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THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE POOR

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But the more harshly they were treated, the more their numbers increased beyond all bounds, until the Egyptians came to loathe the sight of them. So they treated their Israelite slaves with ruthless severity, and made life bitter for them with cruel *servitude*, setting them *to work* on clay and brick-making, and all sorts of *work* in the fields. (Exodus 1 : 12-14, NEB)

Shall they not rue it,
all evildoers who devour *my people*
as men devour bread,
and never call upon the Lord ? (Psalm 14 (13) : 4, NEB)

The dialectical relationship between the Kingdom of God and the poor is one of the central themes of Christian faith and praxis today, and therefore of theological thinking and of church policy decisions.

The Kingdom of God is an "already" which has been inaugurated among men; it is God's free gift, in the redemptive reality of Christ, through his liberating lordship and his Church. But it is equally a "not yet" which is coming, which directs hope to the *parousia* and which is coming towards us as future. The Kingdom as the "already" now present and as the "not yet" in the future, as history "already" transformed by the incarnation of the poor and crucified Christ and as the "beyond" of history, as true History, this Kingdom is the dialectical unity of an action that is real yet is also in the process of fulfilling itself without end.

To remove the present aspect of the Kingdom is to accept history simply as a "vale of sorrow" without further meaning. To remove the future aspect of the Kingdom is to make a fetish of the present and so to fall into idolatry. There is an essential link between accepting the tension of the "already" and the "not yet" and the material reality of the poor. For as the oppressed, the product of injustice, the poor reveal in their very misery the necessity of the coming of that infinite fulfilment of all the insufficiencies of history that is the Kingdom. The reality of the poor makes us discover the reality of the Kingdom's "not yet"; at the same time it prevents any fetishization of the Kingdom's "already" and thus gives the Kingdom the necessary dialectical flexibility for making both faith and hope still possible.

If there were no poor, then either we would be "already" in a Kingdom without any "not yet" or else we would be in an idolatrous Kingdom of this world -in which case the fact would be not that there are no poor but that they have been hidden, exported or liquidated.

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Any historical claim to be "a society without poverty" is an idolatrous claim to be the Kingdom of God on earth. This question is central to the reality of capitalism. For capitalism tends to think that it has done away with poverty in Europe and the United States -because the system produces its poor away from the centre in the underdeveloped periphery. Thus the dialectic of "already" and "not yet" allows us to secularize any idolatrous vision of the present state of capitalism and to give a place in history to the liberation goals of the oppressed peoples and classes.

It must also be understood that the definition of the poor has to do with christology, with struggles in this world. and with the definition that the Church gives of itself amidst those struggles.

1. *The notion of the poor has been progressively defined in the story of the people of God in the Old and New Testaments and in the history of the Church.*

Every system in history tends to close in on itself, sacralizing itself as a divine whole. It claims to be the Kingdom of God on earth. In its long history, the Jewish-Christian tradition has known many different systems and has, within each of them, fulfilled the function assigned to it by God in world history. In each successive sacralized system. God has made himself known in the poor; for their sake he was the God of Moses, of the Judges and Prophets, of Jesus and the Christians. God reveals himself in the poor because they cannot believe in the divinity of the system that is oppressing them. In the very pain of their oppression is revealed to them the non-divinity of that oppressive system.

In Egypt God makes himself known to slaves. Yahweh is the God of the slaves who liberated themselves from Pharaoh and his "cruel servitude". There is no doubt that God's chosen people are poor in the quite material sense. Their poverty is evident and inevitable. And those who are materially poor are the poor in spirit.

In Israel the people want to create a monarchy based on a system of taxes. Prophets rise up on behalf of the poor against this new system. The chosen people remain a people of poverty.

The exiles in Babylon are poor. From their imprisonment in oppression they discover the meaning of Israel's sin. and give themselves to the task of editing much of the Bible. Poverty as oppression and material shortage of goods is the condition of the People of God.

The Jews scattered in the Diaspora continue for centuries this tradition of poverty. living in want and oppression. without either state or army to defend them: a people of the poor among the poor.

Under Hellenistic rule, still suffering oppression. the poor of Yahweh rise up against the oppressors. The Maccabees are an example of this revolt.

of the struggle of the poor against the oppressors, the masters of their land, their taxes and the State.

In the Roman Empire both Jews and Christians are of the poor classes themselves and have no really rich people in their ranks. There are, at most, a few rather better off, yet they possess no power of any sort, political, military, economic or cultural. That is impossible because of their religious origins.

It is only from the fourth century on, thanks to the patient evangelizing work of the poor Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world, that the Empire first gives freedom to Christians and then sees Christians become emperors. From a religion of the poor" Christianity becomes the official religion of the Empire, first in face of the Persians to the East and later over against the Muslim Arabs to the South. Christians, for the first time, face a new problem for faith: Are the rich poor? Are the rich not perhaps "poor in spirit"? The Fathers of the Church speak out again and again against a wrong answer to this question. Monks flee the new, corrupt "Christian City" for the desert, scandalized by the monstrousness of it all.

The age of confusion begins, for there is the beginning of the metamorphosis of the notion of the poor, as part of the metamorphosis of the City of God. For Augustine no earthly city could be the City of God because "Cain built his city but Abel never built one". The City of God can never be built on earth. So those Christians who claimed to be building the City of God in face of Persians and Muslims were in reality only sacralizing one more historical system. The oppressors, the "rich" of Christendom (whether the Byzantine, the Latin, the European or the colonial Latin American), had to justify themselves to their own consciences as "poor in spirit". The term "spirit" now comes to mean "intention", "in the mind", not in material fact. Thus those who are poor "in intention" can still be saved despite being rich (feudal lords, slave-masters, serf-holders and the like). Critics of the state of society, of the system, are banded over to the secular arm and killed as heretics or schismatics.

In medieval Christian Europe the poor were the serfs of feudalism, yet at the same time there appeared others yet poorer who had lived since the ninth century in the towns. The rising class of burghers, or bourgeois, had to struggle for some eight centuries until its triumph under Cromwell in England and with the French Revolution. The poor of the Middle Ages thus became the rich, the bourgeois, the powerful masters of the capitalist system. The poor, in this particular case, were those without wages -they were not the only ones to be poor but were those made poor according to the essential logic of this newly established system.

At the same time and as basic cause of the wealth of the rising bourgeois, other poor peoples appeared on the horizons of European colonial expansion

-black African slaves, American Indians and Asians. From the sixteenth century onwards "cruel servitude" was forced on all the inhabitants of the Third World, that marginal and underdeveloped world whose labour would bring huge profits to the capitalist world that was born, grew and enjoyed its triumph from the eighteenth century onwards.

Leadership in the capitalist world at the centre passed from country to country -first Spain and Portugal, then Holland at the beginning of the seventeenth century, then England at its end, until in 1945 it appeared finally, unmistakable and triumphant, in the United States.

Christianity, once again, as in the rule of the very Catholic Charlemagne, or that of the Catholic kings of Spain, legitimizes the exercise of power ruling over the world's poor. In face of the disaster of Vietnam and the corruption of Watergate, a fervent Baptist preacher, Bible in hand, emerges as candidate for the presidency of the USA. The Trilateral Commission, basing itself on Christian values, justifies a new period of expansion and domination by North American capitalism over much of the world, especially the nations of the periphery. Still more disconcerting, these oppressors think of themselves as "poor in spirit" because they consider themselves free from the taint of their wealth. Whereas the poor -the poor classes, the poor nations -since they envy the wealth of the rich (who know that wealth is evil), and since they lay claim to that wealth, have fallen into "spiritual riches" or pride. The rich have now become the poor, and the poor the rich in the religious sense. What might appear to be a laughable trick is, however, the topic for earnest theological propositions in our theological faculties, in church documents and in the everyday understanding of lower middle class Christians, in the countries of the centre as much as in those of the margin.

2. *The poor, those who are oppressed and exploited and so reduced to misery, can be open and spiritually available to God*

The spiritual meaning of poverty (in its biblical sense, "according to the Spirit", not in its modern inversion, "in the mind", or "according to one's intention") took on a precise, eschatological significance at the end of the Babylonian exile.¹ since we speak here theologically, let us look further into the relevant exegetical studies.

The praxis of domination, sin, as I have said elsewhere,² is the characteristic action of the "Prince of this world", of those who possess power and exercise it, whether in economics, politics or ideology. The oppressors' action is exercised on another person, on the oppressed. The most appropriate

¹ Cf. JORGE PIXLEY, "El Reino de Dios: Buenas Nuevas para los pobres de América latina?" in *Servir* (México) 73 (1978), pp. 7-46; and ALVARO BARREIRO, "Comunidades Eclesiales de Base y evangelización de los pobres", in *Servir* 69-70, 1977, pp. 279-346.

² See my article "Dominación -liberación", para. 5, in *Concilium* 96, 1974 English edition, pp. 40-42.

passage on which to base our thinking is, therefore, the christological text in Philippians 2 : 6-8.

For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death -death on a cross.

The righteous man, the slave in a slave-owning society, does not commit sin but suffers the logic of sin. The sinner is the oppressor; the non-sinner is not the oppressor but the oppressed, for in practice there is no third party. Neutrality, the refusal to choose, is simply not possible.

The slave (*doulos* in Greek and *'ebed* in Hebrew) is the one who is forced to work (*habodah* in Hebrew) for the oppressor. The poor are thus those who have no possessions, those who lack goods. This lack of goods is deprivation of the fruits of their work, is the result of oppression. We are speaking of course of *real* oppression, i.e. economic, political and ideological.

Poverty is a dialectical concept, embracing several terms which mutually define each other. Just as there is no father without a child, and the child is defined by its father, so the poor are defined by the rich and vice versa. Poverty is in no way a pure case of someone lacking something. There is no scarcity without someone having taken the something away from the other, oppressed person. The matter is more complex than some claim, and their efforts at simplification allow them to turn the materially rich into the spiritually poor and the materially poor into those whose envy brands them as the rich.

The oppressor belongs to the very substance of the concept of being poor. There are no poor people without the corresponding rich. Nor is there any absolute poverty in face of God (understood as absolute spiritual availability). There are real poor people in God's sight, since there are real oppressors confronting God, who make the poor what they are: oppressed and lacking their proper possibilities in life, deprived of the product of their work. To take the poor out of their dialectical and constitutive relation with the rich, the oppressors, in an ideological (i.e. theological) trick played by the rich so as to be able to define themselves as the "spiritually poor", thus rejecting the meaning of the concept. Poverty is the result of sin. To define poverty as a virtue or as an absolute stance towards God, as an openness that resembles humility, is to dissolve it in order to be able to use it as a justification of wealth. When the reality of poverty is dissolved it loses all substance as a critical biblical tool and is transformed into an ideology of oppression.

Attempts are often made to universalize poverty -"we are all poor!" – or to relativize or explain it away- "the poor aren't so very poor and they would soon become rich if they would just work like we do!"

Let us look at some examples: In one text, whose origin need not be given, we find this:

In its immediate meaning, to be *poor* is to be affected by situations of genuine want and deprivation. Yet it is convenient to give the term a wider meaning. In economics it describes a person who lacks material goods; yet in widening this meaning it can describe whoever is unable to share in the services of society. In other words, the *poor* are the weak, those who lack economic, social, political power or simply the power necessary for living.

Notice how poverty is sheer scarcity, a "lack of", without cause or anyone to blame. The poor are poor because they "do not have", not because they have been robbed and oppressed.

Still more serious, in this type of abstract, absolute and fetishized description of poverty, oppression or material want is not yet understood as religious poverty. Indeed, real, material poverty is seen as totally distinct from "religious" poverty:

The deeper, spiritual or specifically Christian poverty refers to the spiritual attitude of the man who, recognizing himself as weak and powerless, is open to hope in God's salvation.

By not defining poverty as an aspect of oppression, as the fruit of sin, and by not revealing the religious meaning which can be found even in the economic, political and ideological aspects of poverty, a double error is committed. On the one hand, it denies the religious nature of all oppression of man by man in its devilish, idolatrous and carnal sense (the biblical concept of "flesh" -*basar* in Hebrew, *sarx* in Greek -is more adequate than that of "matter", *hyle* in Greek). On the other hand, it banishes "religious" poverty to some ethereal, mental, unreal and irrelevant sphere. The two errors go together: there is no awareness that the essence of poverty, in the biblical view, is not material want but being the object of oppression and sin. The condition of want has been confused with the condition of oppression.

This ideological-theological trick of dissolving, dis-carnating poverty, which seems so "religious", has both consequences and hidden origins. For it is a trick that has been working since the fourth century, since the Constantinian takeover, and which, by allowing the rich to become the "religiously poor-in-spirit" undermines the Gospel. It is the first step towards the sacralization of the existing material order; indeed, and worst of all, a Christian sacralization of the system.

Or, to take another example. In the Trilateral Commission paper by Cooper, Kaiser and Kowaka, "Towards a Renovated International System", which is something like a manifesto of the Carter, or rather the Rockefeller-Brzezinski team, we read that "disparities in conditions between political entities are natural" (p. 21), and holding fast to the moral values of Western Christian civilization, "we believe that the trilateral countries should substantially increase the flow of resources addressed to alleviating world poverty" (p. 44). For the ideologists of North American capitalism, poverty is a reality without history, something absolutely *natural*. It need not be explained by domination or exploitation but simply by the size of the surface

area of the countries in question, their population, their natural resources, etc. (p. 21). There need be no blame or guilt of any sort. Poverty can be "mitigated" and "alleviated" with alms, with aid, with various projects. Those who give alms and create projects can have quiet consciences; they are, even better, admirable Christians who -"love their neighbour".

These "trilateralists" overlook the unequal terms of trade, the exaggerated profits of their investments and loans, the military presence of their armies, the exercise of dictatorship by heads of state trained in their colleges and universities, for which reasons the countries concerned are in extreme poverty. Poverty for them is sheer lack of goods, not a dialectical reality. This North American capitalist concept of poverty -which is equally prevalent in European and Japanese capitalism- is also seen in those politicians in the marginal countries whom we in Latin America term "developmentalists", i.e. those who believe they can develop their countries through outside technology and capital, into a capitalism dependent on the USA. "Economic development will result in the abolition of poverty", Kubitschek, President of Brazil, wrote in the *Diretrizes Gerais do Plano Nacional*.³ North American capitalism, the developmentalism of the marginal countries, and the theology organic to the interests of both, all conspire to deny it.

To sum up: the poor are the oppressed, and inasmuch as they suffer really and *materially* from oppression, they are religiously open to God and to his Kingdom. From out of their hunger, nakedness and suffering, their availability to the Kingdom is genuine and genuinely spiritual -according to the Spirit of God, not just in the mind. This is what Israel suffered in Egypt and in Babylon; it is what every person, every Christian, suffers when he is oppressed, whether because of his class origins or what results from his commitment to the interests of the oppressed. Moses was taken as a son of Pharaoh, but by opting for the interests of the slaves he came to be persecuted with them and eventually had to flee to the desert -as a matter of fact, and also a matter of spiritual obedience.

3. *Inorganically, the poor are "the multitude" in misery. Yet organically they are "the people" and in this positive sense the active subjects and carriers of the Kingdom of God.*

The domination of sin so structures our historical systems that some become the oppressors, the dominators, and others the oppressed, the dominated. The dialectic between dominator and dominated is strictly evangelical, is of the essence of Christianity as the critique of sin.

Rulers lord it over their subjects, and their great men make them feel the weight of authority; but it shall not be so with you. Among you, whoever wants to

³ Quoted in MIRIAM LIMOEIRO CARDOSO, *La ideología dominante* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1975) p. 94.

be great must be your servant (*diákonos*). and whoever wants to be first must be the willing slave (*doúlos*) of all -like the Son of Man; he did not come to be served but to serve and to give up his life as a ransom for many.

(Matt. 20 : 25-28, NEB)

Every individual ineluctably, whether he wishes it or not, whether he knows it or not, is part of a class, either the dominators or the dominated. The domination of sin thus shapes the domination of some classes over others and furthers the tension between them. Passive resistance, when oppression is simply tolerated, and active resistance or struggle are both the fruit of the domination of sin. The poor, whether an oppressed person or class, whether a dependent nation or an alienated sex, are structurally poor. Any active steps they take against the established "order", within which they are the oppressed class, are actions against the "law", i.e. against the legality, the structure, the organic power of the system.

In one sense (the negative, the passive, the inorganic) the poor function in history as "the multitude" (*ochlos* in Greek, *rabim* in Hebrew, among its other meanings).⁴ They are the oppressed, those deprived of possessions, without knowledge, without history, having internalized the system into their own daily existence. It is of these poor as "the multitude" that the Gospel tells us :

When he came ashore, he saw a great crowd; his heart went out to them and he cured those of them who were sick. (Matt. 14 : 14, NEB)

The Kingdom of God can never be identified with the prevailing system. Any passive acceptance of the powers that be, of the order of oppression, is a denial of the Kingdom inasmuch as it is a "not yet". If the poor accept things as they are with resignation, then in that very acceptance they reject their real share in the future Kingdom, and in such a case "the multitude" is no more an active member of the Kingdom than it is of the present system.

For the active subject of the system is the "rulers who lord it over their subjects". In the capitalist system this great man is the owner. For Hegel, at the beginning of his *Rechtsphilosophie* (paragraph 34 ff.) the subject as "free will" is an abstract and empty subject until it has been determined by something: the subject takes on reality by the possession (*Besitz*) of goods as his private property, exclusive and excluding. The entire capitalist system shapes its subjects as owners. The poor, then, being non-owners, do not figure as constituent parts of the system. In such an idolatrous system there is no place for the poor. The absolute, creative subject of the system is Capital, and capitalists/owners are the subjects and carriers of partial capital. The absolute law of the system is Profit. The distribution of Profit -the sanctifying grace of the Idol -is not done in virtue of the real, human necessities of the poor but in function of the degree of participation in the

⁴ Cf. TWNT (Kittel), vol. V, pp. 582-590.

power of Capital. The poor, as non-being (for they are the "nothing" in the system from which a new order will arise *-ex nihilo omnia fit*), are sacrificed to the idol Money, Moloch:

Money appears as a being endowed with subjectivity -as the economist theologian tells us. Yet in contrast to the subjectivity of trade, where there is no hierarchy, Money is a superior being, king of the world of trade. It is not one commerce among others, but a quite distinct order, even if any commerce can be transfigured into Money. .."They hold a Council and give their power and authority to the Beast. Nothing can be bought or sold except that which has the sign or name of the Beast, or the number of its Name" (Revelation of St. John). Money now appears as the Beast, for whose sake man has forfeited his freedom.⁵

The capitalist system with Capital as its basis has been sacralized. The system defines itself as kingdom, as a kingdom which is "already" universal and eternal. In its name persons, oppressed classes and dependent nations alike can be put to destruction.

All that rises up against the Idol is the Other, the Enemy. The poor who aspire to a different and juster order cannot but be totally opposed to the system. This Enemy can appear at any level: at the global or international level as an oppressed nation, at the national level as an oppressed class in struggle. and at the personal level as a poor man pleading for something to eat, as a woman demanding justice between the sexes or a child asking for truth in education.

At the national level, to take that for the moment. the possibility of militancy, of an active class struggle arising from the oppressed is discounted. Any such struggle is considered anti-Christian. opposed to love. As if it were the poor who started the struggle! For centuries they have suffered from it, and when they raise their voice they are told they are succumbing to hate, that they are not Christians. These theologians of oppression turn the meaning of evangelical love upside down and use it against the poor! When the poor are bold enough to say "I am hungry" and to hold out a hand (later, in desperation it will be the fist that is held out) to satisfy that hunger, the oppressor will shout "Class struggle!" Whereas. in fact, this is nothing more than the poor man's attempt to obtain the goods which the system by its nature denies him. yet which he needs by *natural* and *divine* right – by far superior to the *positive* right on which the ownership of the capitalist is based; The praxis of the poor. interpreted by the sacralized system as the Enemy. is the very act by which the Kingdom advances from its "already" to its "not yet" aiming at destroying whatever is oppressive, allowing history to move forward towards the *parousia*.

At the moment the mere "multitude" becomes a "people". In the moment in which the multitude, for whom Christ was filled with compassion, are

⁵ FRANZ HINKELAMMERT: *Las armas ideológicas de la muerte*. EDUCA, San José (Costa Rica), 1977, pp. 25-26.

organically called to transformation, as an emerging class or nation, into the *carrier-subject* of the Kingdom, they become the people (*lads* in Greek, *ham* in Hebrew).⁶ God the creator and redeemer grants the Kingdom to humanity as a free gift. Humanity receives it and carries it. The multitude called for the sake of the Kingdom is, as people, the active and creating subject of Salvation History.

The task of the Servant or Worker of Yahweh is, precisely, to save the multitude and turn them into a people. "After all his pains he shall be bathed in light. ...so shall he, my servant, vindicate many" (Isaiah 53: 11).⁷ So also Christ, the suffering Servant, has as his mission (as has later his Church) to reconstitute the former crowd into a people by the New Covenant:

This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matt. 26 : 28)

It remains to distinguish between "people" and "my people", between the poor who are the subject-carriers of the Kingdom, objects of the beatitude, and the Church properly speaking, i.e. the People chosen to fulfil the specific prophetic task.

For inasmuch as the poor are not subjects of the system, owners of capital and holders of power, they are both a negative factor (the pure negativity of the oppressed) and at the same time, positively (the positivity of the *exteriority*), they are the subject-carriers of the Kingdom who co-labour to build it. By being oppressed (and by that non-sinners, thus righteous) and active liberators (as members of the people), the poor are the subjects of the Kingdom:

How blest are you who are in need;
the Kingdom of God is yours. (Luke 6 : 20)

The one who is not member or subject of the kingdom of this world, of the system, is member and subject of God's Kingdom. Since the poor person is "the Other" to the system, we can here properly use Sartre's definition: "L'enfer c'est les Autres".⁸ For the system the poor is hell, the Evil one, the totally opposed; for the kingdom of this world with its chiefs and princes, the Kingdom of God and its members are the Enemy, their hell. Heaven is hell for the system and vice versa -what is hell for the system is the site of the Kingdom of God.

How blest are you who now go hungry; your hunger shall be satisfied.
How blest are you who weep now; you shall laugh.
How blest are you when men hate you. ...
Alas for you who are rich; you have had your time of happiness.
Alas for you who are well-fed now; you shall go hungry.
Alas for you who laugh now; you shall mourn and weep. ...
(Luke 6: 21-25, NEB)

⁶ Cf. TWNT, vol. IV, pp. 29-59.

⁷ See my article "Universalismo y misi6n en los poemas del Siervo de Yahveh" in *El humanismo semita* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1969), pp. 127-170.

⁸ JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, *Huis Clos* (Paris, 1944).

These sayings are not paradoxical; they do go against the grain of the system (*para-doxa* = against opinion). In Asia, Africa and Latin America the "many" are beginning to emerge, to be aware of themselves, to shape themselves into a force in history. "Peoples" are being born, determined on their liberation. Jesus' priority for the poor, the "many", in his spirituality and his mercy, calls them to take part in the struggle. The struggle in the world is a contributive factor in the Kingdom of God. The struggle of the poor is the praxis of liberation; it is the activity of the Kingdom in history, raised up by Christ by his Spirit, in the intimacy of the hearts of the poor, the carriers of the Kingdom.

This is why in Latin America today the dictators fulminate against the poor in revolt, not without help from Christians of "the centre", i.e. of Europe and the USA.

4. The Kingdom of Heaven demands an adequate integration of the historical project of popular liberation with the eschatological dimension. Anti-utopian Christianity criticizes this historical project of liberation as irrational and obscurantist.

The fact of the poor can be denied by a "universalisation" (Thesis 2) by which everyone is seen as poor and the Kingdom is identified with the prevailing system. Their subjecthood can also be denied (Thesis 3), and their liberating praxis vilified by the ideological system which claims identity with the Kingdom. Thirdly, the poor can be denied their objective or project (Thesis 4) where this is not seen, in its opposition to the project of the system, as belonging to the eschatological Kingdom. In other words, hope in the Kingdom that is not mediated through a historical hope in a more just system in the future becomes twisted into a contribution to the ideologization of the system and into the possibility of yet further exploitation of the poor. Let us take this question in stages.

In Stoic or Epicurean cosmopolitanism, the Roman Empire was seen in some way as the City of the Gods: the prevailing system was by nature divine, eternal, unchanging. For Christianity, however, no system could claim to be naturally divine or eternal. Hope in the final Kingdom undermines any claim by a system in history to be fixed and unchanging. Yet any theology of hope that fails to set this out clearly will in time become idolatrous. For between the present system and the eschatological Kingdom there is always a third dimension -the project and the hope it generates of a positive and historical utopia. In Latin America, for instance, between the present situation of oppression and dependence on North American capitalism and the final Kingdom beyond history is to be found the vision of a new system in history -e.g. the socialist one. The historical goal of socialist liberation is opposed to the ruling capitalist system and can -indeed must -be expounded in relation to the eschatological project of liberation in the Kingdom.

The fundamental crisis for Christians in Latin America, and perhaps throughout the world, is precisely how to set out this dimension of historical project. For some it is quite simply a matter of maintaining the status quo, since "any future is dangerous". This is a conservatism subservient to capitalism and its religion. For others, from the reformists to the social democrats, what is needed is not to change the system radically but to improve it. For others again, given the basic structures of the present movement in history and a rational analysis of capitalism, the liberation of the poor demands in Latin America a quite new system, more humane and allowing for far more solidarity, built on quite different principles. Not those of profit but of fair participation in the means of production. All Christians can be found holding one or another of the positions. Each has a certain understanding of the poor and of the function of the Kingdom in history. In fact the first and second come together to oppose the third. Their theological critique is based on the social sciences of capitalism and on the thinkers organic to it.

Thus, for example, the German group which attacks liberation theology in *Kirche und Befreiung* starts from the social thought of Popper and criticizes any non-capitalist vision of liberation as irrational and impossible.⁹ In particular, Bossle speaks of "the Marxist and praxeologically obscurantist theology of liberation".¹⁰ They all rely on Weber, who "excludes from discussion the slightest possibility of a socialist form of trading relationship and thus posits capitalism as an unbreachable limit within human history"¹¹ This is why Popper holds no socialist project to be viable. In face of its practical impossibility they fall into utopian irrationalism:

It is my firm conviction that this irrational insistence on emotion and compassion (*Gefühle und Leidenschaften*) will lead in the final instance to what can only be called a crime.¹²

For the bourgeois mind and the sciences to which it gives rise, any goal of creating a non-capitalist society in the future is simply not viable; any plan to formulate it is irrational; and so in the end all responsibility, love and compassion for the poor are considered a genuine, obscurantist crime. This bourgeois anti-utopian Christianity teaches the poor that there is no possibility of a more just order; one must simply resign oneself to one's place in the present system. One text says:

The Church fights that the poor may receive a worthy place, not just a nominal and legal but a real and effective one, in civil society.

⁹ Cf. HENGSBACH, VEKEMANS, LOPE TRUJILLO, BOSSLE and others in *Christlicher Glaube und gesellschaftliche Praxis*, Pattloch, Aschaffenburg 1978, the publication of an "encuentro" held in Rome from March 2 to 7, 1976.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 253. 11

¹¹ HINKELAMMERT, *op. cit.*, p. .

¹² *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Munich: Francke, 1977, German edition, vol. II, p.287.

This anti-utopianism brings the Christian to a reformist conformism. Its elimination of utopia, of any vision of liberation in history, brings the Christian to sacralizing the system.

Anti-utopian Christians also find it hard to see the structures of domination as sinful. The same Urs von Balthasar can say that "social situations may be unjust (*ungerecht*) but not sinful (*sündig*)",¹³ claiming thus to correct a text of the Medellin conference, and so concludes that "a system as complex as capitalism cannot be quickly condemned as sinful".¹⁴ Always the same point!

If capitalism by its very structures involves domination, if the poor (whether nations, classes or individuals) are the result of that system of domination, then the system in its structures is sinful. Gehlen's teaching has apparently been forgotten, namely that social structures or institutions are only functions or roles normally filled by individual persons. An economic or social structure is sinful when the agents of that system, in acting within it, are practising domination.

By not criticizing the system as sinful, by relativizing the poverty of the poor, by declaring impossible any project of a new and non-capitalist society, this view shuts out any historical release for the poor. The Kingdom of Heaven has to be hoped for within the present system, without overcoming or destroying it. The "already" of the Kingdom in the system has overcome the "not yet" of the future. Hope is ideologized. To catechize or evangelize the poor is to teach them resignation. As one document says:

In evangelizing them the Church lets the poor share in a supreme hope (sic), based on the Lord's promises. Even when they are deprived of all things (sic), it is a matter of their possessing the riches of God, who being rich made himself poor (2 Cor. 8: 9), and of faith -as the word which nourishes – allowing them to live with fortitude and with that joy in the Kingdom (sic) which is *already* in bud and which no human sorrow can suppress.

5. If the essence of sin is oppression of the poor and alienation of the fruits of their work, then the essence of religion is "service" of the poor as liberation and as restitution of the fruits of their work. To evangelize is to turn the multitude into a people who can free themselves and be transformed into the People of God and subjects of his Kingdom.

Herman Cohen said, in his *Religion und Vernunft*, that the essence of prophecy consisted in the discovering of who and where the poor were in any system, and from that making a diagnosis of the pathology of that State. In their visible, material and undisguisable poverty the poor show clearly where the system cannot adequately distribute its goods, i.e. who are suffering from domination by others, and are evidence of the sin of the system. The poor are the sign, the bleeding wound, of the deep, structural sickness of the

¹³ "Heilgeschichtliche Ueberlegungen zur Befreiungstheologie" in *Theologie der Befreiung*, ed. Krl Lehman, Einsiedeln, 1977, p. 169.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

system. *The presence of the poor is the measure of the absence of God's Kingdom in a society.*

The poor, moreover, by having no part in the system, by being oppressed, marginal, non-subject of rights and property, are outside the system. By being outside the system they are inside the Kingdom. In other words, the marginality of the poor in respect of the kingdom of this world is a measure of their participation in the eschatological Kingdom of God. Non-possession and marginality in the system are possession and participation in the Kingdom.

The princes of this world are already ensconced in their kingdoms. They have nothing more to hope for except the final consecration of the kingdom they possess. Against that, the poor *in* this world are not *of* this world. They are all hoping for "the new", especially for the end, the destruction of the system that oppresses them and makes them poor. Hope in the Kingdom has its starting point in hunger, thirst and want. The hope of having enough to eat and drink, as Feuerbach said in his *Essence of Christianity*, is a religious act. It is an eschatological hope -as is also the eating and drinking of the eucharist.

The poor, like exteriority of the system, are "already" in the Kingdom. It may well be that they have no knowledge of this; it may well be that no explicit mention of Christ and his Gospel has come to their ears. Yet anything they do in order to eat and drink, in order to achieve a juster order, is a being "already" in the Kingdom. This point deserves to be made at greater length, but I must not take the space to do so here.¹⁵

Though it would not please Bultmann, I believe that Christianity is a religion and that the heart of religion is worship. In Christianity the essence of worship is "service" (as productive work or gift) of the poor as prayer to God. In the current liturgy we say:

We offer you, Lord, this bread, fruit of the work of man.

In the Old Testament doves were offered, fragments of bread, wine. Worship is *praxis* (i.e. a personal relationship in action -he who offers worship and the God who receives it) shown forth in the gift, the offering, the fruit of work (the relation of man to nature). The "bread" of sacrifice is the technical product, offered without return to God, destroyed in his presence. This is an economic-theological relationship. Someone offers something to someone, just like someone selling something to someone else. Thus for the scholastics *religio* as a virtue was dependent on *justitia*.¹⁶

Under Thesis 2, we have looked at the fact that the poor have been dispossessed of the fruit of their work by the oppressors. This want is an

¹⁵ See my *Religión como supra- o infraestructura*, Edicol, Mexico, 1977.

¹⁶ AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, p. 81.

injustice that cries to God. For its sake the prophets and Jesus fiercely denounced all false worship; this has not yet been sufficiently understood:

I tell you, there is something greater than the temple here. If you had known what that text means, "I require mercy, not sacrifice", you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is sovereign over the Sabbath.
(Matt. 12: 6-8, NEB)

Christ is the poor man; the poor man is more than the temple; he who gives bread to the starving (Matt. 25 : 40) gives food to Christ and offers worship to God. This closes off the vicious circle of sin and opens the way to the Kingdom. Where sin is oppression of the poor and the denial to them of the fruit of their work, the Kingdom is being built by the liberation of the poor and the restoration of the fruit of their work as worship of God. This is why worship is, at the end of the day, the same as economics, divine economics, since Christ made himself a slave, as we have said from the outset of this study. Yet there is more. For on the whole the capitalist mind has lost sight of the essential relationship between political economics and liturgy, between work and religion.

We read in Ecclesiastes:

To offer a sacrifice from the possessions of the poor is like killing a son before his father's eyes.

Bread is life to the destitute,

and it is murder to deprive them of it. (34: 20-21)

No greater clarity could be needed! To rob the poor of the fruit of their work (in unjust international relationships, in the low pay of the capitalist systems, etc.) and to offer that product (bread and wine) on God's altar is like killing a son (the poor, the oppressed classes, the dependent nations) in the sight of God himself. It is to offer worship not to God but to the Beast, the Idol, Satan.

Worship, the heart of religion, has much to do with work and with political economy. Sin has much to do with dispossession and want among the poor. For the Hebrews, to work (*habodah*) the ground in agriculture was expressed by the same term as that which designated the act of worship in the temple or divine "service" (*habodah*). *Habodah* is the action/work of the "Servant" (from the same root: *hebed*). Work (= service, in Greek *diakonia*), i.e. economic and material help for the poor, and worship of God have the same basic structure of meaning. Worship, the heart of religion, i.e. of the underlying religion, is fulfilled in the *praxis* of service and liberation of one's poor brethren, of the stranger, the widow and the orphan. This is why Hosea exclaims in the name of God, as he attacks priestly liturgical legalism and all "spiritualizing" (= dematerializing, de-economizing, ideologizing): "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (6: 6).

Within religion, in its full meaning, worship has an economic significance (understanding by "economic" the relationship of man with nature, with

the fruit of work, and with other men). Giving food to the hungry, helping an oppressed nation or class to free itself, is thus to render service to the poor as worship of God. "Mercy" to the poor is the "sacrifice" God desires. The new economic, political and ideological order in history, built as a home for a people newly liberated -if always no more than partially so within history -is the fruit of an act of worship: it is the innovating production of goods for those who today are outside, the poor. To love others as indeed other, as outside, as citizens of the coming Kingdom still beyond us (i.e. *agape*), is the dynamic power of its underlying infrastructure. Thus religion is not some ideological superstructure which justifies the prevailing system; religion is rather the infrastructural undermining of the sinful *status quo* and the construction of a new order in history as an offering or sacrifice to God, a sharing in that building of his Kingdom which is *God's* own gift.

The revolutionary who is a believer will not see his religious position as a matter of accident or of little importance. His religion is a radical openness, an enabling condition of greater political and economic creativity in his work, his service of the poor. This service, "already" in the Kingdom since it is outside the system, is worship of God. Thus the poor are a necessary mediation of the act of worship of the Infinite. In being an epiphany of the crucified *God* appealing for help, the poor are also the necessary path of salvation. The poor are the *origin* of the calling (vocation to their service) and *mediation* of salvation, for it is through service to the poor that worship is offered to God.

All actual, material and thus religious service of the poor is in itself worship of God and the building of his Kingdom.

To deny poverty is to deny the absence of the Kingdom in the present system. It is to affirm the existing system as the kingdom of this world. To affirm the poor, on the other hand, and to serve their eventual liberation, in the structures and in history, is to witness to the presence of the Kingdom in the satisfying of the poor and to the absence of the Kingdom in the imperfection of society. *The poor are the epiphany of the Kingdom or of the infinite exteriority of God.*

It remains to distinguish between the inorganic multitude and the people as the emerging subject of history (Gen. 41 : 40), and the People of God as Church (Acts 15 : 14) called to a special role in history:

Come out of her (Babylon), my people, lest you take part in her sins.
(Revelation 18 : 4)

The Church, God's remnant among the peoples of earth, has evangelism for its calling. To evangelize is to bring good news to the poor, to turn the many into a people and to make that people aware of the destiny that God has prepared for them: the Kingdom. Not just aware, but active, now that there is a real possibility of conquering sin, of restoring their wealth to the poor and of building a new order in which there will be neither rich nor poor. neither oppressors nor oppressed, neither nations of the centre nor nations of the periphery, neither ruling classes nor those that suffer the rule of others...