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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 that we Christians ought to have in this connection is to get rid of an illusory

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... o. trying to change man without touching the world he lives in. Such an attitude, which no doubt appeals to those who enjoy comfortable living conditions, would make us want to preserve the status quo, in which oppressed peoples are kept from being fully human. As a matter of fact, it is idle to talk of changing man without changing also the concrete circumstances he lives in: transforming them will transform him too—not automatically, of course, but quite certainly. There is definitely a dialectic involved in this process. If we forget it, we fall into either of two disastrous errors: subjectivism or objectivism.

So then, the more we get involved in action programs based on that illusory dream, the more we are playing the game of the power elites. Everything we do will be paternalistic. We will tend to promote assistential projects, to be "falsely generous," as Niebuhr put it in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Instead of working with men to transform the social reality that blocks them from being fully human, we will co-operate in maintaining that unjust reality by ineffectual actions that are no more helpful than aspirin pills. Obviously, the power elites will love us and praise us for doing what they want—and we will sleep on blithely, perhaps after having taken our little nip of scotch whisky.

On the other hand, if we do the opposite, if we undertake a loving action, inviting people to "tear away the veils that hide the facts" and reveal the true causes of their misery and oppression; if we help them, by conscientization, to cease seeing reality ingenuously, but to begin seeing it in a fresh and more realistic dialectic,

... the power elites will abruptly stop loving us and proclaiming our virtues. We will be damned as enemies of the Christian Western civilization.

But all this is quite obvious, and we would have to be naive indeed to expect the elites to collaborate with us in their own destruction.

The true humanization of man cannot be brought about in the interiority of our minds; it has to take place in external history. If objective reality keeps man a being humanized, then he should change that reality.

I am convinced that we as Christians have an enormous task to perform, presuming that we are capable of setting aside our idealistic myths and, in that way, sharing in the revolutionary transformation of society, instead of stubbornly denying the extremely important contribution of Karl Marx. Being a Christian does not necessarily mean being a reactionary; and in the same way, being a Marxist does not necessarily mean being a dehumanizing bureaucrat.

Neither the Christian message nor Marx's scientific thought is an invitation to sit back passively and watch oppression taking place, nor are they devilish instruments for enslaving man. Marx is not responsible for the wooden distortions of his concept of man and the world than Christ is for our cowardice. Hence the first requirement for knowing how to hear the Word of God (and not only hearing it but putting it into practice) is, in my opinion, a willingness to dedicate oneself to the liberation of man. Such a process, though, let me say it once again, demands of us a historical commitment, it requires a transforming

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 subjects, 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.

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