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Freire's reading to understand important aspects in South African context of change

Por Darlei de Paula

Doutor em Teologia (EST)

Bolsista CAPES

darleidepaula@gmail.com

Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate that Freire's pedagogy reading is useful way to help Brazilian theology students to understand better the South African change context. So we show common features that can be identified as in South African context as in Brazilian Freire's Pedagogy as tool to access the post-apartheid change.

Keywords:

Public Theology. South African Theology. Church and society.

Initial Issues

The article "From revolution to reconstruction" by Villa-Vicencio starts with an important issue: South Africa is living between the times. Well, such statement can make us to think that what is happening there would be a transition time from hard to better stage or vice versa. However let's face it as a good change or a great chance to a nation it is the result of post-apartheid system. Firstly we have to consider some aspects for instance as that the nation has for generations been locked in conflict and violence. So we can observe that during this time the church was living in two different realities. It contributed in both different sides that is dominant apartheid as social renew. But why can we consider this path between two poles in terms of an imperative? In other words: What does it mean revolution and reconstruction in South Africa context and how did the church developing contribution?

According to Villa-Vicencio the church had supported the *status quo*.¹ It means that even we consider it the most significant impact of religion on the dominant culture we still can understand it as a new possible way to improve the social problems faced by oppressed society. So, we think that a gap between these two points could be found and so analyzed to understand it as part of our endeavor to clarify some aspects in this text raised by questions in the first paragraph.

We can affirm in a first step that it is important to consider there was a positive aspect of contribution by the church mainly to change through human and political fields renew. Another important aspect is to attempt to understand the religious field as a plural which needs to be worked to ensure both qualitative tasks in a peaceful manner as effective to promote changes from revolution to reconstruction. But we still should

¹ VILLA-VICENCIO, Charles. From Revolution to Reconstruction: The South Africa Imperative. In: WITTE Jr., John (Org.). *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context*. Boulder: Westview, 1993. p. 249-266.

note that a critical scholarship is required for such task to be organized.

For a new beginning it is necessary to see that a moment in time has dawned as Villa-Vicencio wrote: *a Kairos*. We are in the proper time which presents that a new social vision is required for this moment. It's biblical inspiration. In South Africa it involves the birth of a new nation. A new soul, a new spirit for sustaining to introduce new life that is not part of the dying social order was built. Taking Paul Lehmann's words: "one generation tells another how the future shapes the present out of the past!"²

So, let's understand that: first, we need start signaling what is the important role of church in the new incoming stage. Second, we ought to try underlining discussion on the starting process. In this way, we can affirm it possibly as a seed. It contributes to renew. It should be understood considering as a sense much more than a set of rules. In this scenery emerges a valuable and embryonic question: Is there a specific, even a unique, contribution which the church can make to this process of change? I think we found here an important issue that can convert into a task for the church. Therefore, it can not deny its important efforts to produce a new cultural reconstruction having a liberating side as focus.

Considering the gospel as spine of the vital body of the church we also have to find some crucial points which spread elements that can provide helping benefits to the social order. One of them is hope we can say that it is mainly for the poor. We need to mention here they were oppressed for several generations that previously or better say in accurate form, last decades for the XX century. They were marginalized having no chance for expressing themselves At the end of apartheid the international media tried to show the disguised scenery approaching how exploited the poor black people were by the sick divided structure. In fact, to finish with apartheid was not enough to relieve

the oppressed people. What they need was to go beyond. It is a continue process of liberating. Let's remember they had the damage caused by minority of white people which was kept in privileged situation. So, we agree with this change and we can state it is an ethical issue that this nation can not afford closing its eyes on this emergent situation.

Now, the new process indeed requires a participation of the excluded people. They need to contribute to mould into free society. In another words: They need to redraw new social scene. As Paulo Freire teaches in his "*Pedagogy of Autonomy*", men and women need to be builders since their reality is part of history as agent and in "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" we found: "It must generate another act of freedom. Only by abolishing the situation of oppression is it possible to restore the love which that situation made impossible."³ And love, we can understand as part of Jesus' preaching in the Gospel, so a crucial part about church participation in the plan of salvation.

Different questions can be raised to clarify the true role of the church. First, whether is it actually looking into them? Second, how was it beyond its walls? We believe that if we look with attention to these two questions, or considering its meaning as real fact we can understand they have clear, decisive and positive task into new South African process. So they need to forget the pale and unsuccessful pale efforts spent a not so long time before.

Catharsis is an action, as proposed by the author that helps us to discover sense about what happened. It clears doubt as: Is the church ready to rediscover, embrace and proclaim liberating traditions of their respective heritage? In such case religion can promote a form to touch people feelings making them to show elements of their violated past. Definitely the nation needs to show and transform what they had been living in suffering history for generations. One important issue is to discover weak points lived in their history. No social catharsis is possible if they do not consider the most important element in this case: repentance. We can understand better it

² LEHMANN *apud* VILLA-VICENCIO, Charles. From Revolution to Reconstruction: The South Africa Imperative. In: WITTE Jr., John (Org.). *Christianity and Democracy in Global Context*. Boulder: Westview, 1993. p. 249-266.

³ FREIRE, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970. p. 78.

considering some important elements in the next paragraphs

Reading the historical facts which marked South African society it is possible to translate into religious or better say, biblical language as the period of Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. Anything is more harmful to society than apartheid. Fragile society suffered systematic exploitation by the strong one. Suddenly an imposed law had made black people to take a cute fairytale transforming into a trash movie. Let's remember that any kind of repentance must begin with a call to turn away from magic. It is not possible to shift any society from exploitation to just.

The poor must be empowered to have the right for claim and settle restoring human dignity. As Freire wrote in his *"Pedagogy of Oppressed"*, "the authentic revolutionary, the object of action is the reality to be transformed by them together with other human being – not other human beings themselves."⁴ And it is the promotion church needs to proclaim picking up from the holy words written in the Gospel.

Justice, renewal and democracy

Justice, renewal and democracy are important concepts to think which can be permeated through South African political debate. It contributes to raise the following question: "Why not repentance?" Such a question drives us to consider that religious repentance is a form to ask for apology by the exploiters whose damage effects of apartheid till now were costing a high price in human blood leaving generations of victims. The submissive mind of the oppressed must be liberated. They can be free by this illustrated social therapeutic resource. We named, or identified it as catharsis. But in another words, which elements are catharsis involving?

Trying to solve it let's start analyzing repentance. It involves more than political pragmatism and a new vocabulary; it evokes to a real great spirit to become possible an actual birth of nation considering that the past was wrong. So we can quote the author's word: "Catharsis or inner

cleansing, purification and indeed restitution are an inherent part of the conversion process".⁵ Only this way can actually make us to agree with this sense, it allows explaining that we are regarding to this idea of revolution to reconstruction as an issue to turn possible this process. Now church needs to plan a help to promote the people. It needs to eliminate neglected past. Such people promotion needs to be based on the leading. Ancient regime must die so it makes possible new one can be born "The seeds that fell in good soil stand for those who hear the message and retain it in a good and obedient heart, and they persist until they bear fruit."⁶

The right way of the church place is to give sense preaching that the cause of the poor and deprived of justice are the cause of Christianity and so it should be required by God's coming kingdom. Note that the Hebrew prophets shift nation to turn away from social exploitation. This is anticipation of the reign of God. It is a challenge for nowadays we found in the gospel: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel."⁷ Repentance is a religious prelude to rebirth and to renew, that's the truth we can keep in mind passing by the heart.

Repentance implies to understand correctly an actually imperative as commitment to retribute. It reconstructs and even so implies in sociopolitical and economic fields. We can begin trying to determine three comments that must suffice: First, learning to say theological "yes". It is to recognize the importance of theological weapon warfare considering that this tool is not merely to deny the other side but to contribute with the church to say no to a possible future violation of human being. To reject apartheid is not enough because the phases of history oblige us to inquire a new sense for a social renovation.

Religious belief is not neutral. It makes us to have options for any political or economical sets. We realize that our religious values can hit such matter concretely. It can be observed by citizens when we have social implications. All it is according

⁵ VILLA-VICENCIO, 1993, p. 254.

⁶ Mark 4.20. *Good News Bible*, New York: American Bible Society, 1980.

⁷ Mark 1.15.

⁴ FREIRE, 1970, p. 80.

to a search in sense of promoting life. We need consider that prophetic words and effective actions used to be by the Hebrew prophets, as well as by John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth saying yes to a new social order.

This dialogue which is radically necessary to revolution corresponds to another radical need: that of men as beings who cannot be truly human apart from communication, for they are essentially communicative creatures. To impede communication is to reduce men to the status of things – and this is a job for oppressors, not for revolutionaries. Let me emphasize that my defense of the praxis implies no dichotomy by which this praxis could be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action. Action and reflection occur simultaneously.⁸

We need to rediscover which values exist to build a basis for a new nation. Certain theopolitical insights must be observed to prove that our yes is unequivocal. They can be summarized by some aspects as follows:

- a) a political system which protects human dignity;
- b) we are one human race and so one family of God;
- c) say yes for full democracy considering a just socio-political order;
- d) say yes to economic structures which show a preference for provision of the basic necessities of life
- e) it is important to still consider the integrity of nature.

Those points above help us to be politically quite specific in sharing in the democratic struggle for a new nation. It shows that we need be concerned with public policy for welfare of people not standing only in a party section. It can lead to it but not necessarily. Let's summarize in five key words: policy, human being, democracy, self-sustainability and nature. So, these five words are background to say a theological yes.

The second point is hearing the cry of the poor. Here we can make a link with the gospel teaching and the religious option for the poor. It seems like an obligation to say yes to the crying and

specially if it comes from the suffering. This sad situation appeared during the apartheid transition or better, transforming process. In another words, the ancient regime has not been able to withstand the pressure of apartheid regime was facing.

So it is possible that the new South African government can have a strong impact in shaping a proper form of socioeconomic identity. We still can state that apartheid continues having effect in a black people whose lives were eroded by the swallowed authoritarian white behavior. We can quote Villa-Vicencio's words:

In this situation, the church, driven by its own spiritual and moral values, will be obliged to wrestle with questions concerning the restoration of land, economic reconstruction, and the freeing of the poor from the structural bonds of oppression.⁹

Above we see as an important path to the freedom of the oppressed people, the condition to have a signal from the church that is watching and giving opinion on this process. It can be hazard if misunderstood by the protagonists.

The challenge of society is to be able to choose a right form of considering the human life quality and then to be tested and weighed against values inherent to the gospel. In such way to discover what is actually an option to become better and if it is still great relief to the oppressed people and so reach down proper political and socioeconomic scenery.

Preaching good news and the challenge

According to the author the church needs to ensure about this process taking a side of the poor. It's preaching the good news and it can't afford to ignore this challenge because it involves a creation of culture and it still demands for economic redistribution. Now, let's remember the sharing passage in the Bible: "There is still one more thing you need to do. Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me".¹⁰

⁸ FREIRE, 1970, p. 122.

⁹ VILLA-VICENCIO, 1993, p. 257.

¹⁰ Luke 18.22.

Let's understand this as a remembrance we need to avoid keeping treasures of gold costing high price of life. We can translate into our present world that anyone has the power needs to see the poor as potential for developing in life. But it is possible giving opportunity to develop according to a just and hopeful way. It is important to underline of John Paul II words about capitalism and Marxism: "imperfect and in need of radical correction".¹¹ We think this encyclical sentence points to an involved role of the church in this process of liberation and grounding of social justice. According to Feinberg¹² social economic rights are important in the sense of a political and cultural manifesto which needs to be constantly held as a clear goal.

Passing by historical Christian thinkers as Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan, and Thomas Aquinas which had contributed for grounding the Theology studies we need take care in our theological stream choices avoiding to go in another way that can have a reverse effect. Talking about this possible result is to show that the poor need to get consciousness about the public right endeavor to transform society. It is because they should keep in mind that the preferential option for the poor does not imply statist paternalism but to work for liberating as a whole. It may be understood as a role society. It ought to institute arrangements whereby that person can achieve by his or her own efforts to the specific target. We can reaffirm with the Freire idea that: "(...) men's activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world."¹³

So, the church needs to test if proposals failed to guarantee the ethical, in addition, it needs to verify the access to the resources to enable people to obtain the plenty life. We can confirm that "the task of church 'living between the times' is to ensure that when political transition is complete the poor are not left, yet again, on the edges of society".¹⁴ In addition to this plead we can name the central message as hope and justice. It is a

treasure for those are oppressed. Our key words in this case are: hope and justice. Both can be find their fundaments in the Bible.

The third point is to develop a new culture that may signify a proper stage to have possible opportunities to society to fundament the basis of positive actions. What is required for example in economic field is to ensure to the poor conditions to develop into the nation. It is because a humanizing culture which is formed by areas as psychological, social, political and spiritual needs to be understood as point of view in theological issues. It needs to try to keep guarantees to the evangelical and spiritual ministry. It is not effective if it will not be provided by a practical task did beyond the limits of the religious sector, it means, we need to banish all kind of proselytism.

According to the author to understand that things can be changed means that since Mandela, Sobukwe, Helen Joseph and Joe Slovo to Steve Biko and other resistance fighters we consider to share in the formation of a new culture, it we can see in the next paragraph:

The theological contribution to cultural reconstruction is likely to come as much from this "alternative" popular religious culture as it is from dominant religious institutions- because of an emerging process within which hitherto marginalized groups are slowly being afforded the opportunity to share in the formation of a new culture.¹⁵

In other words, we need to have theologians able to identify opportunities and in fact to give sense to a religious-political culture side which was hidden until now. This search needs to emerge from hidden elements to enable a contribution to construct. Church's task can be summarized in terms like liberation, realism and praxis.

In terms of liberation we can say that it is possible to read the Bible as a textbook that is worthy to promote an overcoming of the society's malice. Getting consciousness which the action to change social and political renovation is like a therapeutic nature of religion as was written by the author. This part can make us note some aspects

¹¹ VILLA-VICENCIO, 1993, p. 258.

¹² FEINBERG *apud* VILLA-VICENCIO, 1993, p. 259.

¹³ FREIRE, 1970, p. 130.

¹⁴ VILLA-VICENCIO, 1993, p. 260.

¹⁵ VILLA-VICENCIO, 1993, p. 261.

developed by the liberation theology movement started in 70's and since then spread in Latin America and especially in Brazil, which had reflected within pedagogy process thinkers. One of them was marked by Paulo Freire's presence in works that tried to open the education team mind to the reality of the oppressed as we have quoted developing this text.

We found in Freire's writings messages as: "that the human existence can not be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words".¹⁶ In this case we can consider as words picked up from Bible because it sustains Christian values, which man may transform the world. He believed that we need to change this world as we can see in this text as central point. It means to reconstruct the African society.

But Villa-Vicencio helps us to understand his point of view considering that the primary source of renewal is a sense of eschatology or utopia as a goal towards which history is moving and so all values and vision of reality need to be weighed and so tested too. It implies to bring to the light the comprehension and alternatives to those groups as deeply victimized as the poor, women and children. Simplifying we can denominate it the hope.

Considering of theological understanding the notion of permanent revolution as an important point to sustain the new process, we still need to highlight that:

The magnitude of social, economic, and political problems inherent to the process of reconstruction in South Africa is such that if the national culture accepts and legitimates only that which emerges from the negotiation process, the quest for a new South Africa will be severely undermined.¹⁷

What we need to take care in this situation is probably to avoid to ignore the power of keeping alive the sense of revolution that lay on the "more" term. It works like an engine that keeps the activity system in full action. To build a nation involves also another not less important aspect that the realism. This realism needs to be noted as a

presence of vision's period eschatological. So we can affirm it will be a stage of justice and peace. The challenge is facing the church is how to contribute to the urgent help to get ethic in this process that is at same time both eschatological and real.

Concluding remarks

Closing our exposition we can be concerned about praxis. It needs to promote reflection in theology about the actual contribution to a struggle for social justice rather than ideological debate about options for renewal. It requires calculated commitments to transform the existing order. In seeking to affirm the transcendence of the faith the church has its role defining that the ingredient of religion in a process of South Africa will be judged on the basis of praxis. So we can state that the unique task of the church is to keep alive the spirit's revolution. This can be involved in actions that are signalized since an eschatological vision transformed into political action. It is still to show how it is important to learn and how is to proceed in a spirit of challenge that can temper, shape and redirect this situation. According to a South African sociologist Fatima Meer what is important to observe is that the revolutions bring suddenly changes that become familiar and so we think there are needs to be included the gospel. So it is still possible to keep the transcendent dimension of life in the nation's building process. Then we end this text considering that both justice and hope are elements which church should keep as contribution to develop the South African context.

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¹⁶ FREIRE, 1970, p. 130.

¹⁷ VILLA-VICENCIO, 1993, p. 263.