IS THERE A CHANGE OF PARADIGM IN LIBERATION THEOLOGY?

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Liberation theologian, José María Vigil, writes from Nicaragua, about the possibility of a change of Paradigm in Liberation Theology. This article is currently available in the Latin-American Electronic Theological Magazine and will be published in the next issue of Alternativas (Nicaragua). It has been translated by LADOC.

I will begin with a description of the external crisis affecting Liberation Theology, then examine it from within to see the changes that are "shaking the ground" of liberation theology, paying special attention to the theological dogma involved in it.

1. The external crisis facing liberation theology

In the first place, there is a fall in the production of materials on liberation theology (LT). Theologians are writing very little, meeting very little and with fewer people. When they do meet they say nothing in public. All that is heard is their silence. Neoliberalism and "globalisation", which are enemies of the poor and are in full upswing, are not being discussed today by theologians the same way they discussed the enemies of the poor in the past (military dictatorship, and capitalism at that time).

Together with the silence of theologians is the silence of the many courses, workshops and formation seminars on current reality and "theological renewal" that were held throughout the continent only a few years ago and have now disappeared. There are also examples of theological content being toned down, with authors avoiding the issues that provoked the greatest amount of criticism.

Instead of concentrating on the theologians, other analysts have focused on the grassroots base of LT, the base Christian communities, saying that they are in "recession", that maybe they are too elitist and have not managed to embed themselves in the social fabric.

Others say that LT's language is no longer appropriate for today: It is no longer pertinent to talk about imperialism, revolution or the poor as historic subjects. LT supported an imaginary social revolution that has been overcome.

Finally, there are others who say LT's silence is not only understandable, but that it is the most coherent approach because it is not the time to denounce or make prophetic proclamations. It is time for a "sapiential" silence that speaks to daily life not with words but with actions. "It is not a time for prophecy but for wisdom", they say.

If we transcend the external symptoms mentioned above we can enter into LT's internal situation and undertake a detailed examination of the changes we are feeling in the world today.

2. Changes at the level of mediations

2.1. *Socio-analytical mediation: Societal Utopia*

LT never had its own model of society, an ideological socio-political recipe that was proposed as necessary for society. What it did and does have is a Christian utopia that serves as a guide to move history forward. Nevertheless, many of those people who felt inspired by LT or sympathised with it were politically involved in liberation strategies coming from the left wing and at the time interpreted this as a concrete practice within the spirit of LT without recognising the sometimes blurred borders between ideological mediations (necessarily changing according to the socio-political context) and theological positions (permanent). This led some people to the conclusion that the crisis within certain ideologies also meant a crisis in the theological positions closest to them. In each case, the crisis in the societal model inspired by socialism is inevitably reflected in LT, but this is in its practical references not in its principles.

As we move ahead and keep up with the pulse of today's world, we will be creating, although not perceptibly, the references to the new mediations of the utopia that is on the horizon, which will have to follow "another globalisation" defined by the resistance and struggle against the principal sign of our time: neoliberalism.

2.2. *Socio-analytical mediation: Analytic appraisal of today's society*

For some time we have been hearing that "the social sciences are in crisis". The "dependence theory" was abandoned, but it has not been easy to substitute it with another theory and the vacuum that this produced will continue in some way. In addition, the neoliberal analytic strategies have gained ground and hegemony.

Without any secure analytical instrument we have been forced to see reality from the perspective of contradictory analyses. It is easy for us to start doubting and to end up thinking, along with the neoliberal economists, that the poverty in poor nations is not due to exploitation. Our era is one in which people are somewhat sceptical about the possibility of eliminating poverty. From simple economic mechanisms we begin to believe that poverty is inevitable and because it is inevitable it cannot be morally perverse. There is no need for prophetic critiques, but for a silent form of welfare. All of this can be presented before us as "evidence" from social analysis, something that is simply "scientific", above all forms of "ideology".

But the main question in social analysis is neither strictly scientific, nor theological. Today, it is ridiculous — and unnecessary to maintain that there are "neutral sciences". Any choice of a tool for social analysis depends on a fundamental ethical and political option, and in this sense leads to a theological option as well.

From the option for the poor (which also guides us when we chose the scientific instrument to be used in social analysis) we cannot accept that the terrible inequality that exists in the world today is not ethically perverse, regardless of the mutations that technology has introduced to the production process, the spectacular economic growth of the "Dragons of South-eastern Asia" or the complexity of our reality. We recognise that there are substantial changes in some areas, but our perception is that basic structural problems continue to exist (qualitatively) and have even worsened (quantitatively) in their most troubling aspects.

We have greater reasons — for more important evidence — that come before the supposed "scientific certainties". We cannot accept the idolatry of neoliberal economic "scientific criteria", as we were not able to accept the "scientific certainties" of Marxism. In the face of these kinds of "scientific reasons", we have "utopian reasons" that are more powerful (God, justice, compassion, the universal destiny of the earth's goods, the centrality of the person, the non-absolute character of private property...).

We reject a "theology of the inevitable", a "culture of desperation", the idea that there is no way out and that we have arrived at "the end of history".

We are not against development, but want "another" development, another model, based on human ethical values. We do not want a development model designed with profit as the supreme value (as "God"). We prefer, for example, a development model which creates more jobs instead of offering higher profits. And we know that what we are told is impossible is not so in reality, but only in terms of the current environment that demands a level of "confidence" in order to attract investment capital.

When we end up thinking that this level of profit is "natural", or that the high level of inequality in our world is not ethically repugnant, we have introduced into our analysis the neoliberal "scientific" reality created from the interest of capital that is "not concerned for the affliction of my people" (cf. Am 6:6) and has no feeling for the fate of the majority. Adopting this analysis is not only scientific or socio-analytic, but ethical, and by extension, moral and theological.

It is true that some processes of economic transformation, above all from technological advances, can result in an apparent independence of the productive processes in relation to the exploitation of raw materials and manual labour, which previously were the principal contribution of the Third World to world economies. But this transformation can never forget the historic roots that allowed it to happen, which are not eliminated by the simple acquisition of technology that will supposedly emancipate the productive pro-cess from socio-labour concerns.

An uneven distribution of wealth, which continues to grow, as acute as that which exists in the world today is unjust, even in the hypothetical case that there does not exist a "causal" relationship between the two. A rich man who is just cannot stand next to a poor man: This is what we are told in the parable of Lazarus and what Matthew insinuated (cf. Mt 25:31).

2.3. *At the level of the logic employed: A Symbolic reason*

People have been insisting for some time that we move from the dominance of the rational mediation (modern and critical) used by LT to a symbolic logic. Maybe because of its own idiosyncrasies, and the historical context with which it has been in constant dialogue, LT has given special relevance to socio-economic-political aspects (supported by its

passion for justice), which has reinforced the use of this kind of logic. And maybe because of all of this — without it having been historically avoidable — and maybe even because of a lack of time, it was not possible to establish a fruitful dialogue with grassroots culture, which has another rationality.

The modern sensitivity to cultural issues, which is taking on force in the Church and in theology, has made us discover that it is necessary to broaden our mediation and pay attention to the symbolic in theology, at the epistemological level, and even more so pastorally and pedagogically.

Although this intuition, small but growing, is presented at times as though it were a rupture, confusing theology with pastoral and pedagogic work, it is not really an alternative current, but an alternative that has been added, broadened, strengthened and defined. The negative aspect has not been the logical mediation used by LT, but that it was used unilaterally. In relation to everything else, it would not only be absurd, but impossible, to attempt to create a "blank slate" of everything that has been created and start from zero with a supposed "symbolic reasoning" taken from a different cultural universe. In any case, this promising intuition is still a risk in that consciously or unconsciously it could reorient LT to be more cultural and less liberating.

2.4. *At the new imaginary level*

The world of the "imaginary" is not exclusive to theology but pertains to all human existence. Every culture, every society, every era, every hour in history... has its own imagination. And the imaginary of one time fades and is replaced, as eras, societies and the hours in history pass. It is evident that LT, precisely because it is a theology that comes from life, society and history, and is incarnated in the here and now, is generous with references to reality and social imagery. These references put a "date" on the texts, which are not written on the margins of history and "for all eternity". The abstract theologies, the classics as well as the current writings, are those without any reference to the reality. They are on the margin of the signs of the times, based on a speculative laboratory that is distant from life and history and goes beyond reality.

When the imaginary evolves, grows, changes, is given other feelings, collapses, the LT texts are going to reflect this imbalance. Its references, out of context at the current time, will remain as "minutes" of the commitment this theology had to reality and its time. When time goes by only a superficial glance will confuse the permanent theological context of a text with the references to the reality at the time it was written. Only the theologies that do not make reference to reality are free from this problem.

If today's imagery has profoundly changed with the events of the past few years, it is logical that these changes will be reflected in the texts of the last decade. It is the price that LT has to pay — and willingly — for the privilege of being a theology incarnated and for life. Evidently, the new LT creations, faithful to the permanent charism of the incarnation of this theology, should frame its references in the new imagery that is evolving, and should contribute to its creation, but it cannot stop being a living theology full of practical and theoretical references.

2.5. *At the level of widening subjects, perspectives and new fields*

Years ago, even before the historic changes which we have just discussed, there was talk of emerging subjects: principally Indigenous peoples, Blacks and Women.

In LT's first years (it is worth remembering that it is still a very young form of theology) all of these subjects fell under the perspective of socio-economic poverty. It certainly highlighted that Women were "doubly oppressed" as women and poor, and that Indigenous people and Blacks were "the poorest of the poor". This was true, but it was not the full truth. It is not only that indigenous peoples, Blacks and Women are oppressed and even suffer multiple oppression, but that they are the "other", they are "different" and, as such, have something special to contribute.

There is a broadening of the perspective on two fronts. First, there is a broadening of the perspective of oppression, which is not only socio-economic but also ethnic, cultural, gender-based, etc. Second, theology is enriched by incorporating other perspectives: anthropological, cultural, gender (which cannot be done fully without the participation of these subjects). New fields make themselves present in LT with force: cultures, inculturation, women, feminism, theology of the body, indigenous theology, dialogue with pre-Colombian and African religions, ecology, etc. This broadening of the perspective inevitably redefines the future of LT in its different branches.

We also need to mention here what we discussed earlier in relation to "symbolic reason": it is not about an "alternative option" but an "additional option", not only in relation to the past but also what is new. It is a broadening of the concept of subjects and a strengthening of the oppression-liberation concept, which will not only be considered from the economic perspective and will produce new statements. There should be no confusion between

this broadening and strengthening of LT with its "dissolving" into a feminist, Indigenous, Black or ecological theology (although they are liberating). These new statements do not give us an excuse not to pay attention to the classical perspective (of economic poverty), which has not only lost ground, but poverty has increased both qualitatively and quantitatively.

2.6. *At the level of praxis: The liberation strategy*

The militants of the past decade said (at the level of praxis both within and outside LT) that the strategy for liberation was the "individual emancipation of one country after another from the capitalist system by taking power". It was the "domino theory: If Nicaragua won, El Salvador would win, Guatemala would follow". A few years ago, the domino theory worked but in the opposite way, contrary of what these militants had hoped. In today's world, which is so different, that global strategy is no longer viable.

It is obvious that a liberation strategy cannot pursue the emancipation of a country or take power through arms, but must create a new power through civil society, from within. Strategies and paths different from those of only a few years ago need to be followed to achieve the same goal of liberation. Some actions that were revolutionary are considered reformist today and *vice versa*. Objectives that were a priority in the last decades, today are considered secondary or have disappeared. The "paradigm" (if we understand this word as the "historic liberation strategy") has certainly changed. But if a liberation strategy has disappeared another needs to be found, and if it is not possible to find it then it has to be invented. What has broken down is the model for a liberation strategy, not liberation itself.

Only naïve people "toss out the baby with the bath water". And only through this naïveté can one confuse the break down of a strategy with the break down of the utopia of liberation, of the Kingdom! The strategy was only a simple method of achieving this utopia. There are people who when they do not see a way out (or do not want to see it) do not see the need for a way out. There are people who cannot see a clear strategy for liberation today, so they do not see the need for a historic praxis of transformation, despite the fact that there is more need for this today than before.

3. Changes at the level of systematic theology?

For the past few years people have been talking about a "paradigm shift", even in LT. By talking about a "paradigm shift" they are adopting an image from the world of science. It is said that there are two moments in science. The first is a time of stability, of homogenous growth: people research, discover, create new aspects and issues, and the results are added to the body of accumulated science without questioning the general concept, the global framework to which everything subscribes. But there are other times when the scientists perceive that something is wrong at the foundation, that they cannot continue a simple lineal development, but that the global ordering of things needs to be changed. These are times of "paradigm shift".

Apart from the concrete epistemological terminology, the use of the concept "paradigm" is not precise, but is very flexible, metaphoric or analogical. People talk about a "paradigm shift" for almost everything, referring as much to a change in the model of society as to changes in the imaginary, logic and the liberation strategy.

Paradigms go beyond the diversity of spiritual currents, go deeper than the peculiarities of each school of theology, are above mere changes in context to which one or another theology may feel affinity. Different schools can move within the same paradigm. A theological paradigm, in the strong sense of the word, is found for us at the level of the important interpretations of Christianity, what are called the "interpretation" of Christianity. We want to refer concretely to the most profound level of systematic theology, although we do not deny that paradigms can be discussed at more superficial levels.

The "interpretations of Christianity" as theological paradigms

We are going to limit the discussion to the best known interpretations.

— There is a doctrinal-theoretic interpretation, or reading, of Christianity. In this interpretation God is perceived as the Truth who has come to reveal himself to us and our answer in faith to him implies, above everything else, an intellectual acceptance of the truths revealed by him and given to the Church. This means living "in the faith of the Church", from which we are separated by heresy or heterodoxies. This interpretation has been prevalent in the Church not only during the time of the Inquisition but in many other times when being or not being Christian has been consistent with accepting certain "truths" considered to be the "depository" of the faith (orthodoxy).

— There is a moralist reading, which conceives the history of salvation as a moral test that God has given to humanity, which is between grace and sin, and leads us to a final prize or punishment in relation

to the merits or sins we have accumulated. More than anything else Christian life is a moral test, which does not stem from a real "mission" in history or an essential task. This world is simply a "chance to see what we deserve", and once it is over the final destiny will either be fire or we will pass on to eternal life, the only truth that matters, which has little continuity to what we have lived in our personal identity (hetero- salvation).

— There is a ontological-metaphysical interpretation that places salvation on a separate higher plane, which is measured sacramentally. Salvation is supernatural and is played out in "a life of grace". We participate in this through the Mass and a "spiritual life" (sacraments, prayer), which is central to Christian living. Real truth is found in the supernatural and salvation is achieved by participating in this "other true world", compared to which our world is shadows and transitory. In this "other world", which is outside of history, the Christian mission finds its reference point in this interpretation of Christianity.

— There is a historic reading: Reality is conceived as the history of salvation and, simultaneously, as the salvation of history. It is a history that moves linearly, although with ups and downs, toward a goal. "God has a dream", and has proposed a utopia to human beings, making this their task in history. The Christian mission does not separate us from history, but places us in it. Eschatology and the incarnation are not opposites, but come together: we will get to the future world by turning the present into the future. The person who escapes from this world is not more eschatological than the person who moves it forward (towards the eschaton). The ground of this history is the only path we have to reach the heaven of the future. Salvation is made in history.

— These interpretations are not only found in Christianity but in religions in general. Furthermore, within each religion, including Christianity, we need to recognise the different interpretations. It should be stated that while no interpretation is completely false they cannot be arbitrarily interchanged. Today, it is clear that of all the readings, the historical is that which is least an interpretation and the closest to the life lived by Jesus.

— In each of these readings God is experienced in a different way and the reality of salvation and the mission given human beings is conceived differently. In each of these interpretations there are also lineal, homogeneous and additional developments. Moving from one interpretation to another implies a rupture, a global restructuring, a "paradigm shift". The different readings of Christianity are "paradigms" in the strongest sense of the word. When we talk about the crisis in LT we should refer to its underlying paradigm. What is its interpretation, its paradigm?

— Evidently, LT corresponds to the historic interpretation of Christianity. The strongest opposition it has faced and faces comes from readings that are profoundly ahistoric. The paradigm crisis or conflict is not new: the conflict that LT provoked from the beginning has to do with its paradigm coming into contact with the paradigms of other theologies. It is not about minor differences or different schools of thought, but a global diversity, a paradigm. It is quite possible that some of the people who say we need to move ahead and change the paradigm are doing nothing more than trying to return to an old paradigm.

Toward LT's central paradigm

Leaving this point here, we can move forward a bit more into LT's paradigm to see if there really is a need for a paradigm shift within this theology.

In the 1950's, there was a famous debate in the pages of the 'Dieu Vivant' magazine. Those were the critical years after World War II, and the debate was about the attitude of Christians in the modern world. The debate divided participants into two categories: the eschatologists and the incarnationists. The first group, among whom were found Danielou and Urs von Balthasar, were in favour of a Church that gave witness to the transcendentalness of the spirit and the need to abandon "the things of this world". The second group, which included Chenu, Teilhard de Chardin and the movement of worker-priests, insisted on the need for a Church incarnated in reality that could give witness to an historic commitment. The two poles, perceived as opposites in the debate, were eschatology and incarnation.

The eschatologists highlighted the exclusive primacy of the spiritual, abandoning all historic commitments that could take away from the spiritual and the transcendental. In their opinion, human action is nothing more than an "occasion" that "deserves" to be rewarded in eternal life, but does not have a saving value in itself. Eternal life is strictly a gift from God, and our world and our actions are destined for the fire when the *parusia* arrives. Salvation will be a pure gift from God in a complete rupture (heterosalvation) from what we lived in this world.

The incarnationists, on the contrary, placed their emphasis on historic commitment, in the incarnation, in being present in this world. In their opinion, human action itself has a saving value, our historic actions are already salvific (homosalvation).

The debate was not entirely new. The terms had been proposed theologically at other times in history, but in our century they were proposed within the framework of the "relations between eschatology and history". A solution to the debate would not arrive until the Second Vatican Council. The Council brought the debate to a close with probably the most ingenious solution to the problem: the synthesis solution.

If eschatology and history had also been seen as opposite dimensions, Vatican II not only found them compatible but submerged within each other. The debate had been seen as a dilemma: move toward the transcendental that is not part of this world or opt for the immanence that forgets trans-historic transcendentalism (eschatology or incarnation). The Council discovered synthesis. This was possible given the transformations that had taken place recently in the eschatological proposals. If being eschatological before meant having to be separate from the world and pay no attention to history, in the reformulation of eschatology it was discovered that incarnation in history was the best path to arrive at eschatology: the more eschatological, the more historical". The people who have the least interest in history are not the most eschatological, the most eschatological are the people who fervently try to reach their eschaton, the Kingdom. The greatest eschatological sign became the strongest historical commitment. The new proposals between eschatology and history reflected in the Council opened the door to the recuperation of the "historical interpretation" of Christianity.

How did LT arise in this context? With what paradigm?

At the foundation was a rediscovery of the historic eschatological character of Jesus' message that had started at the beginning of the century and had remained within the walls of the European universities. The "return of the historic Jesus" brought the reformulation of the direct relationship between eschatology and history to the forefront. In this context, the rediscovery of the Kingdom as the *ipsissima verba lesu* and as the absolute center of Jesus' preaching (*ipsissima intentio lesu*) allowed for the rediscovery of the centrality of the Kingdom as a Christological basis for the historical interpretation of Christianity. The inevitable perception of a preference — even theological — for the poor led to the rest. As such, LT rose with a paradigm whose essential elements are:

* The historic-eschatological interpretation of Christianity, which includes the primacy of a praxis for historical transformation, integration (not dualism), the oneness of history, transcendency in the immanence.

* The centrality of the Kingdom: The theological and practical recuperation of the absolute character Jesus gave to the Kingdom. Following Jesus in his own faith.

* The option for justice, for those who suffer injustice, with an emphasis on placing ourselves in the social place of the victims of injustice.

This is the "major paradigm" of LT, its theological-systematic skeleton. Within this framework there can be diverse schools of thought, currents and ways of acting, but if they fit within this model they are part of LT. There can be positions that are more committed and those that are contemplative; some can carry out the historic transformation through socio-political action and others through more symbolic actions: some may adopt a language or imagery that is more militant-utopian and others may adopt the "disenchanted realism" of our times. But if they have the essential elements of this paradigm, they are essential LT. And if they lack any of these essential elements they are not LT, although they might call themselves that.

If we wanted to express the paradigm in one word it would be "Kingdom". This would be LT's paradigm because, in reality, it is the paradigm of Jesus. While we have an historical reading of reality, with the Kingdom of God as the omnicentric utopia and we are on the side of the poor, we are within LT.

A paradigm shift in LT?

At the level of systematic theology, we need to ask ourselves if there is a paradigm shift in LT.

While still respecting the vision others have of Christianity, LT has developed in its still short history such a conviction that it could be said that it has imposed upon itself from within an internal force that is "tenacious enough to see what is invisible" (cf. Heb 11:27). LT has not focused on something lateral: a particular devotion, concrete sacrament, dimension, facet or element. It is a theology of universal Christianity, and what is profoundly human, we would say. It has not developed by taking steps outside, but within, moving towards the Christian mystery. It is a theology "centered on the central", of the mission of Jesus, his message, cause, passion and utopia — the Kingdom!

When a theology has achieved an experience this profound, which has been sealed with martyrs, it has passed the point of no return. The question is: what does it carry with it, something optional or something inadmissible? Is it possible to stop believing in something that has carried away the soul? Can some-

one move to the periphery after having touched the centre?

a) There are many interpretations of Christianity. We cannot say that the historic interpretation is one among others, interchangeable, but that for us it the closest to Jesus. The historic reading has revealed itself as the least interpretable and is the closest to what is revealed in Jesus. Is the adoption of this interpretation optional or no? Can we change this element of the paradigm?

LT has the centrality of the Kingdom at the peak of theological principles. Although in practice it has not been adopted by too many people, it has become irresistible even to the LT's enemies. Everyone accepts the language of the Kingdom and the option for the poor, although this does not mean that they change their old concepts. Is it possible to abandon the centrality of the Kingdom for other paradigms?

The "option for the poor" has been the most important event in the Christian Churches since the Protestant Reform. It marks a separation of the waters. For those who took the step out of a profound faith conviction, having experienced the theological foundation of the option for the poor, how can we improve this paradigm without betraying the blood of the martyrs and the suffering face of Christ who made them think about the poor?

From the perspective of systematic theology, it is easy to note that these profound levels do not move in the modern world's winds of change, no matter how strong they appear to be. Is it possible that the so-called "end of history" will lead us to abandon the historic interpretation of our faith, which is closest to the vision of the Son of God ? Will financial globalisation and the supposed triumph of neoliberalism make obsolete our efforts to put the passion of our lives in the utopia of the Kingdom preached by Jesus? Will the collapse of socialism in the East make the option for the poor no longer valuable? What others have said about the option for the poor we also say about the LT global paradigm: "it is a firm and irrevocable option" and there is no turning back. We can (and must) update whatever is necessary in the field of theological mediations, but the paradigm is something that gives us the feeling of permanence.

For all the rest, *afirmantis est probare*: he who affirms the need for a paradigm shift has to prove it. They would have to show a new kind of relationship between eschatology and history, but for theological reasons not because of socio-economic or cultural arguments. They would have to propose something that can overcome the centrality of the Kingdom and with proof in hand not just vague discussions about cultural post modernity. They would have to show that the option for the poor does not have a theological foundation, but not watering it down so that this preferential option becomes a "preferential love" for the poor. While this does not happen, the strength of LT's essential elements will remain intact. Maintaining the pertinence of each discourse within its plane and its limits, without mixing or confusing them, is a sane measure of theological cleanliness. We cannot ignore that in the difficult and tense psycho-social context that has worn us down in the past few years there is a temptation to cover up psychological issues with theological reasoning: tiredness, social and ecclesiastic pressures, what is fashionable, fleeing from conflict, social depression.

Finally, we need to prevent suspicion. All paradigms, like understanding in general, have an interest. This stems from the hermeneutic structure of understanding and it is impossible to avoid. All paradigms are "functional" for a social interest. This is true for LT's paradigm as it is for the most substantial in the Bible itself. Those who have other interests prefer other paradigms that are functional for them. A paradigm shift? What new paradigm? A paradigm that is function for what interests? Has God changed his interests? What theological reasons does he have for a paradigm shift? Are we the ones who are changing our interests (that is are we shifting paradigms for theological reasons)?

In conclusion: We are going to stick with Jesus' paradigm, the Kingdom! Within this paradigm we can find all the minor changes and accommodations we find necessary to make.

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