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Re-Visiting Liberation Theology in a Neo-Liberal World

- III Part -

SECTION 5: SOURCES FOR REVISITING LIBERATION THEOLOGY

17. Return to Biblical Spirituality

One of the criticisms on liberation theologians has been that they appear to ignore the broad issues of spirituality and reduced theology to politics, sociology and economics. However this was not true.⁶⁸ Many of the best readings of the Scriptures from the viewpoint of the poor are made by the eminent biblical scholars in the setting of base-communities with an engaging spiritual outlook. Beyond political and economic categories there is a collective search for a broader understanding of a Biblical spirituality that encompasses the whole of the human reality in its relationship to God. Gutierrez himself says that our preferential option for the poor is not identified "with an ideology, or a determined political program; ... they by no means exhaust the experiences of the Gospel."⁶⁹ It is a fact that the state of fear, hunger, disease and death worldwide have only worsened in spite of the talk of liberation theology in Latin America, Asia and Africa. There is nearly a universal consensus among theologians who have been part of this movement that poverty stretches beyond economic deprivation to include the "non-persons," "the left-over population," "the excluded" in the present neo-liberal world. Gutierrez considers that the range and frame of the "Option for the Poor" have to be extended and widened so that the option has the effect of "taking the poor out of anonymity" giving them a face and a name.⁷⁰

Moreover, a different kind of spirituality or a re-visioning of God's presence was called for after the collapse of the utopian dreams engendered by Liberation Theology. The Brazilian theologian Richard Schaul is of the opinion that construction of liberation theology on the basis of a social analysis aimed at political socialism resulted in the loss of the cultivation of the spiritual life. What unites the poor is not politics but a "spiritual foundation and communitarian support." What is needed is to enter "the religious world of the poor."

It is a fact that, by and large, the liberation theologians had sidelined the 'spiritual' in their enterprise. Unfortunately, this lapse was exploited by what is called autonomous Pentecostalism which built its success on the promises of "healing, exorcism and prosperity" in Latin America. Current Latin American Protestantism supports a "spirituality of results" and a "theology of prosperity."⁷¹ However, such religious movements will only provide ad hoc spaces to survive in a hostile world and to restore alienated individuals to family and community.⁷² They are only a substitute, not an alternative.

It is in this context that we have to appreciate the initiatives happening in the field of pastoral ministry which is considerably different from base-communities. The orientation is to create a network of solidarity, and to empower the people for a more hopeful system in the future.⁷³ Bible reading at the popular level is an effective means of networking for solidarity. Scriptures can give people at the grassroots level the resource for an enduring spirituality, which does not rely on hierarchy. At the heart of this Bible centred spirituality of resistance is the concept of the Church as people of God formed by solidarity and mutual love. It is the Word that networks the people and reconstructs the community in virtue of its power. Thus the Word of God rescues the humanity excluded from life and hope; it is also a vitalizing force for the cosmos that groans because of human greed. The renewal of a biblically based spirituality depends on a complementary interpretation of three distinct but related sources (or "hermeneutical loci"), namely, academic, liturgical (*magisterium*), and communitarian. The communitarian source is the "privileged space of the poor and excluded" or space of "solidarity and spirituality"; it is a space of "commitment and mission" which is creative, prophetic and ecumenical.⁷⁴ Now there is a vibrant *Red de lectura popular de la Biblia* (Network of Popular Reading of the Bible), which is an intensive workshop to train grassroots leaders. The participation in this venture is phenomenal in Latin America.⁷⁵

18. Liberation Theology of Women

Another new face of Liberation Theology is found in the emergence of the Theology of Woman. In the base communities it is women who are usually the active participants. These base communities are vital spaces of women who find themselves as persons- "Persons of the female sex." The process of reflection on experience and Scripture ("seeing-thinking-acting") is seriously taking a women's perspective. The feminine process of seeing- thinking- acting is more contemplative and intuitive than rational. There is a concerted

search for a feminine hermeneutic in the Theology of Liberation. For example the Eucharist and Jesus' death on the cross are seen as the two of his "maternal expressions." Women have a unique way of appropriating the Word, assimilating, expressing and allowing themselves to be fertilized by the seed of the Word, the gospel.⁷⁶

Another Latin American feminist theologian, González Butrón, argues that gender hermeneutics has become crucial for an adequate epistemological critique to take on the sweeping neo-liberalism. It will critique and challenge the patriarchal and sexist assumptions of the market-economy and the acute competition of neo-liberalist policies and its agenda. It will contribute a theoretical alternative based on corporeality. It means the fulfilment of human needs and the creation of world which is home for everyone. She argues further that "only in this way can women move from being "mere abstract or variable entities... considered as a resource or demographic variable" and become full participants in life-changing decisions, the "protagonist agent-subjects," which is the goal of all liberation theology.⁷⁷ Gender justice is therefore a veritable new resource for giving a new translation to Liberation Theology.

19. Call and Claim of Environment

Another significant new voice of the Latin American Liberation theologians is of ecology and its implications for a new just society. Though there is a substantial advancement in the growth of industrialization and commercial activity in the global market economy, the Latin American economies continue to depend upon agriculture. Export sectors demand ever more land, forcing peasant and native people to vacate their ancestral farmlands (remember Nandigram!). Rapid deforestation and widespread strip mining threaten the survival of small farming. Incentives in today's market economy are for fast crops, which need inappropriate use of agro-chemicals and a prodigal use of water, damaging the ecological systems. Environmental destruction uproots the natives from their ancestral land and their traditional forms of life.⁷⁸

By and large, the new market economy ignores the human component of environment. Leonardo Boff notes that human ecology takes into account of the cultural perspective. But he argues that the concept of social ecology which was first developed by Uruguayan social scientists goes beyond human ecology. Social ecology is not simple acceptance of the 'other'. The 'other' is there not because I could not eliminate him/ her but because I need him/her because he/she complements me. Together in complementarity we construct our existence. Not only complementarity but also reciprocity, an opening to all the beings of creation. We are bound to reality on all sides: inward, upward and downward. In the culture of complementarity and reciprocity the conflicts of 'exclusion' and 'inequality' are reduced. In the culture of exclusion, the subject excludes and monopolizes others, denies being enriched, denies reciprocity and symbolically kills the other. Being excluded is the most de-humanizing experience. For, human being lives from participation and all beings are accomplices of our existence.⁷⁹

Our attitudes to the environment not only shape our relationship with other human beings but also our behaviour. When we speak of social ecology, ecological justice is verily the component of social justice. In other words, we must respect the plants' biological cycle, respect the trees, and respect the soil. If we base our argument on Einstein's theory of the interchangeability of matter and energy, then, "democracy is a cosmic democracy, the stars are citizens too, the sun and the moon live with us." Social ecology seeks balance, it denounces the hegemony of capital which is very aggressive and breaks down the ecosystems.

There is a spiritual profile in the environment. The "radical or holistic ecology" speaks of a universe fashioned by grace. "We do not live in a world that threatens us, but a world that is in partnership with our life. We should make a revolution to rescue the lost bonds that tie us to the stone in the road and the snail that painfully drags itself along, to the flowers and the most distant stars."⁸⁰

These multiple voices and initiatives from the land of liberation theology show that the insight and advocacy of this kind of theology are still vital and valid but it needs a new praxis and interpretation which vibrate with the new economic, cultural and political flows of the third millennium. Gutierrez himself speaks about "the expansion of theology outside its original frameworks" and the imperative of incorporating the cultural, racial, feminist, environmental themes into it. Also there is the need of ever new tools of social analysis to take into account of the present complexity of political and economic reality.⁸¹

20. Spirituality of Resistance

In the face of the apparent victory of neo-liberalism, a new focus on survival comes to the fore. The practice of spirituality is crucial to survive the hardships of an everyday life without hope. It is true that with the collapse of European socialist regimes in the 1980s and the aggressive assertion of neoliberal capitalism, the political Utopias which were part of liberation theology lost some of their credibility. Nevertheless, Jose Gonzalez Faus argues that "history has an eschaton of freedom, salvation and fullness." But that endpoint is identifiable now "in the form of small liberations, anticipations and signs." Such victories sometimes embody suffering, even death. But in the end, God triumphs "and the previous defeat is converted into the grain of wheat which gives fruit when it dies."⁸² Hugo Assmann says that in the absence of 'Utopias', "the real challenge is to know how to live together with that ambiguity and not to fall into the temptation of apocalyptic deceit."⁸³

Another Latin American woman theologian continues to affirm the importance of Utopia as a "motivating principle" at least at the symbolic level, as we see in the prophecies of Isaiah even though the Utopia of Isaiah is outside history. But the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, largely ignored by the first generation of liberation theologians,

comes to help when there is an eclipse of a concrete Utopia. Wisdom literature emphasizes the reality of everyday life. Tamez tries to draw a parallel between the circumstances of Israel under the domination of the ellenistic regime, which produced the book of Ecclesiastes, and the situation of Christians in Latin America today. "We live," she writes, "in absurd times... A present time which imposes itself as unique, which seeks to exclude any liberating reminiscence of the past and any Utopian element that could move towards a new reality.... How can Christians live in times of a 'messianic drought'? The author of Ecclesiastes lived in such times. He invites us to assume eternity's time within the history of short and countable time. One can live out that time when one enjoys life in community with which one shares everything."⁸⁴ In a similar vein, Ana Maria and Sandro Gallazzi observe that nothing is more eternal than an abundant table and a good life, which, according to the prophets, are signs of the definitive victory of Yahweh (Isa 25:6). That was, that is, that will be!⁸⁵

The importance of everyday life is increasingly becoming a primary theme in the contemporary discourse of Liberation Theology. Dreher argues that everyday life is "a space of resistance, of hope and of the creation of an alternative logic." In this everyday spirituality, personal and collective dimensions need to be integrated. So also the everyday and the future project should be intertwined. Today's resistance has to do with tomorrow's hope. The new day that is coming needs to be reflected in today.⁸⁶

In his extensive literature, Pablo Richard argues that spiritual renewal is the only possible response to the current situation. He says that the poor have now become the subjects of their own history; formerly they depended on Marxian concepts to articulate their Utopias. Now a vital discernment is achieved and the relationship with the true God, the God of life, is the ultimate subjectivity. This subjectivity is the radical possibility for every person to think and act from his or her own subjectivity. This implies a reconstruction of one's subjectivity prior to race, sex, class, or ethnicity.⁸⁷ Basing his argument on St Irenaeus of Lyon's famous statement; "The glory of God is the human being alive; the glory of the human being, the vision of God," Richard says that only a living subject can see God face to face. He translates divine glory in life categories of land, work, health, education, participation, festivity and joy (remember the vision "Fourth World"). The human being becomes a living subject in the contemplation of God. This entails a spirituality that believes that a faithful living of the here and now is not an otherworldly project. The challenge is to recognize the hegemony of the market where human beings are reduced to being objects. What is called for, then, is a spirituality that can resist the logic, ethic and culture of the market while remaining within the system itself. It is not about fleeing or marginalizing ourselves from globalization, but living within it with a different spirit. For example, if globalization leads to fragmentation and exclusion, then the practice of solidarity is the form of spirituality. Solidarity is the capacity to construct within the system a cultural, ethical and spiritual resistance to the totalizing effect of the market system. Solidarity with the life of the excluded and with nature constructs a culture of life, against the system's culture of death. Solidarity and resistance are the two requisites of a faithful Christian spirituality today. Here lies the importance of the traditional spaces in which everyday life is lived. They are the potential contexts where the alternative logic of respect for life can be lived at the very heart of society. These include the family, the human community, the neighbourhood, the workshop, centres of labour, the local market, etc.⁸⁸

The civil society based on various people's movements is a competent space where solidarity may be practised. These solidarity and resistance movements offer alternatives to the universalizing assumptions of neo-liberalism. Such endeavours generate possibilities of a different kind of society of common good in which there is room for all. For the moment, the construction of a new economic and political alternative to the present system of globalization is impossibility. But we have an opportunity to challenge its logic and spirit. There exist spaces in life where the poor succeed and are honoured: small local political triumphs happen (Nandigram is an example). Though there is still no alternative to the system there is an alternative to the spirit of the system in the existing spaces of life. The resistance and solidarity cultures practise a spirituality of human dignity and inviolability in the context of the totalizing logic of neo-liberalism.

21. Conclusion: A Call of the New Utopia

With the collapse of socialism, the crisis of credibility which we find in the discourse of Liberation Theology today is fundamentally due to the loss of a horizon of Utopia and prophecy.⁸⁹ Without a horizon of Utopia no movement can be sustained and strengthened. The present evil cannot be denounced without 'another world is possible' and praxis to eliminate the evil cannot be undertaken without some *telos*. For example, the exodus from Egypt would not have been possible without a promised land. To continue to the advocacy and promise of Liberation Theology, first and foremost we have to regain a Utopian consciousness. A Utopia represents on the one hand a critique of the *status quo*, and on the other hand a proposal for what should exist.⁹⁰ The apparent success of Neoliberalism is because of its 'utopian ingenuousness' which convinces us, or rather forces us to believe in the Utopia of a "society that produces no more Utopia."⁹¹ Now there prevails a solid, collective acceptance that market economy is the sole economy and 'there is no alternative' (TINA). Under this circumstance, when everyone is 'satisfied' or rather resigned to the TINA syndrome, it is inordinate to speak of 'different world' or AWIP ("Another World Is Possible"). Nevertheless, is there any way out of such 'no-vision thing'?

In history we find that millions became victims of the Utopia of communism and the nihilistic Nietzschean Utopia promoted by Nazism. The history of Utopia repeats itself. The Neo-liberal postulate of 'open society' generates more self-defeat and more violence than Stalin's communism or Hitler's Nazism. Because of the concentration of wealth by the global market, neo-liberalism is causing more than 70,000 deaths every day from hunger,

malnutrition, and their resulting pandemics. The figures are given by the annual *UN Reports of Human Development*. Neither Hitler nor Stalin, for all their barbarity, ever achieved such scores!⁹²

All the three great Utopias of the twentieth century, though they promised a better world, begat misery, violence and death on a massive scale. The first reason of this fiasco is that Stalinist communism and Hitler's Nazism were totalitarian systems and never allowed radical criticism. When we come to neo-liberalist capitalism the case is not clear. After all, capitalist systems allow freedom and democracy. However, the theory of neo-liberalism presents 'market' as the only absolute perfect system and never allows 'another' site in its scheme. It is totalitarian and hegemonic in substance but democratic in style. This is achieved by manipulating media, economic policies, financial institutions, etc.

A society in which new Utopias are not born, nurtured and sustained, is one in which history stands still, the hope of the history is reduced to exigencies and has to live without a perspective and vision. "Where there is no vision people perish" (Prov 29:18). How to regain the Utopia? This is the precise question before the theology of liberation. The above analysis suggests that the only way to invoke the Utopian horizons is a radical discernment of and return to Jesus' praxis which is profoundly people oriented. The Church has to radically situate itself in the civil space, which is very vibrant with numerous grass-roots movements of justice, human rights, environmental concerns, women's rights, peasant forums, Self-Help groups, etc. In other words, civil society is the vital arena and promise for the Church to become competent and credible in her mission of justice and peace. She should accustom herself to associate with such movements like the World Social Forums and become a participant in the social and political processes and discourses without any a-priori presumptions.

She should likewise become an instrument to realize Utopias at the local levels. In the absence of overarching visions and mega systems, the only way to take on the challenge of neo-liberal capitalism is to generate local Utopias; and let numerous local Utopias and civil movements become a buffer to contain the onslaught of neo-liberalism. This will be like a slow poisoning of the Leviathan and killing it. There is another popular simile of ants that devour whole trees to nourish the fungus from which they feed themselves; thus the house of power can be destroyed. In other words, the Church must develop a network personality so as to become a social and religious agency to bring together various micro movements. This exercise of bringing together various movements and weaving the dreams of the 'non-people' and 'excluded' becomes itself, by default, a matrix of giving birth to new Utopias. The promise and hope of liberation theology, I think, largely have to be searched in the peoples' movements at the micro levels that challenge the oppressive structures of neoliberalism at the macro level.

Notes

⁶⁸ Candido GRZYBOWSKI, "Different World from the Viewpoint of Planetary Citizenship," *Concilium*, 5 (2004) 29ff, see also *Global Civil Society*.

⁶⁹ G. GUTIERREZ's book *We Drink from Our Own Wells, The Spiritual Journey of a People*. London: SCM Press, 1984, is an invoking exposition of the spirituality undergirding theology of liberation.

⁷⁰ G. GUTIERREZ, *Teología de liberación. Perspectivas. Versión revisada*. Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1990, 317. John L. Kater (see note 31).

⁷¹ G. GUTIERREZ, "Renovar la opción por los pobres," 273, in John L. Kater.

⁷² Claudio DE OLEIVERA RIBEIRO, "Mudanças e desafios: a Pastoral e a teologia latinoamericanas em questão," in *Revista de Cultura teológica*, 3 (1995) 94. in John L. Kater (n. 31).

⁷³ R. SCHAULL, 10-12, as quoted in John L. Kater (n. 31).

⁷⁴ See Dr Arturo PIEDRA, Professor of History, Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano, San Jose, Costa Rica, Personal Interview, July 6, 1999 in John L. Kater (n. 31).

⁷⁵ See Pablo RICHARD, "Palabra de Dios, fuente de vida y esperanza para el nuevo milenio," PASOS, 78, 1998, 4-7, in Kater n. (31).

⁷⁶ See Sister Ana Francisca LOPEZ, *Red de Lectura Popular de la Biblia* (Network of Popular Bible Reading) Venezuela, Personal Interview, June 24, 1999, in Kater (n. 31).

⁷⁷ A Méndez-Pefiate, "Una espiritualidad para la mujer?," *Revista de Interpretation Bíblica Latinoamericana* (RIBLA), 93, 94. 44 Ibid., pp. 101-2. John L. Kater (n. 31).

⁷⁸ M. GONZALEZ BUTRON, "Desde el mundo de las excluidas para un mundo donde quepan todos y todas: Por la visibilización de las invisibles," PASOS, 70, 1997, 8. In this quotation she is citing the work of Janine Anderson, *La planificación con perspectiva de género* (Santiago de Chile: Mimeo, 1994). "Corporeality, as a source of criteria for an Ethic of Solidarity, has been a fundamental contribution of the feminist struggle..... We want a society where life in its fullness is possible for all." *Ibid.*, 7, 6, in Kater (see n. 31).

⁷⁹ L. BOFF, "Las tendencias de la ecología," PASOS. 68 (1996): 1-9, in John L. Kater (n. 31).

⁸⁰ The massacre of landless peasants in northern Brazil, the armed revolts of peasants and native people in Mexico, the assassination of native leaders and the massive occupation of banana plantations by peasants in Honduras, the confrontations and forced removals of squatters from lands in Costa Rica, the formation of a national movement in Paraguay, and evictions in Chile, all these illustrate 'the cry of the earth' Roy H. MAY, *La tierra en tiempos de globalización*, PASOS, 76, 1998, 21. Kater (n. 31).

⁸¹ See G. GUTIÉRREZ, *Teología de la liberación. Perspectivas* (revised edition), 1990, 19, 24-26. See John Kater (n. 31).

⁸² J. GONZALEZ FAUS, "Una tarea histórica: de la liberación a la apocalíptica," *Revista latinoamericana de teología* 12 (1995), 290. Kater (see note 31).

- ⁸³ H. ASSMANN, "Apuntes sobre el tema del sujeto." in Duque, ed., *Perfiles teologicos para un nuevo milenio*, DEI, San Jose, Costa Rica, 1997, 129. Kater (n. 31).
- ⁸⁴ E. TAMEZ, "De silencios y gritos. Job y Qohelet en los noventa." PASOS, 82(1999), 5.6. Kater (n. 31).
- ⁸⁵ Ana Maria RIZZANTE GALLAZZI and Sandro GALLAZI, "La prueba de los ojos, la prueba de la casa, la prueba del sepulcro. Una clave de lectura del libro de Qohelet," PASOS, 14(1993), 79. Kater (n. 31).
- ⁸⁶ C. DREHER, "Editorial," PASOS, 14 (1993), 5. From Kater (n. 31).
- ⁸⁷ P. RICHARD, "Subjetividad, espiritualidad y esperanza. Algunas perspectivas para definir el sujeto," PASSOS, 79 (1998): 30. Kater (n. 31).
- ⁸⁸ See *ibid.*, 29-31. Resistance is an important theme in many contemporary liberation theologians' reflection on spirituality. In 1992, the *Revista de Interpretacion Biblica Latinoamericana* (Journal of Latin American Biblical Interpretation) devoted a whole issue to "Spirituality of Resistance." (RIBLA, 13, 1992.). Cf. P. RICHARD, "Teologia de la solidaridad en el contexto actual de la economia neoliberal de libre mercado," 4. Kater (n. 31).
- ⁸⁹ See Ignacio ELLACURIA, "Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America," in Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 289-327.
- ⁹⁰ M. HORKHEIMER, "La Utopia," in A. Neususs (ed.), *Utopia*, Barcelona: 1971, 97. See José M. CASTILLO, "Utopia Set Aside," *Concilium* (2004/5) 35.
- ⁹¹ F. HINKELAMMERT, *Crítica de la razon utopica*. Bilbao 2002, 10, as quoted in José M. Castillo, "Utopia set Aside," *Concilium*, (2004/5) p. 35.

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