

## **EATWOT'S General Assembly, Philippines, 1996.**

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"That we may struggle... with dignity upheld for women and men... rejoice, all persons of goodwill". With this song we concluded EATWOT's assembly in Tagaytay City. I will sketch its background, debates, final statement, and on-going questions and tasks. My approach is not apologetical; I rather wish to contribute (together with other persons) to a critique of our work, in order to reshape theological questions and our quests.

### 1) Background.

Third World Theologies are energized by deep changes, in the local-global scenario, in the eco-human community, in ways of feeling-thinking the Ultimate. As Christians we read painful and also hopeful "signs of the times". Global injustice, and racial, cultural, sexual oppressions have grown; but we also rejoice in the pluralistic search for alternatives. Our churches face local and world challenges (perhaps an epochal mutation). We also begin to question anthropocentric absolutes, and rediscover a humble responsibility within creation. Our theology is in dialogue with renewed religions and spiritualities, in the midst of a secular modernization.

In these contexts, rich dimensions and voices have been emerging; there is a re-shaping of liberation theologies. This happens due to a wholistic option for the life of the poor, eco-theology, feminist theology, indigenous people's theologies, inter-religious theology, and other new thrusts. Maturity -in our agenda- includes critique and openness to radical questions and challenges. There is a tension -in my opinion- between some who cling to an unchanging "liberation model" and many who are patiently and creatively doing theology for a new human and cosmic reality.

The Assemblies held at the end of the century (Kenya, 92', Philippines, 96') have common threads and new colors. Both events deal with globalization and alternatives; with spirituality, and biblical and theological constructs. An accent is placed on christology. Feminist theology and the gender perspective are present. Our solidarity with the poor, and dialogue between religions, became key concerns in both Assemblies.

Moreover, EATWOT's membership is invited (by the General

Assemblies and the Executive Committee) to focus on global human realities, and on particular theological issues: methodology, women's experience of the sacred, christology (1992-1996), and on gender perspective and a theological dialogue with different religions (1996-2000). If we examine these efforts, we see that only first steps have been taken (1); deeper work and intercontinental debate is a task ahead of us. I will now underline three permanent theological concerns within EATWOT, that were discussed in the fourth General Assembly.

## 2) Debates

Third world theologies develop strong bonds among each other, certainly fill our hearts, and are genuinely spiritual. At the same time, in work done locally and in international dialogues, we have polite but serious confrontations. There is some inconsistency between what is said and done in day to day theology. May I comment major controversies present in the fourth Assembly (on the following section I review the final statement; here I only interpret some underlying tensions and discussions).

A- Different interpretations. Throughout EATWOT's history, there is a constant debate about ways of understanding human reality; some emphasize an economic-political reading, others prefer an anthropological and a spiritual reading; moreover, some rely on the Biblical judgment over this world, and others on a liberal christianity, and so on. At times continents are labeled as opting for one or another approach; this is a caricature. As a matter of fact, in each region there are many types of interpretation of the historic and cosmic reality -that become part of the theological discourse-. I see EATWOT's membership struggling to be faithful to each particular human and spiritual process, and at the same time, embracing wholistic analysis and action. These two dynamics do not easily go together.

During the fourth Assembly, Samir Amin's brilliant input underlined economic-political global factors, and mentioned a few alternatives (concrete struggle from the local to the global, regional and ecological agendas). Some responded in the plenary session (Elsa Tamez, Rita Nakashima, and others) and also regional work groups gave their inputs, demanding a pluri-dimensional study of globalization and a more clear outline of alternatives.

EATWOT members spoke passionately about racism, reality of women, the many evils of capitalism, local cultures, globalization through market symbols and the media, and other issues that must be included when we study

globalization. Regional reports brought forth many commitments. Asian delegates spoke of community, Gandhian way of struggle, liberating aspects of religion (2). Latinamericans made a critique of modernity, and spoke of solidarity, different identities and projects that contribute to alternatives, a new rationality that includes gender, racial, cultural perspectives. African delegates mentioned specific groups and their strategies, local efforts towards economic survival, faith in the power of Jesus present in human persons. US minorities questioned (as other regions did) the accent on economics; they made a critique of modernity that goes beyond it; and affirmed the construction of a new paradigm (personhood of others, recognition of particularities and our different histories, etc).

So, the regions underlined different and complementary interpretations, and voiced a common demand: we need a more specific and wholistic approach. Economics, politics, culture, gender, religions, spiritualities, and the day to day existence of the poor, are all most important factors, and these factors interact between each other, and they may contribute to a theological reconstruction.

B- Feminist theology and gender. Women's movements throughout the world and in the churches, and feminist theologies, are becoming visible within EATWOT. There are strong discussions, wounds, hopes, proposals. The General Assembly in '92 spoke of the irruption of women, who reclaim their history, have new paradigms in theology, and celebrate their spiritual resources. The Assembly in '96 begun to consider methods and insights of feminist theologies; and came up with practical resolutions.

Mary John Manazan, on behalf of EATWOT's Women's Commission, announced a program of gender dialogue to be carried out between 1996-2000. In plenary sessions, times of worship, group discussions, and informal conversations, many persons communicated frustration because in EATWOT the reality of women and feminist theology had not been taken seriously; and also communicated concrete and radical actions. In a dramatic moment, all women participants walked out of the plenary session, so that men consider theology done by EATWOT women, and later presented six concrete proposals, that were approved and included in the final statement (see next section). This process has been -in my opinion- more a discourse over the situation of women, and scarcely a needed debate over theological paradigms and ways of speaking of God. It has to deeply involve men theologians; and it has to really develop the gender perspective. Little is being done so far; however, there are some hopeful signs (3).

As Ivone Gebara stated during the General Assembly, there is talk about women, but we still have to reconstruct our language about God. In other words, EATWOT has not only to consider the reality of women, it has to dialogue and debate their theological inputs. Many of us are convinced that the perspective of gender allows both women and men to discover a new theological language. Ada Maria Isasi Diaz, Aruna Gnanadason and other EATWOT members spoke on "difference" and "diversity", as a force to change today's world, and as ways of confronting the evils of sexism and racism. It seems to me that a gender perspective will transform our theological agenda; this implies that EATWOT men interact with feminist theologies -as a first step- and then also become involved in a gender critique and reformulation of the christian tradition. The Assembly of '96 moved all of us towards, not only language about women and men, but mainly towards a theological paradigm, where the voices of women, indigenous peoples, eco-theologies, and other prophetic inputs, invite us all to a spiritual and epistemological transformation.

C- Christologies. It is most significant that this is the core theology of the '92 and '96 Assemblies, with outstanding inputs of Asian theologians: Georges Soares-Prahu, Samuel Ryan and others (4). Africans have been developing the christological images of Healer, (Proto)Ancestor, Creator, Spirit, Liberator, Life (5). Feminist theologies have a wholistic, cosmic, life-sustaining understanding of Christ, who saves humanity of all evils (including patriarchally distorted images of God). Asian theologies have insisted in reworking Christology in terms of inter-religious dialogue/action and of solidarity with the poor; this is having a deep impact in debates carried out before, during, and after the fourth Assembly.

May I comment on some of the main issues. As christian theologians take into account other religions, there is a new vision of the universal and particular (inculturated) salvation through Christ. A few see it in terms of pluralism. Most theologians find no contradiction between the faith in Crist as universal Savior and acknowledgment of God's saving presence in other religions. Another key concern is the understanding of *Basileia* in today's struggle against poverty and for a renewed human and cosmic well-being. Christ's proclamation of the Kingdom also leads us to reconsider human utopias. This happens in a particular way through resistance and action by the poor, indigenous peoples, women, local cultures, and so on (who are reconstructing alternatives). Several EATWOT members (Enrique Dussel, K.C. Abraham, and others) spoke about the crisis of discourse, the need of a communitarian epistemology and new

theological languages. Many felt frustration towards stereotypes (in other's and in our own theologies); and called upon EATWOT membership to a reformulation of our languages; in a special way, feminist theologians demanded a real theological renewal. Moreover, Teresa Okure honestly and prophetically asked about the quality of faith in Jesus Christ in our day to day lives and theologies.

I summarize our debates in this way: a productive critique of what is done in EATWOT; and, a clear demand to deepen our different interpretations and to seek common grounds, develop a gender perspective and action, and also deeply renew our theological paradigms. ¡EATWOT is not undergoing stagnation!

### 3) Final statement

A) Many voices and a new way of doing theology. It is obviously not an academic text. It weaves worship experiences (during the Assembly); in connection with an on-going and challenging theological discourse; and, it includes human options and risks. The statement has three analytic components: global factors, our theological responsibilities, and review of EATWOT's organization. The reader may be surprised that 100 participants could produce a coherent text (6). The participants came from many nations, races, cultures, churches, and had different theological accents, within a common faith commitment for a new world and humanity.

Divergent opinions and contradictions (that existed among the participants) were not underlined; one exception is the list of recommendations presented by EATWOT's women (towards which some delegates showed -in my opinion- passive tolerance). A first draft received strong criticism; but the Assembly commissioned and trusted the small drafting committee (that made the final corrections). The text manifests basic consensus, and respectful interaction between different types of theological work.

Each reader can examine the final text. Here I only make a few observations on the peculiar weaving of different elements; and later I make comments on its three sections.

For those of us who frequently work through academic material, this (and many other) EATWOT document is refreshing and inspiring. It includes testimonies on Filipino persons (who hosted the meeting) and their wisdom and spirituality. It reports on rich times of worship: African dance, Asian sharing of sacred rice and of "shakti", prayerful celebration of Mary's

Magnificat, Shibashi blessing, an inter-religious latinamerican worship with prayer to the Spirit. It also includes many human and theological risks and commitments to a renewed humanity and cosmos: struggles of liberation in all its depth, dialogue with different religions, debate on gender and faith creativity of women and of men, interaction with indigenous spiritualities and theologies, and so on. These are the contexts in which doctrinal and ethical elements are developed. All of this shows a symbolic, committed, and rational way of doing theology (it may be called a new paradigm).

B- Reality and theology. In terms of content, the first section deals with global factors, those that destroy us, and, also the counter-balancing global forces and alternatives. It is not a pessimistic reading of today's world. Rather there is a constant affirmation of a new world (this also is the title of the document). I see an accent on universal factors, and insufficient discourse on local realities where globalization is taking place (in different forms). It is most important how counter-balancing forces are spelled out: 1- relationship with Mother Earth, 2- option for the poor, 3- sustainable development, 4- macro and micro realities, 5- new rationality and symbolic action, 6- attention to poverty, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, 7- liberation-solidarity as ethical principle and as historical project. It is also noteworthy how the economic analysis by S. Amin has been expanded with other cultural, gender, and political elements.

The second section explains theological challenges that we discover in our solidarity with the marginalized and through the analysis of globalization and other phenomena. Two dynamics are presented: the human perennial quest (in the politics and cultures of humanity), and the Bible as a witness of this search for full life -there is a beautiful short summary of biblical messages. The human quest and Revelation illuminate each other; and theology is understood as a "fire that sparks at the point of this encounter". Eight challenges are sharply spelled out in the form of questions; I comment three of them. The theology implied by the perennial human quest is that of universal salvation -that does not allow reduction of God's saving love to christianity and the churches. Our Trinitarian faith has radical social imperatives in terms of community building and confrontation of modern idols. Moreover, today we rediscover gratuity and solidarity that define christian praxis.

This second part of the statement also deals with the themes of the inter-continental theological dialogues (1992-1996). 1- It urges a remaking of Christology from the standpoint of other faiths and religions, and of the reality

of the poor. In my opinion, the statement is bold: Jesus is unique in terms of his "mediation of creation and of the whole human history"; I also feel that to go beyond the imagery of Christ as a center that excludes others (the so-called christ-centeredness), a pneumatic christology needs to be developed. 2- It acknowledges several concerns in women's vision and praxis: confrontation of violence, liberation spirituality and sexuality, epistemology in terms of day to day praxis of the poor and of women, a "gender revolution" within EATWOT. For this sake, six recommendations were presented by the women delegates and assumed by the whole Assembly: that all read and discuss five essays on feminist theology, that men-women dialogue on theology and gender, consideration of the experience of grass-roots people, and, that together with our focus on the poor and on race and culture we also focus on gender. (Moreover, two recommendations concerning meetings: half of the presenters be women, sensitivity to process and more dialogue that draws from experience). All of this certainly opens up a new phase in EATWOT. I wish that we journey deeply into the gender perspective; and I also hope that we leave behind the stereotype that women's theology has to do with feelings, and men's theology deals with reason; rather, all of us may contribute to a new paradigm where conceptual, symbolic, spiritual elements come together. 3- Finally, concerning methodology, the EATWOT text underlines a wholistic approach, and once again mentions race, women, indigenous peoples, and the problem of a colonized language.

C- EATWOT's work. The final paragraphs review the work done between 92-96; it underlines the importance and also the pain and difficulty of really having inter-continental dialogues. The text includes a strong critique, since we do not listen nor read each other; and, it suggests that we continue dialogue on gender, on race, and on the African reality. The conclusion takes up some points of the Evaluation Commission report: EATWOT as an alternative theology, with a liberation perspective, whose members are linked to people and their struggle for life. It also favors membership from more areas of the world, more younger members, and a transformation of EATWOT's discourse and concerns thanks to women's theologies. These and other conclusions show that it is a dynamic and self-critical organization.

#### 4) On-going tasks and challenges

Briefly, may I underscore the critique in EATWOT's self-evaluation, and

also the strong convictions and plans towards the future. Our Association -with 20 years of experience, 1976/1996- is beginning to renew and reshape its theological paradigm, and its exciting intercontinental dialogues. The young association is young and mature!

There is a clear awareness of the changing global contexts, and their challenges to theology. We need more net-working, honest and sharp debate, deeper spiritual sharing, on-going commitment in local and global struggles, and joined efforts in the reconstruction of our theological paradigm. In terms of content, I underline the following: faith understanding of historical transformation, inter-religious dialogue/action and its theology of religions of the common people, pneumatology, eco-theology, and theology and gender. These concerns may continue not only as part of our agenda but they may also re-open fundamental questions and inquiries. I also trust that the many voices in our dialogue, where women have a leading role, will change our methods and contents.

Our on-going and realistic utopia is a new humanity and a new earth. This is a dream and a praxis. It happens as we walk into the Mystery of Life, we who are disciples of Jesus-Christ. As theologians we give witness of a hopeful Love, that has been manifested to all of humanity and the cosmos. We work on a round table, that has four legs, four foundations. 1- Celebration of the faith. 2- Critique and alternatives in our local and global contexts. 3- A theological reconstruction. 4- Spiritual, human, political, ecological, action. As we work on these round table, the "reasons of the heart" are shared and celebrated.

#### Notes:

\*Report sent to EATWOT's membership, after de 4<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in Tagaytay City, Philippines

1. Many steps have been taken at local and regional events, organized by EATWOT and by other theological institutions (where EATWOT's members are present, for example SOTER in Brazil); what is just beginning is an inter-continental discussion. See the papers presented in three inter-continental discussions: methodology, women's experience of the sacred, christology, in Voices volumes XVIII/1 (1995), XVIII/2 (1995), XIX/1 (1996). James Cone has a leading role in these dialogues.
2. EATWOT-India in its seminar "Search for life sustaining spiritualities in



the context of globalization" (1998), came up with many actions and alternatives (see Voices, XXI/2, 1998, 134-151). Hopefully other regions may be inspired by the deep intellectual and spiritual work done in India and throughout Asia (EATWOT's best organized and creative region).

3. See M.J. Mananzan (ed.), To be fully human..., EATWOT's women's theologies, Manila, 1998; and the special issue of Voices on women and gender (XXI/2, 1998). Gender dialogues -throughout EATWOT- are being carried out in 1999 and 2000; hopefully they will concretely transform our way of theologizing.
4. See a collection of Asian Christologies: R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), Asian faces of Jesus, London: SCM Press, 1993.
5. See J.N.K. Mugambi, L. Magesa (eds.), Jesus in African Christianity, Kenya: Initiatives, 1989.
6. Participants read and commented a first draft (written by a committee: S. Ryan from India, African B. Goba, US Minorities A.M. Isasi Diaz, Latinamerican D. Irarrazaval -and later, the collaboration of K.C. Abraham). In a plenary session many delegates voiced criticisms and suggestions: that it be a document and not a report of a meeting, reformulate parts of the text in the form of questions, make it more prophetic, do not mention name God since it is patriarchal, tackle all dimensions of globalization, underline differences that enrich us, better formulation of christology and biblical elements. There was no public revision of each content, nor a vote on each line of the document; rather there was a spirit of trust that the critique towards the first draft would be included in the final document. The drafting committee then changed and shortened the text.