

EVIL AND THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

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Introduction

THE GREATNESS AND BEAUTY OF GOD is certainly revealed throughout all the marvels of creation. Yet given the actual condition of humanity's destructive sinfulness which is often camouflaged as the good, the beautiful and virtuous, it is precisely in contrast to our own vengeance, cruelty and callousness that the most fascinating tenderness, kindness and compassion of God becomes most gloriously experienced and revealed. In the difference, the uniqueness becomes all the more evident.

Evil in the world

Whether we look at history or at the contemporary situation, the human condition is one of overwhelming evil. In some cases evil is immediately evident: wars, police brutality such as in Los Angeles or South Africa, private armies to kill the street kids in Brazil, the killings of the Mafia in Italy, the neo-Nazi movements beginning in Germany, the Sendero Luminoso's senseless killings in Peru, today's ethnic wars in the former Yugoslavia, the gang violence which is erupting throughout the USA, or any other kind of violent destruction and killings which continue escalating throughout the world.

Yet there is a deeper, more prevailing and even more hypocritical kind of evil which in many ways is even worse because the ones who perpetuate it and whose lives depend on it do not perceive it as evil. In fact, they perceive it as good, reasonable, righteous and even natural. I am speaking about the institutionalized evil of the socio-economic structures of our contemporary world which started to be built in 1492 and are becoming ever more destructive of much of the world population in 1992 through the 'New World Order'.¹ At the very basis of our great modern civilizations one finds the blood of the victims through which the civilization was built and continues to be sustained today—underpaid workers, slaves, exploited migrants, abandoned elderly and sick people, expelled peoples, slums, raw materials stolen from other countries and the like.

Western civilization has certainly led the world in great scientific and technological advances, great strides have been made in forming

democratic governments which try to safeguard the basic freedoms of humanity, medical breakthroughs have been miraculous, western missionaries have certainly done heroic works among the poor of the world and the level of living of the average westerner has come a long way since 1492. These are but some of the positive advancements, but we need to ask ourselves, 'at what cost?'²

Assuming that the western models of progress and success are correct (and I do not think they are), we still have to ask how universally applicable they truly are. Since every human beings wants to succeed, these success models can be true only if they are within the reach of all. Can these models of human success be truly available to everyone? If not, they will be more destructive than life-giving, leading to more corruption, crime and violence than to true happiness.

It is in the very process of trying to succeed—to become someone rich and special—that we begin to manipulate, exploit, enslave and even murder others in order to obtain our goals and fulfil our desires. But because we have an innate desire of the heart to be good persons, we begin to justify and mask our crimes by turning our victims into inferior, unworthy, uncivilized heathens whose only worthwhile purpose in life is to serve their 'natural' masters. This thought will permeate and dominate all the structure of the human heart and of society in general. The victimization of the weaker others will thus appear as a great virtue for the sake of civilization and the glory of God.

In these civilizations, the rich and the powerful will appear as the great heroes to be admired and imitated and as mirror images of the divinity while the poor and the weak will appear as lesser human beings who can easily be ignored, used, abused and discarded without any great concern. They are easily expendable. There appears to be no problem in exploiting them and even enslaving them, for their purpose in life, their glory and their dignity come about only in serving the rich and powerful—their only value is in the service of the great ones of society.

In these circumstances, religion more often hides the real face and heart of God than revealing them; for 'God' has been recreated to the image and likeness of the dominant culture. God blesses the armies going off to battle, anoints the war leaders, and sanctions the law and order of the group as an extension of God's own ordering of the universe. The enemies of the dominant will appear as the heathens who oppose God. The ultimate argument of the Franciscan missionaries to the Indian leaders of Mexico was that they had to admit the Spanish religion was the true one because the Christian God had overpowered their Gods in battle and had sent the Spanish to chastise them for their sins.

This is not to say that there will not be good and charitable persons within this society, but those who seek to do good will be blinded to the basic and fundamental goodness of those who are different by the strong ethnic and racial centrism of their own dominant group. The only way truly to help 'those poor and wretched folks' will be by helping them to assume our apparently good and holy ways of life. Thus in seeking to convert the natives to the 'true religion' of the victimizers, the well-intentioned missionaries will in effect be helping the victims to be victimizers themselves!

The most unfortunate aspect of this victimization is that the victims learn from the victimizers what appears to be the only true way of life possible. The only way to be fully alive is to be like the rich and powerful. They set the stage and their ways began to appear as the reasonable and natural ways of being good, beautiful and fully human. This interiorization perpetuates and expands the way of violence as the only way possible for human success. In this world, there seems to be no way out of the escalating cycle of destructive violence and victimization.

When did all this begin? According to the Bible, it began with the very beginnings of humanity and each generation will add to the evil it has learned. There appears to be no way out of this vicious cycle of destruction.

God's struggles against evil

God's saving entry into human affairs seeks to break with the way of victimization and violence. God wants a good life for all, but not at the cost of any. The God of the Bible does not want victims! God stops Abraham from sacrificing his son, leads the slaves out of Egypt and will go to the point of allowing his own Son to offer his own life in sacrifice rather than victimizing anyone. These are privileged moments of the biblical experience of God.

The Bible begins by affirming the origins of all human beings—we are all descendants of Adam and Eve who were created to the image and likeness of God and are therefore of intrinsic beauty and infinite worth. But Adam and Eve went their own way, Cain killed his brother, and all generations will learn and develop the ways of the first ones! God's creation has gone sour! This corruption has become so ingrained in the inner depths of the human spirit—both collective and personal—that even God will not easily cleanse his people of their false ideas about life: God takes the people out of Egypt much more easily than he can take Egypt's way of life out of their minds and hearts.

But God being the loving parent that God is, will not let creation destroy itself. The main focus of the entire biblical adventure is God's

identification with and concern for the oppressed victims. In the Exodus, God hears the cries of God's people, sees their suffering and determines to come and save them; during the glorious days of the Kingdom, God speaks through the prophets in favour of the widows, the orphans and the foreigners who are being exploited by their very own! In the exile God comforts the people living in a foreign land and offers them hope. In the poems of the suffering servant of the prophet Isaiah, it is not God who afflicts the servant, but God who speaks through him, through the excluded and despised other, to offer hope to all others. God does not will victimization, but uses the victims to bring salvation to all—victims and victimizers alike. It is the victim who is God's instrument of ultimate triumph!³ But it is evident from the failures of the Old Testament drama that it was not enough for God to enter into solidarity with the victims of society as a concerned outsider.

Human beings are of such infinite worth, that God sends his Son to enter into ultimate solidarity with the victims of this world by himself being born a victim—Jewish (world's outcasts), Galilean (despised by the Jews) and son of Mary (of questionable parentage), Jesus lived a constantly victimized life and died a victim.⁴ The core of the revelation of Jesus is that he refuses to accept the image of a good and successful human being from any of the victimizers of his society—religious, spiritual, economic, political or revolutionary. Unlike us, he will never seek to follow the way of his victimizers; he refuses to idealize their goals or try to become like them in any way. In this way, he demonstrates complete freedom, even though tempted, from the repetitious cycles of violence and victimization and ends up disappointing everyone—even his disciples. He was altogether 'too much' (Mt 13:57).

Jesus introduces a radically refreshing and liberating image of the authentic human being: I am who am! It does not matter who my parents are, my social or economic status, my nationality or race. If God, the all-powerful creator and absolute master of the universe, is my father, then no humanly created category of identification can rob me of or hide my ultimate and only truly real identity. My ultimate status and identity come not from human beings, but from God.

Because I am, I am of infinite worth, unique beauty and sacred dignity! This was the supreme truth that the world's cultures of dominance and victimization could not stand to have revealed; for it demolished and demonstrated clearly the fallacy of all their rationalizations and justifications which legitimized their power claims over weak and defenceless human beings.

This revelation makes of Jesus an intolerable rabble-rouser—one who subverts the masses. This is why he must die, for he is disturbing the very

foundations—sociological, cultural and religious—of human groups based on dehumanizing differentiation and segregation. Jesus was born a victim, was a victim of false accusations throughout his life, and died a victim condemned by false accusations. Yet he refused to give in to victimization! He offered salvation to all—victims and victimizers alike—because he refused to imitate the humanly accepted patterns of victimization and invited us to do the same! Free to be without having to destroy anyone! That is the ultimate liberation.

It is in the cross that the ultimate victimization of the weak is revealed: 'They all cried out, Crucify him', while the ultimate loving and saving power of God is equally revealed through the crucified victim: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. Incredible as it sounds, the evil of human beings allows the ultimate glory of God to become manifest and in so doing, the destructive cycle of victimization has finally been broken.

God was supremely revealed and experienced at one of the most unreligious and least spiritual moments of human history: the cruel and bloody execution of an innocent victim. The nakedness of the victim Jesus dying on the cross revealed in its most naked form the unlimited love and compassion of God who allows his Son to be sacrificed rather than allowing others to be victimized. Through this love, violence and destructiveness have been conquered without destroying the very persons who have sought to perpetuate victimization. They too will be offered new life without having to resort to the victimization of others. Now we can all be free together!

Yet, in the here and now, sin still reigns in persons and in civilizations. Precisely because of our own gospel tradition, it is even more evident in our own Western Christian civilization. One of the greatest lessons we learned from our first Spanish missionaries was not to be afraid of calling the demons of our own society by name.⁵

America's (USA) sinfulness and God's glory

Let me begin by saying that the foundation of the USA is unique and original. It was built by the outcasts of Europe who truly wanted to begin something new. They wanted to get away from the despotic monarchies of Europe and to create 'God's new Israel'. They in effect rejected victimization. In this new land, in this new covenant community, all persons would have a voice and a vote. Their ideals and foundations were certainly correct and earth-shaking. Something truly new was irrupting into the history of humanity—a new nation based on the best of biblical and humanistic dreams and ideals of liberty and justice.

This new nation has certainly been the promised land for many from all nations who have come here to forget their past and create a new beginning. Everyone is born equal and has the same opportunities to get ahead in this world—at least this is what we like to believe about ourselves. But we who are not part of the white dominant group of the USA know the actual truth of the situation to be quite different.

The foundation stones were correct, but the building was falsified for it was not really open to all the peoples of the world, but only those whom the original inhabitants (Nordic Europeans) considered to be fully human—like themselves. The natives were not only systematically excluded, but their extermination was biblically justified by identifying them with the Canaanites of old whom the People of God had been ordered to exterminate so that they could take over the promised land. Hence it became a virtue to cleanse the land of the heathen natives!

Africans were brought in as slaves and their enslavement was also biblically justified by identifying them with the cursed children of Canaan (Gen 10) who were condemned by God to be the slaves of the white peoples for all eternity. Their animal-like transportation, in the process of which many died, their inhuman treatment in the plantations and their condemnation to a totally inferior status never seemed to have bothered the consciences of the majority of the Christian population.

Finally, in the 'manifest destiny' dreams of the young and expanding nation in the 1830s, there were no qualms of conscience about sending agents into the Mexican state of Texas to begin to sow the seeds of discord so as to separate Texas from Mexico, and later about starting the unjust war with Mexico in order to take over fifty per cent of the Mexican nation. From that moment on, the captured Mexican mestizo became the despised opposite in every sense of the word of the good, beautiful and respectable human person of the WASP (*White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant*) nation of the north. When slavery was eliminated, the poor, defenceless and uneducated Mexicans became a good substitute for the former slaves. Ways were formulated to keep them uneducated so that they could continue being good, quiet servile workers.

Thus liberty and justice for all really meant for the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants of the new nation. White Catholics were tolerated but not trusted. Unfortunately, victimization was rejected, but only partially. Ethno-racial centrism, coupled with the insatiable profit motive, has become the real basis of the new American enterprise. It quickly based itself on the age-old structure of the victimization of the weaker other, for the profit and gain of the powerful.

The United States is certainly a marvellous experiment in democracy and opportunity, but in truthfulness we must also be aware of its limitations and deficiencies precisely in faithfulness to the original dream: that a new nation could exist where no one would be victimized for there would be true liberty and justice *for all!* There are many good, religious and conscientious persons. Volunteerism and charitable works abound. Many people and corporations truly seek to do good and eradicate misery. Yet our cultural structures prevent us from going to the very roots of the victimization and violence which are required to nourish and fulfil our acquired desires and appetites. We want to do good but are afraid that it might cost us things and ideas that we do not want to give up.

I have been in many beautiful and exciting religious experiences throughout the Americas, especially in my own USA. I have been at civic ceremonies when the God of our nation has been proclaimed and praised. I have been in our churches wherein our God has been hailed and venerated with great music, sermons and pageantry. I have been with the pope wherein our own Catholic experience of God has been truly exuberant. Yet none have been as powerful as the two which I would like to share with you.

The first one is the civil rights movement which was led by Dr Martin Luther King. The black victims of racism took the lead, others awakened and followed. It was a non-violent protest which refused to tolerate any longer the racial discrimination which had been so widely accepted throughout the USA. Certainly slavery has been brought to an end, but segregation reigned throughout the USA and the churches were not excluded. There was violent opposition to the movement to end segregation at all levels of society, but the non-violent power grew all the stronger. Scripture readings, sermons, chants like 'We shall overcome', marches, tears and fears all served to bring Blacks, Whites and Browns together in a common crusade for liberty and justice. Many sincere Whites became aware of the ugliness of the hidden racism of our country. In the marches, no one cared whether one's partners were black, Hispanic or white; Christian, Jewish or atheist; Baptist, Catholic, or anything else. We were all together and there was no doubt whatsoever that God was with us leading us on to the liberation of the oppressed victims. It was not asking for favours, it was simply demanding justice in the name of the Creator, in the very name of the founding principles of our country. It was one of the greatest spiritual crusades of our country.

The other great experience of God came through the farm-worker movement led by César Chavez especially in California and Texas. The

poor Mexicans in the USA had never been allowed the protection of labour laws. In effect, unions and labour legislation kept saying: Mexican (and other) farm-workers do not count in the USA. Migrant workers were constantly brought in from Mexico as needed and then sent back to keep the local farm-workers from unionizing.

These *campesinos* were forced to work under the most brutal and dehumanizing circumstances—under the scorching sun, constantly stooped down to pick the crops, without toilets or water. Even worse, often the crops were fumigated with dangerous chemicals while the workers and their babies were in the fields. They were paid less than minimal wages for seasonal work and received no workers' benefits whatsoever. I am sure that the slaves in Egypt did not have it any worse than our poor farm-workers.

César Chavez, a poor farm-worker himself, called for non-violent crusades. The Mexican victims took the lead. People throughout the country were asked to boycott the buying of grapes and lettuce. All the big landowners and labour unions were against them. Many tried to discredit them and even threatened them in many ways. It is said that when the grape boycott was really beginning to take effect across the country, the dietitians at the Pentagon decided that grapes were very good for the soldiers in Asia so eight pounds of grapes per soldier per day were bought to send to Asia! It was like David against Goliath.

César Chavez dared to reveal the hideous and unjust structures which were kept in place to assure the success of a few at the cost of sacrificing the many on the altars of the crop-picking fields. The human sacrifices continued but they had been nicely and politely camouflaged and hidden. America could enjoy its good fruits and vegetables without having to think about the body and blood sacrifices that were required to get the food onto the tables. Yet the campaign continued and brought some moderate changes. It still continues while the opposition grows more grotesque each day.

All the powers conspired to destroy the defenceless movement of the victimized farm-workers. On the other hand, the more the resistance grew, the more men and women of all backgrounds and religious persuasions started to join the crusade. As in the civil rights movement, there were Jews, Christians and others; Protestants and Catholics; religious and laity; Whites, Blacks and Browns. No one had any problem marching behind the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe for she was the traditional protectress of the Mexican poor and their banner in their struggles for justice. We sang religious songs and prayed the rosary. We were together and united and the more we were threatened, the more

that we knew God was with us. Marching with the farm-workers was a re-walking of the way of the cross. Those who took part, regardless of their religious persuasion, knew they had truly experienced God present among us.

The civil rights movements and the farm-worker movement have brought us into solidarity with the other suffering victims of the Americas in their struggles for new life. They are beginning to see themselves as the suffering servant. It is not God's will to bruise them. As in the Exodus, God is present in the struggles of the oppressed 'nobodies' against the unjust oppression of Pharaoh, and the gods of the empire are powerless against the God who hears the cries of the poor. As in the crucifixion, God speaks absolute truth from the position and through the lips of the crucified ones whom God will resurrect. The resurrected peoples of the Americas are the ones who will usher in the truly new humanity of the Americas. They are the people of hope.⁶

These movements are not asking for revolutions, but for the conversion of all: of the poor from their passive and silent suffering; of the dominant from their arrogance and blindness. The call of the victims of our society is like the call of Jesus to the rich young man. God is speaking to all of us through the cries of today's suffering servants—will we listen?

The experience of the God of life begins when the victimized begin to discover themselves not as culpable for their suffering—some kind of divine chastisement—but precisely as victims of an unjust system of avarice and aggression. In the recognition that God does not legitimize the unjust ways and structures of society, the true mind and heart of God become known and proclaimed. The experience of God is deepened and clarified when the victimized realize that they should not try to overthrow the agents of violence through their own means of aggression, but rather through non-violent alternatives of life which refuse to imitate and duplicate the schemes of the violent of this world. The living out of this conviction even unto martyrdom is one of the deepest and most authentic experiences of God humanly possible in this world. It is in these moments that we can truly see and experience the brilliance of the glory of God in the midst of the human condition: 'Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him' (Jn 13:31).

NOTES

¹ Jon Sobrino: '500 years: structural sin & structural grace', *SEDOS Bulletin* vol 24, no 5 (15 May 1992).

² L. Boff and V. Elizondo: '1492–1992: The voice of the victims', *Concilium* 1990/6 (SCM Press: London).

³ J. G. Williams: *The Bible, violence & the sacred* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), pp 78, 168.

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the Galilean identity of Jesus as the identity of a victim, consult V. Elizondo: *Galilean journey: the Mexican American promise* (New York: Orbis, 1983).

⁵ M. Salinas: 'The voices that spoke for the victims' in *Concilium* 1990/6.

⁶ Ignacio Ellacuría: 'Utopia v profestismo desde América Latina', *Revista Latinoamericana de teología* no 17 (1989), pp 141-184.