

## EVIL AND HOPE: A RESPONSE TO JON SOBRINO

From the standpoint of Latin American liberation theology, any reflection on the concepts of evil and hope must be necessarily governed by concern about how planetary beings and humans live or die. This assertion finds justification in the very nature of theological discourse as reflection on the experience of God in our daily lives. This is important because the discourse of Christian faith has to do primarily with reality itself, with the self-presentation of reality in its visible and hidden dimensions of evil and hope, not with mere thought or discourse about the theoretical status of these concepts.

For Latin American theology, evil and hope appear as relational and dialectical concepts due to the fact, among other things, that their true meanings can only be found in their historicity. This understanding has become a central principle of Latin American theological method and has been addressed extensively by Ignacio Ellacuría. In his view, "salvation is always salvation of 'someone,' of 'something,' to such an extent that the characteristics of the savior should be searched after the characteristics of what must be saved."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Jon Sobrino presents the structure of evil and hope from its expression in concrete situations, and he seeks to establish its meaning beginning with the people's life or death, especially the Third World victims. Moreover, Sobrino has emphasized that it is only from *this* reality that one can see the depth and radicality of evil and of hope in a world that hides the real causes of victimization and that destroys all hope of transformation. In addition to its theological weight, Sobrino's presentation communicates the pain and indignation at the massive crucifixion of the impoverished. It bears the anguish and the passion of someone who witnesses firsthand the protest of the victims of this world, and their enduring hope.

The theology of Jon Sobrino has been influenced deeply by the human and Christian sensitivity toward the dramatic reality of the Third World, and especially by the assassination/martyrdom of his immediate Jesuit community. As I was reading the paper which Sobrino shares with us today, I recalled words he once uttered; words that are now helpful in understanding the spirit of his reflection today. Feeling the impact of the painful events of 16 November 1989, Sobrino drafted the following:

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<sup>1</sup>Ignacio Ellacuría, "La Iglesia de los Pobres, Sacramento Histórico de Liberación," *Estudios Centroamericanos* 32 (1977) 707.

In order to write, one needs a clear head and breath in the heart; but in this case, for many days, my head lay barren and my heart, chilled. Now, some days later, as serenity sets in, I write down these thoughts. I do it in grateful homage to my six Jesuit brothers, and in the hope that they might provide light and encouragement to those of us who remain in this world.<sup>2</sup>

The reflection presented by Sobrino today also seeks to provide light and encouragement to this theological community so that we might be moved to active mercy on behalf of the crucified people in order to eliminate their suffering. This can be our way to correspond to the reality of God within history. It is a reflection of faith centered on the incarnation in the world of the poor and the oppressed, which combines pastoral concerns with theological knowledge.<sup>3</sup> While there is greater conceptual rigor in his book *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Orbis Books, 1994), Sobrino's reflection today is placed within the same framework.

One of Sobrino's most important contributions to contemporary Christian theology is his affirmation of theological knowledge as a principle of liberation. Although formulated over 25 years ago, this affirmation is still important today because theological knowledge continues to be used to conceal many evils in Church and society and it continues to provide religious legitimacy to oppressive relations within the Church. In order to determine the *liberating* character of theological knowledge, Sobrino seeks a response to the following questions: "What interest motivates theological understanding? Why do theology? For whom and from whose standpoint is the theological understanding done? . . . What interest motivates—really, and not just in intention—the various forms of theological understanding?"<sup>4</sup> I believe Sobrino would agree with me that today, from the standpoint of the marginalized races, oppressed cultures, and excluded women, these questions have yet to receive a satisfactory response. Sobrino accurately points out that what truly needs to be examined is the relationship that diverse theologies establish with reality. This is what truly distinguishes one theology from another and this is what grants or denies them true liberating Christian character. Taking as a point of reference the relationship that diverse theologies establish with reality, Sobrino presents a twofold critique.

First, with respect to the theological discourse articulated using the theoretical categories of modern criticism mainly in the First World, Sobrino criticizes this type of theology. Even though it has advanced in the creation of new theological meanings, it nevertheless dwells in the realm of reality primarily at the

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<sup>2</sup>Jon Sobrino, "El Asesinato-martirio de los Jesuitas Salvadoreños ¿Quiénes eran y por qué los mataron?" *Sal Terrae* 12 (Diciembre 1989) 853-54.

<sup>3</sup>Juan José Tamayo-Acosta, *Para Comprender la Teología de la Liberación* (Estella, Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1989) 269.

<sup>4</sup>Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, 3rd ed. (New York: Orbis, 1991) 9.

level of "thought." That is to say, theology in this form does not allow reality to speak for itself, thereby hiding the truth of things. For Sobrino, "the theological enterprise, insofar as it is a public product presented in and to society, can hide, cover up, and even justify society's evil."<sup>5</sup> It can also be said that this theology tends to ignore the practical and intellectual actions of excluded social groups working for themselves on behalf of justice and human integrity. Along the same lines, Sobrino criticizes the lack of awareness shown by this theological discourse of the way it operates in society. Hence, it not only becomes an accomplice to structural evils, but denies itself the acknowledgement of its own reality of evil and hope.

The second criticism that Sobrino presents has to do with the critique of idols, with the problem of idolatry in Christian theology. Examined earlier by Franz Hinkelammert, together with Ignacio Ellacuría and Pablo Richard, Sobrino's work in this theological vein best expresses the most characteristic feature of Latin American liberation theology. Nonetheless, this is the theological vein most ignored by the wider theological community. Even though the problem of idolatry is a subject of utmost importance and urgency in the United States, we do not see in the CTSA, CTS, nor in the AAR a session or workshop dedicated expressly to theological idolatry. The urgency of taking this subject seriously stems from the challenge that reality itself poses to Christian life. In terms similar to those of Sobrino and Ellacuría, Pablo Richard points out that the central problem of theology today is not atheism or unbelief, but idolatry. In his view,

the oppressors of the people have almost always declared themselves to be believers. . . . Today, . . . practically all of those responsible for economic, political, and ideological oppression, are Christian. Domination, consequently, has always been basically idolatrous, thereby involving a serious threat to the faith of a people both poor and believing. . . . The basic theological task in America is not that of establishing the existence of God, but of discerning the true God from false idols. Today it is no longer meaningful to declare oneself a believer; the meaningful thing is to explain in which God one believes. The basic problem is not the existence but the presence of God.<sup>6</sup>

For Sobrino, idols operate actively in the present reality and express themselves in structures, institutions, and discourses that generate inhumanity and death. The malice of idols lies not only in what they produce, but in that they "disguise themselves as divinities, wrapping themselves in the characteristics of the divine, such as ultimacy, self-justification, and transcendence, offering salvation to their worshipers even at the expense of dehumanization, and above all,

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<sup>5</sup>Jon Sabrino, "Evil and Hope: A Reflection from the Victims," *CTAS Proceedings* 50 (1995) 80.

<sup>6</sup>Pablo Richard, "Theology in the Theology of Liberation," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. and Jon Sobrino, S.J. (New York: Orbis Books/Collins Dove, 1993) 155.

they demand victims in order to exist."<sup>7</sup> According to Sobrino, the most concrete expression of idols today is found in the worldwide capitalist market which promotes the massive exclusion of entire peoples. The central characteristic of idols is that they construct an inverted reality, where the success of a few is accomplished through the failure of many, but this failure is understood as a necessary condition for the good of all, and is even explained away as divine mandate.

Sobrino asserts that "idols seek to conceal their true reality of death and, by necessity, they generate lies in order to hide. Sin seeks to conceal itself as well as the scandal of its own concealment."<sup>8</sup> In view of this reality, the basic demand of faith and theology is to tell *the truth of things*, and this truth is best uncovered from the world of the poor and oppressed. Jon has witnessed that telling of the truth, since it requires unmasking and fighting lies, it often requires that a person exposes one's own life. Therefore, telling the truth also requires spiritual consistency, a vigorous spirituality rooted in compassion and translated into justice. In this line of thought, there is no doubt that in the last few years the critique of idols by telling the truth continues to be dangerous. If criticism of the idolatrous nature of the world's market is dangerous, what is proving to be more so is the critique of patriarchal institutions in Church and society. At the present, those who tell the truth about the victims of male-dominated power structures are persecuted; those who unmask the lies about the false divinities of androcentric theologies are punished; those who expose the truth about the oppressive nature of hierarchical Church institutions are censured; and those who denounce the sexual division of social and theological labor to the disadvantage of women are repressed. And yet, with the exception of Latin American feminist theologians—both women and men—, this is the theological arena most ignored by Latin American liberation theologians. In the context of this reality, Sobrino's reflections call every theologian to acknowledge the following:

1. That the fundamental challenge that we face today is the reality of suffering and massive impoverishment. This reality, on the ethical level, "expresses the fundamental sin of this world: the destruction of life. . . . On the level of praxis . . . [it] cries out for its own eradication. . . . On the level of meaning . . . [it] poses the question of whether life is to be lived with hope, resignation, or cynicism. On the theological level . . . [it] triggers the question of God or of the Ultimate, of whether there is any truth to God of the Gods."<sup>9</sup>
2. That the theological problem of utmost urgency today is idolatry. This has to do with shedding light in the midst of lies, with telling the truth about

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<sup>7</sup>Sobrino, "El Asesinato-martirio de los Jesuitas," 870.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 872.

<sup>9</sup>Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994) 32-33.

reality, analyzing its causes, its diverse manifestations, and proposing the best solutions for its transformation.<sup>10</sup>

3. That the truth of reality, whether we choose to look at the truth of things or not, is found "within the suffering world because such a world is the most real world."<sup>11</sup> We are called "to grapple with this reality, try to understand it, and save people from it."<sup>12</sup>
4. That the most pervasive reality, and therefore the most scandalous and most in need of salvation is violence against women. As stated in our final report on the II Latin American Women Theologians' Meeting of December 1993 entitled "Between Indignation and Hope," this reality of suffering and violence is the most harmful because it is the most concealed, the most ignored, and the most present in the daily lives of most Latin American women.<sup>13</sup> This reality confirms unequivocally the principle that Sobrino offers in his paper today: "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."<sup>14</sup> Another principle may be added to this one: from the magnitude of the problem, we establish the magnitude of tasks for Christian theology. Theological language can be deceptive if it does not address the evil of violence against women and children, or if it ignores our hopes and our actions of survival, resistance, and transformation.

If theological knowledge is to operate as the principle of liberation, it must tell the truth of things. For Sobrino, the fundamental access to the truth lies in the honest knowledge of reality. This premise leads to several questions which Sobrino has attempted to respond to: How is reality accessed? From where is reality accessed in order to capture the "maximum" of truth? What must one do after accessing reality? What implications does this have for theology?

In reference to the first question, Sobrino has emphasized that access to reality can only be accomplished by entering it through incarnation. "In Christian language: to be in reality . . . means to take a positive decision to arrive at where we really should be. This arriving-in-order-to-be is something active,"<sup>15</sup> as exemplified in Christ's own Incarnation.<sup>16</sup> The most immediate theological conse-

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<sup>10</sup>Sobrino, "El Asesinato-martirio de los Jesuitas," 870.

<sup>11</sup>Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 32.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>13</sup>Ana María Tepedino, "Between Indignation and Hope: Report on the II Latin American Women Theologians Meeting," Río de Janeiro, 3-9 December 1993.

<sup>14</sup>Sobrino, "Evil and Hope," 80.

<sup>15</sup>Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988) 31.

<sup>16</sup>In Sobrino's thought, five factors are involved in the access to the truth of reality: (a) honesty with the real, respecting the truth of concrete reality, (b) honesty with the real,

quence of this assertion is that theology finds its proper place "in a suffering world insofar as such a world is a mediation of the truth and absoluteness of God."<sup>17</sup> The answer to this question provides the foundation for answering the second question concerning the location from which to gain access to the truth of reality.

For Sobrino, reality can only be approached by Christians from the experience of the victims, from within their hopes and actions against evil.<sup>18</sup> In this context, it seems appropriate to point out that this type of reflection has led to important developments in Latin American liberation theology, especially in the contribution of feminist theologians. The vision offered by Sobrino concerning "the hierarchy of evils" is fully supported by other theologians in Latin America. However, as mentioned in our Final Report of 1993, most of Latin American feminist theologians believe that the concept of "the hierarchy of evils" can operate only within an analytical framework that establishes economic factors as the most significant of social relations. In this framework, the social actors can only express themselves in the dialectic of rich-poor, exploiter-exploited. Here, the vision of reality is governed by the generic concept of "impoverished people." From the point of view of Latin American feminist theologians, this analytical framework does not do justice to women and it does not do justice to reality itself, due to its limitations in examining the multiplicity of factors that impact women's lives. As a result, it does not permit the development of new strategies to modify actual oppressive structures of power. Hierarchical gender relations stand out among these as the first and most widespread power structure in every human society.<sup>19</sup> This is one of the most important critiques of liberation theology raised by women. Moreover, liberation theology has not woven the critical categories of gender, with those of race and social class into the fabric of theological knowledge itself.<sup>20</sup>

For Sobrino, the criterion for establishing the "hierarchy of evils" is the very existence of the victims, "because upon them are gathered many other evils, as well as because through their plight the worse evil is shown."<sup>21</sup> If we admit that the victims are the millions of poor people, one must also admit that this criterion still does not tell us who the victims are, what real impact evil has on their

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the reaction of mercy, (c) fidelity to the real, (d) allowing ourselves to be led by the real, (e) fundamental theological spirituality. See Jon Sobrino, "The Spirit of Liberation: Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 680-86; and Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 13-22.

<sup>17</sup>Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 30.

<sup>18</sup>Sobrino, "Evil and Hope," 72-73.

<sup>19</sup>Virginia Vargas Valente, *El Aporte de la Rebeldía de las Mujeres* (Lima, Perú: Ediciones Flora Tristán, 1986) 75.

<sup>20</sup>Tepedino, *Between Indignation and Hope*, 2.

<sup>21</sup>Sobrino, "Evil and Hope," 75.

bodies and their dreams. Who benefits from their suffering? What hopes do they embrace and what are they doing to eliminate evil? In the same manner, if we admit that the victims are the impoverished world majority, an honest view of reality leads us to recognize that these millions—the great majority of them—are women and children; that most of them come from oppressed cultures and races, and that their daily lives are steeped in violence. According to the Final Statement of the International Dialogue of Women Theologians on Violence against Women held in Costa Rica, December 1994, such “violence cannot be reduced to isolated incidents or simply individual experience. It must be seen in the context of the globalization of exploitation and domination in all areas of life.”<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, along the same line of thought pursued by Ellacuría, in order to determine the characteristics of evil, how to eliminate it, and how to retrieve hope, it is necessary to have as the point of reference the actual physical, social, sexual, racial, and cultural characteristics of the victims. This condition of reality is what leads me to suggest that the concept “hierarchy of evils” should be replaced by the concept “relational polycentrism of evils.” This concept would assist in better understanding the contribution of theology to alternatives for change in order to challenge effectively the current neoliberal capitalism, its predatory logic toward planetary life, its neocolonizing tendencies, its sexist and idolatrous discourse, as well as the patriarchal institutions that support it. As I have previously suggested, “In Latin America we cannot sustain a hierarchy of evils in which women’s oppression is ‘only’ a minor evil or a circumstantial phenomenon,”<sup>23</sup> or even worse, as something only worth mention in a footnote.

In relation to the third question, the theological work of Sobrino seeks to shed light on what theology ought to do in the present reality. A consistent matrix throughout his work is that theology should abandon its participation in the production and reproduction of inhumanity and oppression. In a reality marked by suffering, Sobrino has emphasized that “the end purpose of theology is to clarify and facilitate how humanity is to *respond* and *correspond* to God within history. . . . Before a world of suffering, the primary response must be a compassion that seeks to eliminate such suffering; and this response must be present in every human, religious, and Christian activity.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Sobrino points out that the compassion/mercy response to reality “means working for justice . . . and employing in behalf of justice all our intellectual, religious, scientific, and technological energies.”<sup>25</sup> This understanding of the purpose of theology leads theologians to the self-understanding of one’s own life. Based on

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<sup>22</sup>“Final Statement of the ‘Women against Violence’ Dialogue,” *Voices-EATWOT* 1 (June 1995) 214.

<sup>23</sup>María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1994) 23.

<sup>24</sup>Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 39.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

his own experience, Sobrino says simply that "we have learned to exercise mercy and find joy and a purpose for life in doing so."<sup>26</sup>

Finally, Sobrino reminds us that even in the presence of evil, reality itself is also Good News of salvation because it carries within accumulated goodness and grace. This is the fundamental structure of reality from which hope is generated and nourished. What verifies and sustains hope is the conviction of the world's victims, especially those of the Third World, that, despite all, reality is textured of justice and goodness, and that good is mightier and more fundamental than evil.<sup>27</sup> We learn from the poor and oppressed that hope is a gift, a promise, and a call to action. It is a hope that has shown itself in work and actions for justice. After so many centuries of male-dominated Church and society, women's courage to survive, resist, and transform demonstrates that reality can always give more of itself by letting our hope be what it is: the fundamental structure of our being. This view of reality bears important implications for theology. I mention only three of these because, in my view, these are the ones that inspire Sobrino's theological work, as well as his personal experience.

The first is that reality itself becomes a theological concept from which theological argumentation takes place.<sup>28</sup> The second is that if theology seeks to participate in the world as light and salvation, paradoxical as it may seem, its content is to be found in the world of the crucified people.<sup>29</sup> The third is that the theological community worldwide is called to embrace the light and salvation offered by the crucified. By allowing ourselves to be moved by mercy, we can participate actively in taking the crucified people from the cross. When this happens, then one's own life is led and inspired by the Spirit. Because God's own Spirit dwells within the crucified of this world, they themselves are the bearers of truth, grace, salvation, and hope.\*

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>27</sup>Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 34.

<sup>28</sup>Jon Sobrino, "¿Cómo hacer teología? La teología como *Intellectus Amoris*," *Sal Terrae* 5 (Mayo 1989) 402-403.

<sup>29</sup>Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, 53-56, 78-82.

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