Wesen*) of public theology. It can be said that Calvin innovates when he thinks theologically about political, economical and social matters. This particular emphasis of his theological construction overcomes a platonic division between spiritual and material elements in Christian life. This point must urgently be apprehended by the vast majority of evangelical churches in Brazil, including many Presbyterian ones, which intend to carry on Calvin's theological legacy.

There is a plethora of fine academic research covering several aspects of Calvin's theology which can be understood are public theology *in nuce*. Calvin never understood the role of the church as one of only taking care of "souls". See for instance, Calvin's sensibility to the public problem of poor people²². Preaching on 1 Timothy (3:8-10), Calvin once declared:

Do we want to show that there is reformation among us? We must begin at this point, that is, there must be pastor who bear purely the doctrine of salvation, and then deacons who have the care of the poor (Calvin apud Hall, 2008, p. 18)²³.

²² For details concerning Calvin's sensibility to the poor see, inter alia, Matos (1997, p. 5-24) and Olson (1989, 2004).

²³ Latin American Theology of Liberation in the last quarter of the late twentieth century produced a great stimulus to biblical theology, stressing the importance of care for the poor in the Bible. Centuries before these Latin American theologians, Calvin demonstrated to have such a sensibility for the poor. This statement does not imply or suggest that Calvin was a liberation theologian. However, this public dimension of Calvin's theology is by and large ignored by many Calvinists in Brazil. The obvious question that arises from the observation of that point is: why?

Calvin also dealt a lot with political issues. All those familiar with Calvin's writings will remember at once of the last chapter of Book IV of the Institutes, which is about civil government. According to William R. Stevenson Jr. (2004, p. 173) there are four questions that work as guidelines for understanding of Calvin's political thought. These questions are:

1. What is the source and justification for civil government among human beings?
2. What is the purpose and proper role of civil government?
3. How ought civil government accomplish its rightful aims?
4. Under what circumstances, if any, might Christians under government properly disobey or resist that government?

When one starts to consider this political theology developed by Calvin almost five centuries ago, it is easy to reach the conclusion that there is a rich treasure in this political (perhaps it would be possible to call it "Theo-political") thought yet to be discovered by Brazilian so-called Calvinists. See for example the commentary of Psalm (94:5-6), when Calvin criticizes civil leaders who don't give attention to the poor and dispossessed: "to treat such [viz., the poor] with cruelty argues a singular degree of impiety and contempt of divine authority". These wise words of Calvin must be heard not only by the Brazilian authorities, but by political authorities and leaders from all over the world, specially in a time of a worldwide economic crisis, when it is no more possible to think only in terms of local, but always also in terms of global – it is not by chance the curious word *glocal* (the blend of "global" and "local") was created.

Another intriguing aspect of Calvin's public theology is his sensibility to ecological matters. He lived of course in a time quite different from ours, when the world didn't face severe ecological problems as it faces nowadays. Nevertheless Calvin points to a sensibility to the earth itself. It is clear when he comments about the Sabbatical Year (BIELER, 1990, p. 464). The implications of this sensibility of Calvin to such questions that are very important today are immense. It is

possible to use Calvin's social ethics to approach, for instance, economic matters in a worldwide perspective (e.g., the question of debts of poor undeveloped countries to wealthy western nations) and even to questions related to environment.

Anyway, as Professor Stevenson Jr. (2004, p. 186) reminds us, "civil government does have distinct responsibilities, and the church should continually call temporal rulers to those God-ordained duties". Christians within the Calvinian tradition should be in the vanguard in raising their prophetic voices against all forms of injustice, in Brazil and wherever in this world²⁴. They must learn that this is also part of the mission of the church, and not only "soul winning" and church planting, as almost all the Evangelical churches in Brazil understand their responsibility as churches.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As stated in the beginning of this text, this is not a completed, an already done research. Rather, this research is still in its preliminary stages. However, it is sufficient to reach at least three inconclusive conclusions, which are:

1. It is undeniable that there is an influence of Calvin's theology in Brazil. Nevertheless, there is still a big open field for the growth of this particular and so important area of academic investigation.
2. The tendency of Calvin scholarship in Brazil is to do a "traditional" approach to Calvin, an approach which gives more attention to subjects such as soteriology and ecclesiology – which are very important of course – but not so much importance to the social, political and economical aspects of Calvin's theology.

²⁴ A remarkable approach to such a theme within the Reformed calvinian tradition is Wolterstorff (1983). See also De Gruchy (1991, p. XII), another very good book that defends "Reformed theology is best understood as a liberating theology that is catholic in its substance, evangelical in principle, and socially engaged and prophetic in its witness". Coincidence or not, these works has not yet been translated into Portuguese.

3. The (re)discovery of the public aspects of Calvin's theology has the power to oxygenate the academic research in Calvin studies, not only in Brazil, but all over the world.

May this brief article be at least the first step in this academic and spiritual journey.

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