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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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## Liberation Theology: Looking Forward

HUGO ASSMANN

I do not see easy paths, but rough tracks, winding ways. Anyway, now is not the time for straight lines and fixed points, at least not for a person who doesn't offer humble submission to the overabundant certainties flaunted around the world. We may find consolation, and a challenge, in the fact that the place where unpredictability is reappearing is the crisis of the paradigms of the pure sciences: dissolving structures, states far from equilibrium. Not even matter, and still less life, is governed solely by order and equilibrium. The uncertainty principle is part of reality, and not just of the way it is perceived. The excluded third wants to get through into the core of the sciences. (On the historical plane, we are the excluded third. We are more in favour of dissolving structures, aren't we?)

We know what a sharp contrast this is with the petulance of the powerful, in economics and politics. Order, the already established and the already known demand exclusive validity. And what happens in the churches and in the various schools of theology? The diagnosis is familiar: they are trying to go back to strong discipline. I suspect that the strategy is based on the idea of making an impact by having a single voice. Once again, as so many times in the past, a missionary venture is dominated by fear.

More than ever, liberation theology must maintain and intensify its attitude of constant *metanoia*. Learning from the faith experiences and evangelising potential of the poor was its motto from the beginning. If at times it broke this rule, and fell into arrogant certainty, perhaps driven and horrified by cruel urgencies, it is now time to go back to learning to learn.

In the midst of a world lulled into accepting dogmas and noisy proclamations of good news, it is important to welcome uncertainties. We need an attitude, a spirit and – why not? – a spirituality based on fruitful uncertainties; obviously not in the sense of being rudderless or rootless, but in the sense of maintaining the utopian perspective which is under attack, in the sense of openness to alternatives, to hope, to surprise, to the unpredictable, to the tricks of grace in history.

Why do I insist on this? It is because it is part of the open structure of faith, understood as listening to the cries of the excluded – of the excluded Jesus of Nazareth and the excluded poor – which is fed by an attitude of openness to the new and unforeseen. We are living today within a huge process in which situations that cry out for change are silenced, as are the cries of countless victims. Deafness, insensitivity, blocks on solidarity are the dominant mode. Without conversion there is no listening to the cry; there is no faith. This is what gives such importance to a founding element of liberation theology: it seeks to learn to listen to the silenced, to listen to their cries. Its validation is linked to faith and spirituality. It is impossible to practise it by mere flourishes of academic language.

The powers which oppress need certainties: more than anything, the certainty of doing good, the certainty of being the bearers of good news, of a gospel. Their conviction that they possess it – that is, the fact that the oppressors feel themselves to be benefactors – is the point which the so-called movements of the left have understood very little.

To the extent that they have been learnt by listening to the cry of the victims, our certainties are of a different character. As a result they do not conflict with constant openness and search. As well as being different, in their origin and content, they are opposed to the false certainties of the false gospels.

What are our certainties? In brief, they are the clear facts of hunger, acute poverty and the exclusion of countless human beings from the dominant logics. Are we certain or not that it makes sense to side with them? It makes sense because it is the very meaning of faith. It makes sense as well for our health and happiness, and for the health of the planet.

I have taken a long time over this preamble because I wanted to have it as a backdrop to what I am going to say about the challenges facing us. I shall mention just a few of these challenges.

I shall begin with what I call the hijacking of the gospel by the *oikumene* of the market. Are there new implications for the poor? Are there shifts in the commitments of Christians and the churches?

From this there follows immediately the need for an inventory of the repositionings, both theoretical and practical, required in liberation theology. This applies mainly to conceptions of the human and of politics.

Thirdly, and just as an example, I shall touch briefly on a theological issue which, as the Pope says in his most recent social encyclical, *Centesimus annus*, has ‘great hermeneutical value’. What I want to do is offer hypotheses. If we are immersed in a vast process of idolatry and sacrificial ideas, how does it have a profound effect on this and other theological issues?

In conclusion, I shall take a quick look at the need to broaden the horizons of our spirituality.

## I

### *State of the World I: The Catholicity of the Market*

With the welcome collapse of ‘real socialism’, a wave of capitalist triumphalism has swept the world. I think that it is a mistake to attribute this cry of triumph only to specific undeniable virtues of the market economy. In the way it functions, the market economy is not separable from the other two structural aspects of capitalism, political structures and capitalist culture. The political structures make up a very specific model of democracy (the economic and social content of which is basically left to the laws of the market). And capitalist culture seeks to reproduce the values required by capitalist economics and politics.

This complex is preached these days as imperious and evangelical, good news sweeping all before it. It has transformed itself into the principal religion, which subordinates the minor religions. Faced with this universal gospel – *katholon* – all the other religions, including Christianity, have been reduced to the status of particular religions. The *oikumene* which now seeks to take over the task of the basic humanisation of the planet belongs to capitalism, via the market. The promises of life come connected to the developments of this catholicity. Capital is the Giver of Life. The other gospels are now particular, with a complementary mission.

Put this way, it seems shocking in the extreme and sounds slightly absurd; not, however, to anyone who has thought hard about neoliberal ideology, which includes, in its global revelation of the market, practically all aspects of life. Pluralist systems are accepted, and even encouraged, together with a measure of moral and religious freedom. But this holds only for those aspects which do not affect the essential gospel of the system. Unconditional adherence is demanded to what are considered the definitive guiding principles. They do not hover in the air. They take the specific form of utopianised institutions and mechanisms.

Do we understand the novelty? What is new in the current state of the world is that capitalism has reached a stage in which it presents itself as an integrated whole: market, liberal democracy and capitalist culture. It is as an integrated whole that it offers itself to the world as a global solution. It no longer admits alternative systems, and is not prepared to make concessions.

If we were to list the elements that highlight the religious fallacies of this economic religion, we would have to tackle topics such as the following:

- the insistence on the messianic role of the market in neoliberal discourse;
- the inculcation of a mystique of the market;
- capitalist culture as a whole;
- the one-directional interpretation of the failure of 'real socialism';
- talk of the 'end of history';
- the naturalisation of history;
- the peculiar view of the self-regulating nature of the market (superior to the potential for self-regulation found in living organisms or ecosystems);
- and, above all, the implication that the market is good news (gospel).

In other texts I have discussed four points in which the paradigm of self-interest, developed in the market system, has inverted and retranslated essential elements of Christianity:

- A programme for the achievement of the common good without conscious purposes, which are replaced by blind processes – in other words, love of neighbour without the need for conversion.
- The presentation of this paradigm as a happy 'discovery' – in other words, the hijacking of the gospel by a messianic version of the market.
- A profound transformation of the image of God – in other words, the creation of an idol (idolatry of the market).
- An inexorable insistence on sacrifice in which all sacrifices are 'necessary' and the victims lose all dignity – in other words a new insistence on sacrifice, which is difficult to categorise as a relation of persecution because the process of creating victims is silent and made to seem natural.

### *State of the World II: The Majority of Humanity Is Relegated to the Category of 'Useless'*

Only now are we clearly aware of this. The gulf between the rich and poor countries (with similar differences within our countries) has now created an unprecedented situation: the poor majority is now seen to be totally useless and without a role as a factor in production. Let us look at the scale of the phenomenon.

There is no doubt that the rich countries still need the poor *countries* (as exporters of capital and raw materials and as suppliers of cheap labour), but they no longer need most of their *populations*. The old phrase 'the reserve army of the unemployed'

is no longer adequate for dealing with this issue. It implied potential access to the labour market, and thus envisaged typical exploitation as taking the form of manipulation through the rotation of scarce jobs. Today false consciousness has deepened. One business leader's question sums up the situation: 'How can I be exploiting people when I'm not even interested in employing them?'

*Centesimus annus*, section 33, notes the acute problem of the masses of 'superfluous' people. But has it escaped from the ambiguity when it states: 'Thus, if not actually exploited, they are to a great extent marginalised; economic development takes place over their heads, so to speak'? Concentrate on the image. Would it not be better to talk about their heads being crushed by a steamroller?

'Structural adjustment' needs only to be mentioned to evoke the inexorable consequences we all know only too well. Its social cost, in sacrificed human lives, is frightening.

### *State of the World III: Are the Churches and Christians Making 'Adjustments'?*

To work with the hypothesis that because of the new world situation churches and individual Christians are adopting new positions has nothing offensive about it. It is simple common sense.

Most Christians feel perfectly at home within capitalism as it is. They even take part, without many questions, in all the functioning of the system. What sounds abnormal, to most Christians, is head-on criticism of capitalism in any of its structural aspects.

The accusation of materialism sometimes brought against aspects of capitalism – which is being heard with new force at present – never had an impact comparable with that of the persistent charge of atheism levelled at socialism. That is why no one is inclined even to ask whether the churches in the socialist countries had a critical influence on the structures of their countries, or whether that influence was greater or less than the slight influence for change that the churches here have on the structures of their countries. Obviously, the churches in the socialist countries did have influence. There is no shortage of people now wanting to give them credit for the collapse.

Some years ago a fervent ideologue of 'democratic capitalism' delivered his verdict: on the level of institutions the marriage between capitalism and most Christians has been quite peacefully consummated, although it has not yet been ratified in the heaven of principles, as regards official church documents. As we see, he jokingly put the order of events the wrong way round, and he added that, partly because of this lack of ratification, segments of Christianity continued to be somewhat inhibited about the consummation. If I attempt a translation it might be: that is why things like liberation theology and so on could go on happening.

Let us return to the question: are new 'adjustments' taking place at present? To show that they are would mean understanding delicate nuances. It is well known that in the specialised language of religion (and other areas) adjectives produce miraculous shifts in the meaning of nouns. Not being a fan of such charades, I will restrict myself to some hermeneutical suggestions.

I assume that any analysis of possible new positions ought to start from what is today the really new aspect of the situation: in terms of global models, there are no longer really any alternatives, if we are considering what has any weight in the real world. Capitalism has. The discredited 'real socialism' has ceased to have. The 'third way', whatever that means, also has none. And it seems that there are as yet no

coherent alternative models of socialism. That is the picture in the real world.

Thus there is no confrontation between real models on an equal footing. Criticism of reality, and even serious confrontations, remain perfectly possible, but they are conditioned by what really exists. What exists works on the basis of its solid reality. The critiques may refer to it, but their basis is, almost exclusively, on another level, that of criteria and principles. Other distinctions could be suggested, but this one has great hermeneutical importance.

The market and planning have ceased to be opposed models now that total planning – which also had religious features – has collapsed. The unrestricted market, while non-existent in practice, maintains its position as an ideological postulate, with no counter-postulate of equal weight. What exists in fact is an unchallenged dominance of the market, accompanied by a heady mystique about the total market. This dominance does, it is true, experience various forms of interference foreign to its intrinsic dynamic, some supportive, some restrictive. In any event, however, the basic fact is the dominance of the market. Not even the so-called ‘social’ market economies deviate from it. It is worth reflecting here on the old social democratic dictum: as much market as possible and as much planning as necessary (to guarantee social aims). It has always been found – and the Pope has emphasised this more than once, though the neoliberals refuse to recognise the fact – that the market does not meet social priorities.

Today the differences do not lie between total plan and total market. They lie between an unrestricted market on the one hand, and a market with planning for social targets on the other. The thorny questions are the detailed definition of the limits to be imposed on the market, and what sort of bodies are needed to plan the relevant interventions. After all, let us not forget, we are immersed in market dominance.

Most present-day Latin American governments have fallen into the snare of neoliberal rhetoric. This argues that, in the case of our countries, the market has still not sufficiently consolidated its predominance. The final installation of this predominance goes by the charming name of ‘modernisation’. The result of this situation is the frequent juxtaposition of conflicting discourses: we will establish the predominance of the market in the economy, but we will not allow the market to neglect social needs. The market always neglects them. Isn’t it obvious that the two types of discourse move on different planes? Profession of faith in the market has a specific reference, to something that exists. The only reference that social promises have is to the ethereal principles they invoke.

In the light of the foregoing, it is clear that we have an interpretative key which enables us to distinguish different referential levels in the churches’ social documents. With regard to the market economy and capitalism as a whole, we invariably find elements of support (more or less firm) and of criticism (more or less strong). These elements come combined, without any clear distinction of levels. It is thus perfectly feasible for them to produce lists of statements that both accept the market and are critical of it. Taken separately, they serve to reinforce opposed positions. Taken together, the impact of each set is probably very different. The one which refers to what really exists usually yields bigger ideological dividends, though this doesn’t mean that the abstract principles and criteria have no use in real battles. The encyclical *Centesimus annus*, so full of critical discernment with regard to the market economy, lends itself magnificently to the suggested interpretative exercise.

Two further observations before ending this section. The first expresses a personal conviction. I think that the restatement in official church documents that the destiny

of all resources and products of human labour is the common good of all provides an important campaigning issue. Related to this are an insistence on the connection between the principle of solidarity – not optional but in this respect binding on Christians – with a more or less clearly defined list of human needs and their essential material basis, and a stress on the defence of human dignity, spelt out in practical terms in this context. These ideas touch the core of market logic.

My second observation refers to the gradual appearance in official church documents of an explicit connection between theology and economics. It is true that moral argument still predominates over the theological, but the awareness that economic problems have not only ethical but also directly theological implications is beginning to get into these documents. To my surprise, the expression ‘idolatry of the market’ has already made its appearance in *Centesimus annus*.

## II

In this section my sentences will be shorter. I will say straight out what I just suspect. I am not setting myself up as an adviser. Discouragement is not my style. I am still learning from the fireflies – I’m surprised at how much light they give.

### *Liberation Theology I: Fidelity*

There are things we will not give up, though we are always ready to go back to learning. Some of these are the following.

At the origin of what we venture to say are the thousand and one ingredients of the actions we call *praxis*. It is only in *praxis* that one discovers that one’s ideals have flesh and blood and that it is worthwhile cherishing hopes. Books, although they are in written form, only develop their flavour in life.

Without faith and spirituality, theology makes no sense. And faith consists (holds itself together) in listening to the cry. Grace rushes in from others. This is ‘the evangelising potential of the poor’.

We don’t have God as an object we have acquired. ‘The verb “to have” is the death of God’, said Moacyr Félix. God searches for us, insidiously. We search for him when we understand that he is the one who listens to the cry of the victims.

Jesus was the one who said that the Samaritan was ‘good’; the Samaritan, not the priest. Imagine the fury. Then they got busy. There was no place for this in their logic. The only thing to do was to get rid of him. But God liked it and said Amen. So do we, even if it brings us to disaster.

A crucial point, where few people understand us, is that we hold that the experience of transcendence is savoured and stammered about within history. They would like to shut it up in cells or churches. There is nothing wrong with churches, when they give energy and nourishment, word, wine and bread, fratenderness [a neologism in the Portuguese, meaning ‘brotherly love’ — Ed.] and stimulus, then spread out to where life goes on. ‘History can no longer be separated from the place where human beings encounter transcendence’, said Juan Luís Segundo. This is the crucial point.

Because God is the Mystery embedded in history, the *logos* of theo-logia has to be a *dia-logos*, a word which springs up in the texture of history. It has mediations. It is a journeying word. What are the mediations? Those which help us to journey through history. Let words be built as houses are, with real-life materials. Let them be fit for living creatures to live in. It is no good doing theology just within theology

itself. Anyone who tries that builds tombs, even if they are impressive mausoleums.

Why should we renounce the most typical feature of liberation theology, its fruitful connection with life? There are types of academic theology which are so insensitive to what goes on in the world that they deserve to be called cynical. Linear reason connects fixed points. Our way of thought operates with multiple nexuses, decentredness, multidirectionality.

Can gospels be created without feeling? To resonate inwardly and resonate with something is empathy and sympathy. This is the organisation of hope.

And let us not lose our sense of humour. In the Christian cornfield there are amusing stupidities.

### *Liberation Theology II: Revision*

It was necessary to resist those who tried to reduce liberation theology to a sort of regional variant, to a contextualisation dictated by circumstances. We retorted that there were things in our version which had a resonance beyond our borders. As we looked towards the future of humanity and of Christianity, we got to the point of dreaming that the Third World would evangelise the churches. Without giving up this dream, we have to reassess the thickness of the walls which divide us. Isn't this a reflection, within the churches, of the increased marginalisation of the Two-thirds World?

We are not the dominant voice. We are a voice at best tolerated. We make an impact, true, and even have an influence. But, at most, we are one voice among many. If there were times when we fell into arrogance, now is the time to return to humility. We will have to negotiate for our little piece of earth, our modest path, foot by foot. In today's world and today's churches, any rights are defined by the dominant powers and the prevalent authoritarianism, and by the limited spaces allowed for participation. Are we really democratic? Would we like the *demos* of democracy to mean the turn of the long-suffering people? Let us keep our ideal radical, but let us not forget how small are the spaces for democracy. In the churches they are very small indeed. Finding them, using them and trying to enlarge them requires perseverance. It requires care with the available energy, and paying attention to one's health.

Liberation theology began in a climate of acute needs, though also of newly kindled hopes. The cruel needs continue, and today they are more acute than ever. Has hope been exhausted? Well, 'Let not faith nor hope fail.' Nevertheless, in re-examining our naivety, let us be sure to look also at the framework within which it developed. This is a subject for serious discussion because it has to do with the social analysis we adopt, models of struggle, vanguardism which has no echo among the masses, and even secret doses of populism. We would be naive if we did not realise that some of us were not wary enough to avoid being labelled as adherents of the 'isms' that were top of the hate list. Not all lies have short legs. Those in high places produce lies with long legs, which get a long way.

Real life is dense, and the dialectic available to us had the fault of leading us off on byways, in a most undialectical way. This happened both in theory and in practice. I think we still sometimes fall into the sin of intellectuals who claim to represent the people but who, sure that they know best, ignore the many different views expressed.

Liberation theology grew out of social alliances, in which the presence of lay Christians alongside non-Christians was taken for granted. The work of systematising it fell into the hands of clerics and their hangers-on. To a point this was

inevitable, but that didn't make it any less dangerous. Did it, perhaps, get infected to some extent by clericalism? A layperson advanced the hypothesis: the greater the persecution, the more the movement stays confined to the church. Even in the most painful conflicts there was a tendency to miss the point, to stray on to less important issues as compared with the basic options of most value to the oppressed.

Liberation theology was quite ecumenical at its birth. Our Protestant brothers and sisters made significant contributions. This ecumenical cover was used at crucial moments. Ecumenical bodies showed disinterested generosity in their support. Despite this, for sociological reasons, but not only, a sort of 'Great Catholic' arrogance thrived. This was shown at meetings, in collections of books, etc. There is no suggestion that we should abandon denominational characteristics; sometimes the facts of life demand them. Nevertheless, there remains a lack of readiness on the part of Catholics to establish fruitful ecumenical alliances on many levels.

There was carelessness, even blindness, in taking up the challenges of discrimination against women, blacks, indigenous peoples, ethnic and cultural variants. White male dominance is a characteristic of liberation theology which the nature of the churches themselves makes hard to overcome. If the churches discriminate, liberation theology must create a strong witness to the contrary, and do it quickly.

### *Liberation Theology III: Learning*

As I said at the beginning, I shall be stressing anthropological and political issues.

The collapse of 'real socialism' exposed a deep conflict in conceptions of human nature. I think that now is the time to learn to discern what is valid and what is dangerously naive in a series of terms which were common currency in progressive movements in Latin America. Examples include 'consciousness', 'conscientisation', 'class option' and 'new human being'.

Our understanding, which I consider correct, is that the essence of violence and injustice, which rebounds on the poor, derives from 'perverse structures'. It is the gradual working out of the oppressive logic of the law, and not breaches of that law, which gives rise to social sin. So clear to us was the causal nexus between the self-regulating aspect of malign institutions and their terrible consequences that we may not have thought enough about the self-regulatory processes essential in any living process, both on the strictly biological level and on the social. Possibly we came very close to the absurdity of imagining that everything in life could be governed, very soon, by deliberate decisions, conscious processes linked to scientific processes. 'Socialism will be scientific or it will not be', was Engels' *fatwa*. I imagine that for many people the 'new human being' was a model of the most complete consciousness permeated by pure generosity. Today we are beginning to understand better the limits which are possible for consciousness. Without the protection of self-regulatory mechanisms, on the institutional and cultural level, the sense of urgency leads to cruel demands and a very bad use of the socially available human energy.

In Eastern Europe we now hear explicit reversals: 'We tried to create the new human being without egoistical aspirations. I fear that isn't possible' (Václav Klaus, Czechoslovakia). On our side of the divide there is no lack of people passing verdicts: 'Socialism failed because it conflicts with the complexity of the human condition' (Zbigniew Brzezinski); 'Capitalism is triumphing because it is coherent with human nature' (Michael Novak).

We don't reflect enough on the fact that a particular vision of the human being was embodied, from the beginning, in the paradigm of self-interest working itself out

in the market system: total confidence in self-regulating mechanisms and a willingness to do without conscious intentions. 'Real socialism', at the other extreme, put its faith in the utterly generous giving of human beings who could be regimented, at any minute, in the service of plans devised by the supposed omniscience of infallible central authorities, which would be the vanguard and channel for the concious current of all.

It isn't easy to choose and respect, at every moment and in changing circumstances, a vision of human nature opposed to these two extremes. On the one hand, there is opposition to the blindly self-regulating machine, which seeks to discard conscious intentionality. We know, all too well, that the logic of self-regulating market mechanisms tends to exclusion, rejection and expulsion. On the other hand, there is opposition to centralised command systems which arrogate the right to demand time and energy, assuming that they are at the pinnacle of disinterested consciousness and infallibility in management. We now realise more clearly that these are two types of sacrificial morality which need victims, many victims.

How can respect for interests be combined with faith in openness to self-giving? In community contexts, with near consensus, we are easily led to idealise generous self-giving. Isn't this proved by so many of our songs and prayers? We take for granted conversion and solidarity almost without resistance. But on the plane of complex societies, the greater the institutionalised injustice, the greater the obstacles to our capacity for solidarity. On top of everything is the deadening effect of the bourgeoisie; underneath is the constant pressure of hunger and fear, which generates violence even among the poor and encourages absorption in immediate needs. For these and other reasons, community languages, when not combined with the languages of hard conflict negotiation, come into crisis and prove inadequate in popular movements, trade union activity and political struggle. Many people have already begun to understand this, but the effects of this understanding on the view of the economy form a relatively new chapter of liberation theology.

From now on, statements of general principle on the ideal of a just and fraternal society must be filtered through anthropological and political analysis which can detect the levels of possible false consciousness, since without this we will continue to accept a morality of sacrifice. It is not advisable to set at maximum, and universalise at that level, ethical demands in complex societies. On the other hand, it is worse to lose faith totally in the capacity for solidarity, in what Karl Rahner called the 'supernatural existential', which calls us inwardly to give ourselves and makes us fraternisable, on the way to behaving like brothers and sisters.

What has been said so far immediately raises a series of linked problems; for example, the question of bodies to plan and execute priority social aims. These aims are a necessity unless we cease to believe that human beings are genuinely fraternisable to the point of being able to reach agreements on priority social aims. The bodies we have on this institutional level (the state, parliaments, parties, etc.) are far from being useful for such aims. Their non-transformation perpetuates the pretexts of those who promise the spontaneous generation and birth of social justice through the action and favour of the market mechanism.

Another important question, which directly touches the ambiguity of some sorts of liberation theology language, is that of the dialectical tension between the utopian horizon and the institutional forms required to make history. This is one of the most confused points in the ideological armoury of the Latin American left. How many short-circuits are made between the straining aspirations, so far from realisation in the cruel present, and the leap to perfect liberation in a tomorrow declared possible,

over the first hill or round the first corner? To preserve the utopian horizon – never totally attainable, but always a necessary goal – and to glimpse the step-by-step process of the precarious but possible institutional roads, we need a critique of glib utopian reason, the sort that kills dialectic and makes utopias out of existing institutions (whether they are called self-regulating mechanisms of the unrestricted market or universal planning models). There is no perfect building of the Kingdom in history because it is the horizon which keeps our hope warm. The Kingdom, which is already present among us, is only a seed, sign and fragmentary anticipation, enough to make us really embrace bodies, causes and plans.

Here I break off my unfinished list of lessons to be learnt.

### III

Liberation theology requires the liberation of theology, as Juan Luís Segundo insisted twenty years ago. This task was put off in many areas, and cannot be delayed any longer in the new situation created by current developments. There are already beds with soil broken to a fine tilth, almost ready for planting. But there are many other plots that are still caked and dry. My garden is modest and my crops are few. I am almost ashamed to be giving tips about other areas, where my hoe has not yet broken the surface.

My modest efforts, over the past few years, have been concentrated on the relationship between economics and theology and, stemming from this, on issues to do with human nature (since we have entered the 'decade of the brain'). I sometimes have the impression that direct access to liberation theology is blocked at some points by piles of rubbish. There are subjects, for example, which affect thrones and altars when broached. An example? Let us think what the implications of a soteriology without sacrifice would be. I'm not sure if a roundabout route via problems which at first sight are less theological really makes the journey easier. I assume that this is true even in some areas which are by no means secondary. Today dialogue with the pure sciences, as well as being necessary, helps to put theological topics in a new context.

Cruel idols and their inexorable demand for sacrifice, idolatry and the morality of sacrifice – I feel that this set of issues points towards profound changes which have barely begun. In the following paragraphs I shall venture, rashly, into hypotheses about a related subject, by way of illustrating what I am suggesting.

#### *Original Sin: Capitalist and 'Socialist' Versions*

The subject of original sin is enormously relevant. Whatever the emphasis, or the aspect given most stress, in discussing original sin, we are faced with very different visions of the way human beings can be regarded as historical agents. I regard it as of utmost importance that we realise that capitalism, as well as 'socialism', has a particular interpretation of original sin.

As a generic problem, the myth of original sin is present in almost all cultures. It is the expression, in mythical language, of the discoveries humanity has been making about the contingent nature of the human being as such (on the ontological level), but especially in relation to the extent to which it is possible to achieve mutual love between human beings in association, given that this love is necessarily mediated by institutional forms.

It should not have surprised us that this issue of the contingent nature of ideals

which could really be achieved should reappear in acute form with the advent of complex human societies. The discovery of 'society' is, in this sense, the most important fact of the modern era. As a result, the different polarities in the interpretation of what is expressed by talk about original sin are closely linked to ideas, different and even contradictory, about the way to pursue the best solutions for the realisation of the common good.

Before the rise of capitalism and of the socialist ideals which are its counterpart, the dominant attitude in the western Christian tradition to what were called the limitations imposed by original sin in the historical and social sphere was quite pessimistic. The West was always inventing substitute historical agents, above or beyond history, which were credited with a beneficent intervention in history to reduce the consequences of human contingency (i.e. of original sin). This pessimism persisted from St Augustine down to the Council of Trent, though there were obvious differences of emphasis.

It was in the modern period that there appeared, I think for the first time, two very different versions, which, however, have in common a certain tone of good news: both regard themselves as having found a solution to the problem. But this happy state was reached by very different routes in the two cases. It is useful to remember that there were almost two centuries of pondering about 'passions and interests' before the bourgeois economists (especially in the work of Adam Smith) reached a clear view. They said that the passions govern human beings; the productive passions (ambition, greed, self-interested effort) are directed to the common good. Then came the great 'discovery' that self-interest, in the clash of competition, is a sure guide to the common good.

The paradigm of self-interest, which appeared as a happy solution, contains, paradoxically, a clear recognition of original sin. Some writers maintain that, on this point, both the Reformation and the Council of Trent created a favourable climate. This paradigm, however, is at the same time a jubilant proposal about how not to worry too much about the matter, now that an enticing path has been found for getting the best out of original sin. For the first time, I believe, original sin, while preserving its dark side, acquires a brilliant and beneficial side. Incredible as it may seem, this positive side is substantially the same thing as the dark side. This marvellous solution is intelligible only if we note the new and ingenious way of creating a transcendental subject, which does what good subjective intentions would never succeed in doing: this consists of the self-regulating mechanisms of the market, which are much more important than conscious human agents.

Historic socialist ideals constructed optimism by a very different method: collective consciousness, armed with a science of the social, would enable us to cast off the weight of our contingency. Human future is possible because, under the specified conditions of science and consciousness, human subjects will guide the course of history, taking into account its material determinants. Put like this, it is clearly an oversimplification. Original sin, in this second optimistic version, is connected above all with material conditions and the dead ends of historical consciousness, and the solution is left to the capacity of human agents to surpass themselves and direct, consciously and scientifically, these factors and their own social organisation.

Nevertheless, socialism has taken seriously the historical obstacles which arise from the material base of social relations and are reflected in the stumbling progress of social consciousness, and which hinder, especially in class-divided societies, the conscious construction of the common good. We could perhaps see here a theory of original sin that is particular to historic socialism. However, its intense faith in the

emergence of social consciousness, capable of being directed scientifically to collective goals, led the majority of interpreters to say that in 'socialism' confidence in the redemptive role of human beings as shapers of history was so great that it was not just an unacceptable undervaluing of original sin, but it implied a readiness to do without God completely – and hence atheism. Human beings, raised to the position of active shapers of history, were in conflict with a particular image of God.

In capitalism, by contrast, there is no similar arrogance about historical agents. They are seen – in a full acceptance of the individualised and subjective wound of original sin – as bundles of passions and interests. This situation is considered irremediable, with the result that it is impossible to regard with confidence any advances of social consciousness seeking to organise the achievement of the common good in complex societies. It is regarded as much wiser to keep appeals to conscience to the minimum. In their place comes a more 'human' solution: to leave to self-interest and the providential mechanisms of the market the achievement of the common good, at least in its main aspects. Additional philanthropy is welcome, since there will always be people who do not choose to activate their self-interest. It is clear that this attitude takes seriously an individualised original sin (not its social aspects), mistrusts the value of conversions as a support for social aims and has an unshakeable faith in the regulatory processes of the market. Who can say that there is atheism in such great confidence in a providential solution? With the human being as shaper of history reduced to lower status, there is room for a particular image of God. The important thing is not to stop asking, 'Which God?' The denied God of total planning does in fact cast doubt on the existence of God. But the affirmed God of the unrestricted market gives neither God nor us qualms. There is no doubt at all, it is Moloch in person.

### *Irreverent 'Intermezzo' on Conversion*

Be converted to your self-interest  
as a basic option.

Explore the salutary aspect  
of your original sin.

Never let yourself be confused  
by another preferential option.

Once the course prescribed was hard:  
'Be converted to others.

This is the first step,  
the precondition,  
for love to exist in the world.'

In those days they only mentioned  
the bad sides of original sin:

vices to be fought,  
passions to be choked,  
interests to be ditched ...

What a waste of energy  
driving good intentions home ...

Only beggars wait for bread  
on other folks' goodwill.

Our advantage only comes  
when others profit too.

New times, new gospel too!  
Be converted and entrust yourself  
to the promises of competition-imitation.  
My imitation desire  
imitates what others crave  
imitates those who'll win,  
imitates those who use  
effortlessly  
the verb *to have*.  
Let us combine our copycat desires  
in a universal mimicry.  
No one stops anyone from having  
a corrective conversion,  
a complementary option,  
for charitable hobbies.  
But never give up your original sin.  
Never go out without it!

*Original Sin in Centesimus annus*

Everyone will have realised that this little ironic poem had two aims: to alert us to the dangers the fundamental option for the self-regulation of the market contains for the essence of Christian faith, and to alert us also to the naivety and lack of realism about human nature involved in aspirations to build complex societies on the basis of unlimited generosity. The Pope's text, which I reproduce below, is a good example of the difficulties involved in maintaining a balanced position between the unrestricted market and paralysing central planning.

The text is clear about what is accepted and what is rejected. This is the moment to apply the interpretative key suggested above. Do the examples cited in support of acceptance and rejection operate on the same level of reality? In the final section the text employs condemnatory invective (the dangerous illusion of those who try to bring heaven down to earth, the need to tolerate the mixture of good and evil, don't try to anticipate the final judgment, etc.) which recall classical metaphors used by liberal and neoliberal thinkers – Karl Popper, Friedrich Hayek, Michael Novak and others — something which the Pope perhaps didn't even realise.

I would say that the text, which should not be taken in isolation, admits of various interpretations. But, whatever the interpretation, it is a quite original effort in terms of a theology of original sin directly related to economics.

Centesimus annus 25

Man, who was created for freedom, bears within himself the wound of original sin, which constantly draws him towards evil and puts him in need of redemption. Not only is *this doctrine an integral part of Christian revelation*; it also has great hermeneutical value insofar as it helps one to understand human reality. Man tends towards good, but he is also capable of evil. He can transcend his immediate interest and still remain bound to it. The social order will be the more stable the more it takes this fact into account and does not place in opposition personal interest and the interests of society as a whole, but rather seeks to bring them into fruitful harmony. In fact, where self-interest is violently suppressed, it is replaced by a burdensome system of

bureaucratic control which dries up the wellsprings of initiative and creativity. When people think they possess the secret of a perfect social organisation which makes evil impossible, they also think that they can use any means, including violence and deceit, in order to bring that organisation into being. Politics then becomes a 'secular religion' which operates under the illusion of creating paradise in this world. But no political society – which possesses its own autonomy and laws – can ever be confused with the Kingdom of God. The Gospel parable of the weeds among the wheat (cf. Matt. 13:24–30; 36–43) teaches that it is for God alone to separate the subjects of the Kingdom from the subjects of the Evil One, and that this judgment will take place at the end of time. By presuming to anticipate judgment here and now, man puts himself in the place of God and sets himself against the patience of God.

### Conclusion

I will make two final remarks, closely related to the need to deepen our spirituality. We need to relearn, at every turn, how to live with the implications of human contingency on the socio-historical plane. We have to reject the idols which demand victims and renounce moralities based on sacrifice. At the same time, we have to discern mixed gods, tolerate the harsh fact of not being able to eliminate, at a stroke, idolatrous sacrificial systems which crucify the poor; meanwhile, in the midst of all this, we have to believe in our vocation to self-giving – how can we live this out and make it effective in practice? I think that it is precisely here that the preferential option for the poor is an essential illuminating reference, without which there is no possibility of serene fidelity. It is humble learning to listen to the cry of Jesus the Victim and of the oppressed victims that can keep us in a hope-filled state of *metanoia*.

My second remark amplifies the first. We will have to live with complex articulations of human contingency in the ambiguities of the market economy, fighting for priority to be given without delay to social goals. This implies a deep relationship with pain and pleasure. Why? Because the West, and within it Christianity, has never ultimately come to terms with pain and pleasure. Capitalism, in its way, filled this vacuum. In the West suffering and pleasure were never respected in themselves. They were integrated into theories of ends, pain-for and pleasure-for. Capitalism is a fantastic revolution as far as these issues are concerned. It turns the morality of sacrifice on its head, silencing and invalidating the cries of the victims. It presents itself as a theory of happiness and pleasure, manipulating human desires in their deepest dimension and moulding bodies. It thereby prepares the way for an outburst of ambiguous ecstatic spiritualities. This is an extremely challenging range of issues. I would say, to sum up, that a Christianity which is unable to face and unravel these challenges, and a spirituality which is unable to deal positively with the subject of pleasure, will have little chance of creating gospels that help people to see through the fallacious gospel of the market's 'economic religion'.

(Translated from the Portuguese by Francis McDonagh.)