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Letter to a Theology Student

Paulo Freire, Brazilian philosopher of education and author of the influential Pedagogy of the Oppressed, has in recent years been exiled from Brazil and working with the World Council of Churches in Geneva as head of its Educational Division. His letter to a young theology student first appeared in the Montevideo monthly, Perspectives de Diálogo, for December, 1970. This translation was provided by LADOC, the Documentation Service of the U.S. Catholic Conference's Division for Latin America.

I was delighted to get your letter, in which you raised a series of interesting questions on the interrelationships between the process of conscientization, the liberation praxis, the Word of God and the First World and Third World. Rather than reply directly to your questions, let me discourse freely on certain ideas. And let me start from the really basic question: the liberation of man.

I imagine that one of the prime purposes of Christians ought to have in this connection is to get rid of an illusory activity, one that will embolden us to challenge the powerful of the earth. In the final analysis, the Word of God is inviting me to re-create the world, not for my brothers' domination but for their liberation. I am not really able to hear that Word, then, unless I am fired up to live it fully. Listening to the Word of God does not mean acting like empty vessels waiting to be filled with that Word. The Word of God is not some content to be poured into us as if we were mere static recipients for it. And because it saves, that Word also liberates, but men have to accept it historically. They must make themselves agents of their salvation and liberation.

For a very good reason, then, only the Third World—not in the geographic sense, but in the sense of the world that is dominated, dependent, voiceless—is able to hear the Word of God. For the First World to hear that Word, it must previously undergo an Easter. It must die as First World and be reborn as Third World. Only from the Third World too, in the sense I am giving it here, can a Utopian theology emerge, a theology of denouncing and announcing, implying prophecy and hope. A theology that serves the bourgeoisie cannot be utopian and prophetic and hopeful. On the contrary, that sort of theology would create a passive, adjusted man waiting for a better life in the hereafter. It would dichotomize the world.

But as a matter of fact, just as the Word became flesh, so the Word can be approached only through man. Theology has to take its starting point from anthropology. That is why I insist that a Utopian and
prophetic theology leads naturally to a cultural action for liberation, and hence to conscientization. Theological training should be one kind of cultural action for liberation, in which man gets rid of his ingenuous concept of God (it is a myth that alienates him) and gets a new notion of Him in which God, as a presence in history, does not in the slightest keep man from "making history"—the history of his liberation.

And so, though I am no theologian, I line up with those who do not find theology an anachronism, but recognize that it has a vital function to perform. And to fulfill that task, the theologian should take, as the starting point in his reflections, the history of man.