

## EVIL AND HOPE: A REFLECTION FROM THE VICTIMS

Hope and evil are always with us—evil cruelly and plainly; and hope too, but often miraculously.

On the one hand there is the limitation inherent in everything human. There is the burden of life, and the misery of existence. There is sin and there is guilt. Acceptance of finitude, even when tried, is never easy. And then, there is death—Epicurus' attempts at denial notwithstanding, because one thing is death and another the rejection of dying in an agonizing manner. There too is the ghost that now brings panic to our world by suggesting that humanity is not a viable adventure.

Evil is beyond ourselves. This is the evil that has been the subject—under different names—of the international summit meetings of the recent years: ecologic destruction (Rio de Janeiro), and the inhuman situation of the human species (Cairo, Copenhagen). With his eyes on El Salvador, the late Archbishop Romero used to say: "This is the reign of hell."

On the other hand there is the hope of life, especially that of millions of impoverished people—a hope kept alive by life itself, and by big and small experiences of grace. This hope of the poor has also been kept burning by prophets like Martin Luther King and Archbishop Oscar Romero, by the compassion of men and women like Dorothy Day and Dom Helder Câmara, by the memory of the martyrs, by the memory of Jesus. With his eyes again on El Salvador, Archbishop Romero used to say that "on these ruins the glory of the Lord will shine."

It is evident that evil permeates our world; but it is incapable of ending our hope. Depredation and its victims show the cruelty of history, while hope is its tenderness. That is why the most important point in this paper's title is the conjunction "and" that binds *evil* and *hope* in history, with lucidity but without naiveté. This is indeed the point stressed by Ignacio Ellacuría in his last theological paper, as he analyzed prophetism and utopia jointly.<sup>1</sup> José Ignacio González Faus writes of the utopia of the Reign and of the reality of suffering.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>I. Ellacuría, "Utopía y profetismo en América Latina: Un ensayo concreto de soteriología histórica," *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 17 (1989) 141-84. This text was also published in *Mysterium Liberationis: Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación*, ed. I. Ellacuría and J. Sobrino (San Salvador, 1990) I:393-442.

<sup>2</sup>J. I. González Faus, "Utopía del reino y realismo del dolor," *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 31 (1994) 31-47.

And Jürgen Moltmann speaks of the "angel of the past," with its devastations, and the "angel of the future," who prepares the way for the coming of God into our history.<sup>3</sup>

Our guide for this reflection will be the double conviction of the *reality* of evil and of the *reality* of hope. I think it is important to emphasize this from the very beginning, because there are many in our world who want to hide evil and kill hope.

#### 1. THE PERSPECTIVE: THE VICTIMS OF THIS WORLD AS MYSTAGOGY

Evil is multiple—physical and psychological, factual and moral, historic and transcendent, individual and societal, avoidable and unavoidable, committed and endured. I am going to focus here on the consequences of one particular evil: the victims in/of the Third World, for whom existence itself is the heaviest burden and death the nearest destiny ("poor are those who die before their time," in the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez).<sup>4</sup> These victims offer us the correct perspective from which to analyze evil and hope in all-encompassing ways.

In this paper I give priority to the reality of the victims over the written texts of the past. I certainly do not ignore those venerable and inspiring texts—those by Isaiah or Paul, or the ones by Gabriel Marcel and Jürgen Moltmann, for example. But it is a fact that in order to analyze "limit realities," like evil and hope, direct immediacy to reality is irreplaceable. I am going to speak, therefore, from a Third World perspective, which for theology means a specific *Sitz im Leben* as well as (if I may be allowed some paraphrasing) a specific *Sitz im Tode*.

Perhaps you expect this perspective from me, because I come from the Third World. However, I want to point out to you that the reason for my choosing this perspective is not mere geographic provenance. It is much deeper. It is precisely in this Third World where I have clearly seen—with no attempt at covering up, as in other "worlds"—the depth of evil as well as, paradoxically, the depth of hope. In my world I have seen that these two realities spring forth in mutual reference. In other words, I have learned that the existence of evil, and not the fickleness of a better quality of life (usually at others' expense), is what demands and makes possible our hope. And conversely, it is hope that allowed me to see evil as something deep and radical. Finally, I have discovered in the Third World something foundational to Christian faith: that the last word seems to belong to

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<sup>3</sup>In *Orientierung* (March 1995) 61-63.

<sup>4</sup>This has to be concretized, besides, from within the specific oppressions that come based on gender, race, and culture. These are added on to and introduced by the all-encompassing oppression. I believe, however, that in order to understand the structures of evil and hope it is enough to analyze the victimizing general oppression.

hope and not to resignation. I often think that history is like a reflector—even if fragmented—of the great truths of Scripture, of both the scandalous and the blessed ones.

Indeed, it is a proved experience that there when evil abounds, hope overabounds; or in any case, hope abounds there more generously than in other places.<sup>5</sup> And this has nothing to do with purely conceptual dialectics, whether Platonic, Hegelian, or biblical. Rather, these are palpable realities. Ignacio Ellacuría said it: the blood of martyrs produces hope in Latin America, while the rich countries deal in fear.<sup>6</sup> And a Euro-American religious woman who worked as a medical doctor in a very conflict-ridden area of El Salvador, in the midst of repression and war, has put it this way: “My reflections are somber, painful at times. Looking at the faces, listening to the stories, my heart cannot but feel the pain. But I am not sad. . . . I find myself learning from these people what I always hoped would be true: that love is stronger than death.”<sup>7</sup>

In the world of the victims, hope and evil converge—this is the fundamental assertion! Furthermore, it is that world that unveils and hierarchizes evil as well as the partial, praxic, and dialectic character of hope.

### 1.1. THE “UN-HIDDENNESS” OF EVIL AND ITS UNMASKING

The victims do not allow the existence of evil to be covered up in our world, in spite of the world’s attempts at it. The more the victims, the more evident the evil.<sup>8</sup> In this way the victims become a mystagogy of the *mysterium iniquitatis*—a tragic necessity. They are equally necessary as mystagogy of the *mysterium salutis*. Therefore, the victims make evident the objective reality of evil, as they also unmask the subjective will to cover up and distort it to the point of transforming evil into a good thing.

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<sup>5</sup>Historically, we cannot be naive. After hope-filled periods we can have others filled with hopelessness and disenchantment, as is the present case (at least in part) in Nicaragua and El Salvador. But this in no way contradicts my point that the world of the victims is the best suited place for hope, as long as commitment and love spring in that world too, as we shall see in a moment.

<sup>6</sup>I. Ellacuría, “Quinto centenario de América Latina. ¿Descubrimiento o encubrimiento?” *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 21 (1990) 281ff.

<sup>7</sup>“Carta de Ann Mangaro,” *Cartas a las Iglesias* 283 (1993) 9.

[Translator’s note: The author here uses the term *inocultabilidad*, extremely infrequent Spanish. *Inocultabilidad* literally means that it is not in the nature of something to be hidden, hence it can be said to have the quality, character or dimension of “un-hiddenness.” The translator has chosen to keep this cumbersome and rare term, in translation, in order to remain as literally faithful as possible to the author’s thought.]

<sup>8</sup>Thus, the victims of repression and war seem to be more “newsworthy” than the victims of unjust poverty. Nowadays there is little if any talk about Nicaragua and El Salvador; and no one is offering any reparation for the evils inflicted on these peoples—certainly not the United States.

The victims bring to light the deception of language's attempt at denying the massive, profound, and durable character of evil. More concretely, the victims unmask the culture of concealment and deception that neoliberalism needs in order to function as an economic system. Neoliberalism speaks of a "society of well-being" without the dialectic of a "society of bad-being." It has developed a spatial-temporal, apocalyptic language: the "end of history," the "global village," "globalization," etc. With this language it pretends to communicate, crassly or subliminally, that utopia has finally arrived. Neoliberalism has often enough explicitated its utopia in terms of the Christian tradition, thereby co-opting it. For example, Michel Camdessus speaks of the marketplace in reference to the Reign of God; and Michael Novak, theologian of capitalism, says things like these:

For many years one of my favorite texts of Scripture was Isaiah 53:2-3: "He grew up like a sapling before him, like a shoot from the parched earth. There was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him, nor appearance that would attract us to him. He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity. One of those from whom men hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem." I want to apply those terms to the modern business corporation, an extremely spurned incarnation of the presence of God in this world.<sup>9</sup>

If Novak were right, my thesis would be false. But Novak is not right. For anyone who has not lost his common sense and who still has "a heart of flesh" the Third World victims can open up the real totality of this world, much in the manner of the Servant of Yahweh who, according to Isaiah, "has been set up by God as light to the nations" (Is 42:6, 49:6). The Third World unveils its truth to the First.

Perhaps we can summarize this point with a reminder. At the origin of the Old and New Testaments we find the victims: "what have you done to your brother?" (Gen 4:10), "you have killed the Just" (Acts 2:23 par.), and those victims who "cried to heaven" (Ex 3:7), a metaphor similar to that of the Servant and which leads us to the same conclusion: the "un-hiddenness" and unmasking of evil. Medellín began with this cry of the victims, and in turn it became the centerpiece of the *Puebla Document*.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>In *The Corporation: A Theological Inquiry*, ed. M. Novak and J. W. Cooper (Washington DC, 1981) 203. [Translator's note: This text was translated back into English from the author's rendering of it in Spanish. The biblical texts, here and hereafter, are directly taken from the NAB.]

<sup>10</sup>Let us recall both texts as cited by the *Puebla Document* itself, because neoliberalism is trivializing reality in order to make us think that now everything is fine, and that nothing gravely wrong is really happening today. "The Medellín Conference already indicated, over ten years ago, that this fact is incontrovertible: 'A quiet cry rises from millions of men, asking from their shepherds a liberation that does not seem to come from any other place' (*Poverty of the Church*, 2). This cry might have seemed quiet then,

## 1.2. THE HIERARCHIZATION OF EVIL

Evil is omnipresent. It expresses itself in and through every dimension of human reality; hence, the question of its hierarchization is not idle. "Do not fear those who kill the body. Fear instead those who can kill the soul," said Jesus. "If I am hungry, it's a physical evil. If someone else goes hungry, it's a moral evil," said Berdeyev. These phrases express a profound intuition. They point to the question of the diversity of evils and their hierarchization.

The victims of evil can act as criterion in its hierarchization, and similarly as its *analogatum princeps*—in spite of all the possible theoretical discussions on the subject. In the first place, victims "de-center" our understanding of evil. Undoubtedly, one's own death, one's own sin, and one's own condemnation bear the ultimate character of evil in a way that is not reducible to any other. Self-centeredness is precisely what abounds in these experiences. And yet, one might need to say of evil what the Christian intuition discovers elsewhere: that to focus on oneself will never lead us to the most important truth; rather, the deepest truth is available only there where we put the other as central focus of our lives. Paul's words point in the same direction: "I wish to become damned if it would bring about the salvation of my brethren." The victims "de-center" us in order to bring out the deepest truth about evil.

In the second place, victims seem to be the greatest evil because upon them are gathered many other evils, as well as because through their plight the worse evil is shown. Indeed, many dimensions of evil are brought together in the experiences of the victims: extremely serious bodily diseases, inhuman poverty, torture and death, psychological suffering, anguish, anxiety, neglect, moral evil, sin by omission and commission, plus social evils both civil and ecclesiastical.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, victims also point to human limitations in the prevention of such barbaric acts. They also point to "metaphysical" evils, to absurdity and to the silence of God—ultimately not explainable either by Hegel's "speculative Good Friday," or by thinking that "only a suffering God can save us," or by Moltmann's "crucified God," or by the very traditional belief that "God can bring good out of evil." Not even God's own words to the Jobs of history ("Were you there when I created the seas?") can explain away the divine silence.

There is some ultimate quality in the suffering of the victims, greater than in other evils. It seems that the current cycle of human history began at

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but it has since grown clear, loud, impetuous and, at times, threatening." *Puebla Document*, 88-89.

<sup>11</sup>As I was writing this paper, an example of this was made public. High-ranking Argentinean military officers are confessing some of their abominations: pregnant women, close to childbirth, were thrown into the sea from flying helicopters. . . . And the bishops, quite late, now ask for forgiveness because of their insensitivity, cowardice, omission, and outright complicity in these events.

Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and the Gulags, and has not ended yet. We still have El Mozote, Rwanda, Bosnia, Bangladesh, East Timor, etc.

### 1.3. A PARTIAL, PRAXIC, AND DIALECTIC HOPE

Victims also have the ability of reformulating hope, and of specifying it in a Christian manner. In this they act as adequate mystagogy.

(a) Christian hope is not founded mainly on a humanly transcending and trusting openness toward the future (W. Pannenberg), expecting to survive beyond death—as in the traditional presentation of hope. On the contrary, hope is *partial*. It is, before anything else, the *hope of the victims*. “That the executioner not triumph over the victim,” was Max Horkheimer’s profound wish. “That the cry of Jesus on the cross be heard by God,” is the expectation of the New Testament. This is the hope that to the deadly actions of men (“you killed him”) there can be, in response, an action of life (“God raised him to life”).

Hope is the hope of the victims. It recaptures the central element of Jesus’ resurrection, which is not simply a symbol for the expectation of life beyond death (as if it were interchangeable with other such symbols: the immaterial survival of the soul, or the transmigration of souls, and so on). Resurrection is not a symbol that can have greater credibility vis-à-vis some modern anthropologies because it speaks of the survival of the entire person (body/soul), or even because it implies a social survival (Jesus is risen as the firstborn of many brothers and sisters), or because it points toward a cosmic transformation (new heavens/new earth). What happens in the resurrection is that God does justice in favor of a victim—Jesus—thereby giving hope to all the victims. Hence, a desire, or a radical trust, or an openness could not be the *analogatum princeps* of Christian hope.

(b) Furthermore, the victims demand that hope be *praxic*—that it help bring down from the cross those crucified on it. It must be a fighting hope, because the evil that befalls the victims must be fought against; it must be eradicated (of course, it is a matter of debate to what degree evil can be thoroughly eliminated from history). Hope, then, is not pure expectation (a passive hope, as we would say). Rather, it is praxic, active. It is not private—no matter how good or inevitable this might or might not be—but collective, popular. Hope belongs to the victims; it is theirs, and of those who claim it as their own.<sup>12</sup>

(c) The fact that hope belongs to the victims demands that one also try to understand its *dialectic* dimension. Hope occurs against something—the Reign

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<sup>12</sup>In this manner we can also recover a central element of the idea of the Reign of God. The latter has all too frequently been reduced to a notion of hope, and it has seldom been clearly understood as praxic, as it evidently was with Jesus. It was once important to discover that the idea of the Reign of God cannot be grasped without hope. It is equally essential to discover that it cannot be understood either outside of concrete efforts to make it present in real history.

of God against the anti-Reign (this latter theme, by the way, seems to be nearly absent from First World Christologies). Hope in the midst of an evil world is well described by the Pauline phrase of "hoping against hope."

The dialectic character of hope is important because it helps to effectively unmask the negative dimension that permeates reality. There are clear attempts to cover up this negative dimension, as if reality were a *tabula rasa*, permeated by innocence, with equally possible potential towards good or towards evil. But reality is not innocent. The "victims" point to their transcendental correlation to the "executioners," whether the victims be individuals or whole groups.

Nowadays it is in bad taste to mention the executioners. The neoliberal culture has introduced this cosmetic change. But if the Cairo Document recognizes that our world today has the means of eradicating poverty, and if we still have well over one billion human beings living in poverty (according to the figures handled at the Copenhagen Summit), then we must conclude that there is guilt in our history and, therefore, that executioners do exist. Hope must be dialectical, against the anti-Reign.

## 2. THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING DYNAMISM OF EVIL

Whence evil? Whence hope? These are two questions I want to address now, even if briefly. I am going to approach them again from the perspective of the victims, and thus I am going to focus on two concrete points: the origin of the evil that produces victims, and the reality that generates hope for the victims.

Years ago, while witnessing in El Salvador so many and cruel evils, and so many victims, I asked myself which of the commandments of God's law was violated the most. The question does have something of the macabre, but it seemed good to ask it because it shed light on our reality. We must first remember that the commandments are fundamentally a set of very grave prohibitions that attempt to prevent the creation of victims. Conversely, the commandments are guides for the promotion of life among peoples and communities. Taken as a group, commandments express the various ways in which life and death occur as human realities, and thus they are all encompassing.

(a) Theoretically one should analyze the various roots of human sinfulness, which of them is the more original, and how they relate amongst themselves. Undoubtedly, pretending "to be like God" (according to Genesis), or acting with "exorbitant pride" (in Bishop Casaldáliga's phrase), can and does function as the greater sin—the *hybris* that can radically dehumanize us and, by extension, everything else we do. But this realization in no way prevents us from analyzing the historical visualization of this transcendental-theological root within our relations with other human beings. In our real-life world, there is a New Testament phrase that remains valid, enlightening, and current: "The love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim 6:10). Tied to this there is the pseudomysti-

cism through which *hybris* is expressed: the "messianism and mysticism of the marketplace" taught by neoliberalism.<sup>13</sup>

This means that the process of sinfulness—especially at the structural level (which is the one that more seriously affects impoverished peoples)—has a precise dynamic. It begins with the violation of the Seventh Commandment: with theft, depredation, exploitation, and injustice. The *Medellin Conclusions* began, quite consciously, describing poverty and denouncing the injustice that cries out to heaven (*Justice*, 1). This theme was taken up again by the *Puebla Document* and we are still living with it.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus still acts as the parable for our world—the hoarding of riches that neoliberalism demands and the recompense it promises. The parable does not speak of "theft," although another phrase in the same Gospel says that all wealth is unjust.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, when pointing out an idol that stands in opposition to God, it is wealth that is indicted (Matt 6:24, Luke 16:13). We could discuss if wealth itself is here presented as a sample idol, or as the first of them. What does become clear, however, is that "Jesus, when trying to find a rival for God, refers to wealth, thereby showing that this is a crucial issue for him. He considers wealth the greatest danger for those who try to serve God."<sup>15</sup>

(b) From the violation of the Seventh Commandment one moves on to the violation of the Fifth: you shall not kill. Murder, torture, and massacres are often the condition for depredation, or for keeping what has been stolen. Often the slow death of poverty is the consequence of depredation and theft.

Murder, torture, and massacres cut across history and are well known. We need only recall what began in Latin America in the year 1492, and what has occurred in Iraq more recently. The slow death of poverty would become apparent in a contemporary reflection on idolatry. It still haunts our time (and how!) as it unveils the dimension, according to Israel's prophets, that best expresses reality: history. In this context, then, idols are historical realities that pretend to be divinities, that promise salvation to their followers, that demand worship and orthodoxy, and—we underline it!—that require victims in order to survive.

Among the idols there is a certain hierarchization. Both the *Puebla Document* (n. 491) and Archbishop Romero<sup>16</sup> clearly point to the accumulation of

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. H. Assmann, "Teología de la liberación: Mirando al frente," *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 34 (1995).

<sup>14</sup>We recall a comment by St. Jerome: "All wealth comes from injustice, and so without anyone having lost someone else cannot find. That is why I think that this proverb is very true: 'the rich man is either unjust or the heir of someone unjust'." *Patrologia Latina* 22:294.

<sup>15</sup>J. L. Sicre, *Los dioses olvidados* (Madrid, 1979) 164.

<sup>16</sup>O. Romero, "Misión de la Iglesia en medio de la crisis del país: Cuarta carta pastoral," *La voz de los sin voz: La palabra viva de Monseñor Romero*, ed. J. Sobrino,

wealth as the first among the idols. And in order to safeguard this particular idol, the military and paramilitary machines and the death squadrons offer their services by violently producing victims.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the hoarding of wealth, all by itself, also produces victims; because it generates slow death by poverty. That is why Medellín says that injustice, even when no blood has been shed, is "institutionalized violence" (*Peace*, 15). And when John Paul II denounces "the idolatry of the marketplace"<sup>18</sup> he means that an economic system founded on the absolutization of the marketplace violates the Fifth Commandment by producing victims.

Perhaps we are also entering a new phase in the process of victimization. This new phase does not merely produce the slow death brought on by exploitation. Now it is death by exclusion. The human race is witnessing the appearance of a subspecies—those who are excluded, those who do not count, those who are utterly ignored while exploited.

(c) In order to hide, cover up, or even justify the violations of the Seventh and Fifth Commandments, the Eighth is also torn apart: you will not lie.<sup>19</sup> In El Salvador the modern "process of evil" began a century ago when peasants were robbed of their communal and village lands. This led to their slow death by poverty, and ultimately to the repression and war of recent years. The ideological and information machines have tried to cover up the origin and development of this process. The same thing has happened in numerous other occasions, as recently as the war with Iraq—the war with the most sophisticated technology, as well as the most televised war of all time, has ironically been the one with the least known victims. Then there are the daily tragedies: in 1960 the ratio between the rich and poor was one to 30; while in 1990 the ration was one to 60. There does not seem to be any interest—even in places with a free press—for letting these figures and events be known and massively discussed as crucial realities and questions of our time.

Let me arrive at a conclusion based on all the above. There seems to be a certain set pattern for the violation of the commandments. Not by simple juxtaposition, but through a *quasi* necessary dynamic. The will to annihilate the other—his person or what is his—displays the dynamics that lead to the violation of the Eighth Commandment. This is so because scandal and cover up are correlative. This correlation can certainly occur at the personal level: we often want to hide from ourselves and from others the evil we are and do. But most especially, the correlation happens at the structural level.

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I. Martín Baró, R. Cardenal (San Salvador, 1980) 145ff.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 146ff.

<sup>18</sup>John Paul II, *Centessimus Annus*, 33.

<sup>19</sup>I have written more extensively and in detail on this subject. See my "La honradez con lo real," *Sal Terrae* 946 (1992) 377ff. (This is a single-theme issue of this journal, and it bears the general title, "You will not lie!")

The Watergate and "Iran-gate" scandals, for example, were followed by cover-ups. In First World countries this happens with varying degrees of subtlety. But in the Third World the cover-ups occur with no circumspection. No delicate argument or approach was needed when it came to hiding the Salvadoran army's massacres at El Mozote and El Sumpul—it was a matter of simply lying; they were simply denied. And when on rare occasions the facts must come out (as with the publication of the "Truth Commission" report on mass murders in El Salvador), then a complete amnesty benefiting those responsible is granted immediately—the most efficient way of covering up. This is like saying, "don't bother to investigate what really happened; it's useless."

Hiding the scandals of this world is a necessity. The greater the scandal, the greater the cover up; and thus from the magnitude of the cover up we can figure the magnitude of the scandal. That is precisely why each fulfillment or violation of the Eighth Commandment gives us an idea of fulfillment or violation of the other commandments. This is why we have given some attention to this commandment.

But there is more. The violation of the Eighth Commandment shows that human words can be placed at the service of evil, and of very radical evils. The human word is, precisely, the instrument through which many institutions exercise their influence in society: mass media, churches, universities, and schools of theology. And I am insisting on this because, although it is clear that any and every created thing can be a vehicle for either grace or sin, sometimes we have the naive impression that there are some created realities that could never be at the service of evil. The use of reason—and in our case, of theological reason—is sometimes considered one of these exempt realities.

Let me put it this way. We usually judge the words of any given theology as possibly more or less adequate, or as elaborated with more or less intellectual integrity, and so on. But we seldom question the words of any given theology on the objectivity through which they reflect reality, or on how they let reality speak through them (K. Rahner), or on how they let truth be true, or on how they might cover up truth (Paul to the Romans)—which words can do in many subtle or crude ways. Many years ago Juan Luis Segundo called our attention to this last potential role of the words of any theology.<sup>20</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría phrased it this way: "Interests that favor the unjust dominant powers can hide behind statements that purport to be neutral or traditional."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the theological enterprise, in so far as it is a public product presented in and to society, can hide, cover up, and even justify society's evil. The theological enterprise can violate the Eighth Commandment.

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<sup>20</sup>See J. L. Segundo's well-known book, *Liberación de la teología* (Buenos Aires, 1975).

<sup>21</sup>I. Ellacuría, "Teología de la liberación y marxismo," *Revista Latinoamericana de Teología* 20 (1990) 120.

(d) Let me return to the dynamism of evil, and let me briefly say something on the violation of the first two commandments. The Second Commandment ("Do not take the name of God in vain") is radically violated when God is used to justify or bless—and not just to cover up—evil, depredation, and death.<sup>22</sup> This is indeed the ultimate evil, passing what is sinful as virtuous. Let me add that this is a very serious concern for every religious, ecclesial or theological activity, since it has the possibility of blessing created realities.

On the First Commandment ("You will not have another god before me; you will not worship rival gods"). For many years now the so-called advanced countries of the West have not suspected the existence of idols in their midst, as if these were realities possible only in the sphere of the exotically religious. However, these rival gods—one of them now found in the "idolatry of the marketplace"—are historical realities that demand victims in order to survive.

This goes well beyond conventional theism or atheism. Here the circle closes on the violation of the commandments. The first of these, which is the transcendent formulation of all the others—let God be God, and not turn oneself into a god—is translated and verified in one's nonviolent respect for other human beings, especially the poor. To worship the true God, and not to worship the rival gods, is translated and verified in the promotion of the neighbor's life; not in the worship of wealth.

### 3. THE ORIGIN OF HOPE

What I have been discussing so far might seem somber. Indeed, evil seems to have no end. It often seems that it is useless to even fight against it. This apparent inevitability of evil can become one of those elements used to justify any wrongdoing, to hide or distort it. It certainly makes an appearance in the present world of victims, therefore leading some today to talk of a "geoculture of hopelessness and a theology of inevitability."<sup>23</sup> The problem, hence, does not seem to merely be the existence of evil but rather its apparent or real inevitability, and consequently the uselessness of any struggle against it. This questions hope, and advises it to strike a deal with resignation. Therefore, it is crucial to ask whether hope is possible at all, and—if it is—where does it spring.

The answer to this last question, although an apparent tautology, is simply that "hope springs forth wherever it springs forth." The answer, therefore, is very personal. I want to share with you, from my experience in El Salvador (in turn shared by many others), where I see this hope.

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<sup>22</sup>War and private property have been justified numberless times in the name of God. During the war with Iraq, whether in the name of Allah or in the name of the Christian God, both sides to justify and bless war.

<sup>23</sup>X. Gorostiaga, "La mediación de los cambios sociales y los cambios internacionales," *Cambio social y pensamiento cristiano en América Latina*, ed. J. Comblin, J. I. González Faus, and J. Sobrino (Madrid, 1993) 131.

Let me start by saying that people's hope, and my own, is not simply the anthropological translation of a metaphysical vision—some limitless possibility of being. Hope is not a scientific or ideological conclusion that would point us to a good future if only we would take the necessary steps. And it is certainly not some sort of temperamental optimism. Hope, rather, is the conviction that it is possible for the future to bear goodness in spite of the presence of evil in the world. I believe that the root of this conviction is twofold.

(a) In the first place, there are the indications that—in spite of it all—the Reign of God continues to burst into history, through signs, quietly and modestly, of course. These signs, however, do show that the anti-Reign and all enslaving evil can be defeated. This gives rise to hope.

This is how Jesus' miracles, healings, and exorcisms are interpreted, as well as his words of denunciation and truth. Put another way, the mercy/compassion by which the Gospels say that Jesus performed miracles on behalf of the poor, as well as Jesus' stance against the oppressors, show that love and truth are possible. And this gives hope to the victims.

When this mercy and this truth are efficacious, even if in quantitatively small ways, they show that evil can be defeated (the evil which in John's theology is the opposite of love and truth—it is murderous and a liar).

Simply put in the language of my earlier reflections, hope springs forth for the victims there where the commandments of God are kept. When this happens, when their lives are respected, when their lives are promoted, the victims recover hope. And because the cover-ups want the victims to disappear, to speak the truth is to return them to life, to make them real and hence to give back to them their fundamental dignity. In my experience, victims are not afraid of truth, even when truth can be hard on them too. Truth is ultimately on their side, and at times it is the only thing they have on their side.

Said in a more systematic way, hope springs there where the *Reign of God*, the *mediation* of God, is made present through signs against the anti-Reign.

(b) Hope also grows where a good *mediator* is present. In other words, there where we find persons who conscientiously live by the will of God, who are consequent and staunch witnesses to the love and mercy of Jesus. And these are the martyrs. Now, I could say this on purely academic grounds (which could be done based on revelation, although martyrdom has been neglected by theology); but I am speaking from the truth of experience, which is well and centrally attested to by Scripture.

This is indeed the point made by the Letter to the Hebrews, at the start of chapter 12. It is a crucial and disconcerting point. The author of this text has but one remedy for despondent, persecuted Christians who might abandon the struggle: keep your eyes on Jesus who also endured contradiction (v. 3). Jesus is the *first martyr*, analogously to his being the *first believer*, as mentioned in verse 2—*archegos* and *teleiotes*.

Real martyrs, those whom we have not yet turned into an intellectual category—the ones we “have heard, seen, and touched”—still generate hope. But

it is important to ask why. In my opinion, what directly generates hope for the victims is the *life* of the martyrs, and the love and truth they have expressed through it. By being faithful till death, and by allowing their lives to be taken from them, the martyrs' love and truth are granted deeper radicality and ultimate character. And this reinforces hope.

Theoretically, perhaps, this need not be the case. Pure logic might even say the exact opposite: goodness will never triumph because evil kills the good. That is why outsiders, those who only hear or read about martyrs, might find it difficult to believe that martyrs can generate hope. Outsiders might consider that remembering the martyrs is a form of masochism. This might all be understandable, but false. Even today Archbishop Romero remains, before all else, a symbol of hope!

But why is this so? It seems to me that this world's victims hope for deliverance from real evils, and thus they seek a truly *Other*: a God and a Christ (or saints, or angels) who would have the power to free them from the executioners. But the victims also rejoice in their *affinity* with the liberator, that is, when God and Christ come to share their condition of impotence. In other words, the victims want an efficacious love that can overcome evil, as well as a love that will be near to them, coming down to those it wants to liberate; a love lived out in human fashion. The victims want both: *alterity* and *affinity*. In life the martyrs expressed alterity: the power to really eradicate the oppression of the victims. In death the martyrs express affinity with the victims.

In the final analysis, the power of the martyrs to generate hope cannot be completely explained. But we know that this is what they do among us, and that is why we can also understand Moltmann—a theologian who has reflected on hope like few others—when he says: "Not all lives are occasion for hope. But the life of Jesus is, because he lovingly took upon himself the cross and death."<sup>24</sup>

Hope, therefore, is generated by the signs of the Reign (the mediation) and by those who carry them out (the mediators). These are the men and women who in life were good, loving, and truthful, and who remained faithful till the end.

(c) That I have joined hope and martyrdom should not seem strange. Strange or not, this relationship is fundamental in Christianity. We must remember that our faith and our ecclesial community come from Jesus the martyr. We say that he has been raised by God, but to this we must add that he was raised precisely because he was a martyr, an innocent victim. Plus, briefly, two more points:

First, a reminder on the first ecumenical council at Nicea. It is well known that this council discussed the divinity of Jesus; but it is much more important to remember why this discussion happened in the first place. We cannot allow the Hellenization of dogma to hide what is fundamental here: whether suffering and divinity could be reconciled. Nicea clearly says that it is possible to confess the divinity of Jesus, in spite of his suffering and death (the Arian objection).

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<sup>24</sup>J. Moltmann, *Umkehr zur Zukunft* (Hamburg, 1970) 76.

Suffering, negativity, evil must, therefore, be somehow related to God. Our faith in God must integrate his absolute alterity as well as his absolute affinity with us. From there, then, it might not be absurd to think that this duality is present in hope.

Second, a point on soteriology. According to the Gospels, Jesus showed his power over evil—while he was alive—through healing signs, through exorcisms, through his acceptance of sinners, and so on; but through his death he does something else. In no way returning to any type of Anselmian argument, I think that we can also interpret the cross of Jesus as his attempt to actually eradicate evil, and not only to overcome it by taking it upon himself.

Conceptually we must distinguish between a liberation that struggles against evil from the outside, and another one that fights evil from within as it also bears it. This last point—to bear evil as the Suffering Servant—might be necessary as part of the mystery of history. At least this is what Christian faith says. Then, in order to turn history around the main human task today is to fight against evil, but not merely from the outside. It must be done from within too, bearing it. Both of these directions, and not just one of them, we find in the martyrs. And this double way of fighting evil in turn generates hope.

Let me end where I started. Evil can only be approached, in Christianity, from the perspective of the victims, from the kenotic *incarnation* of Christ. This can only happen when we are really, and not just intellectually, present in the world of the victims (“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?”). This presence can only be accomplished by the attitude of “bringing crucified peoples down from their cross”—the *praxis* of Jesus. And this must be done with the commitment to participate in the destiny of the victims, bearing the reality of sin that leads to the *cross* of Jesus. When this happens, hope springs forth. When we “bear the victims,” they in turn “bear us,” and the miracle of hope takes place.

Whence hope? In the last analysis, from the mystery of God. But even this mystery makes itself visible in history for anyone with eyes clear enough to see. This mystery becomes visible in the victims and the martyrs. This is what Archbishop Romero used to say:

Brethren, keep this treasure. It is not my poor word that sows hope and faith. I am no more than God's humble echo among this people.<sup>25</sup>

[ Translated by Orlando Espín ]

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<sup>25</sup>Homily on 2 October 1977.