

# Liberation and spirituality

*Pablo Richard*

**L**IBERATION THEOLOGY HAS BEEN DEFINED since its beginnings as a critical and systematic reflection about God – a God discovered, encountered, lived and celebrated from within a practice of liberation. In this sense, liberation theology from its birth has been a liberating spirituality. An especially profound experience, since the beginning, has been that of the disquieting presence of God in all the poor and oppressed. It was not merely the poor, but God among the poor who disquieted the Church, and the whole system which proclaimed itself Christian. The biblical text which best expresses the origins of this liberating spirituality is Matthew 25: 31–46, the last judgement.

## CHANGING CONTEXTS OF LIBERATION SPIRITUALITY

### *Socialist revolution*

Liberation theology as the basis for a liberating spirituality has preserved its fundamental identity for the past thirty years. What has changed has been the *practice* of liberation within which we have lived our experience of God. During the 1960s the Cuban revolution and the socialist option made a great impact on Latin America. This period culminated in the Chilean experience of a democratic socialism (1970–1973). Without a doubt, during this period we lived out the impact of Marxism as a critical theory of the dominant system, and as the rationale of a practice of liberation. The ‘Christians for Socialism’ movement was the expression on a continental scale of the massive participation of Christians in the search for an alternative to the dominant capitalist system. During this time (1960–1973), liberation theology developed a liberating mysticism and spirituality which enabled committed Christians to live their Christian faith in a coherent way from within the practice of revolution. Vatican II (1962–1965) and the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia (1968) made possible this positive evolution.

***The rise of Base Ecclesial Communities under dictatorship and oppression***

The period beginning in 1973 in Chile (and both before and after that in other Latin American countries) was one of military dictatorships, a time of extreme persecution and martyrdom. Several thousand Christians, including many priests and women and men religious, died as martyrs for their faith and for their love of the poor. It was a time of reflection and self-critique as well. Militant Christians, especially those committed to a practice of liberation, questioned the reductionist perspective on the seizure of power, and the excessive politicization and ideology lived out in the previous period. A communitarian context was now added to liberation theology. What now spiritually challenged and integrally transformed Christians were the demands of a continuous life within a community, as well as the intellectual process of learning a critical theory.

It was in this period that Ecclesial Base Communities multiplied, especially in the rural world and the poor suburbs of the great Latin American cities. These communities created a space where the poorest and most excluded could participate. They sought not only a new presence within the world of the poor, but the construction of a new model of Church: a Church as People of God and Communion of communities. When liberation theology used critical theory as its means, it was mostly the most militant and intellectual who could give it depth, but now a living community provided the means by which the poor and simple people could live it out. The Third Conference of Latin American Bishops celebrated in Puebla, Mexico (1979), ratified this new orientation of theology and spirituality in the Church.

***Popular uprisings and new celebrations of liberation***

During the 1980s, while South America remained under dictatorships, Central America was pushed to the limits by the wars for the liberation of its peoples: *campesino* masses<sup>1</sup> rose up against the national oligarchies, which for centuries had exploited the countries, regardless of their welfare. In Nicaragua it was the dynasty of the Somozas; in El Salvador the whole country was in the hands of fourteen families, and in Guatemala a military-industrial élite dominated.

On 19 July 1979, the Sandinista revolution triumphed in Nicaragua, with the massive participation of Christian countrymen and women. The famous *Gospel of Solentiname* of Ernesto Cardenal and the *Misa campesina* of the Mejía Godoy brothers express very well the spirit and mysticism of this revolution. The *Gospel of Solentiname*, named after the place where it was born, is a rereading of the gospels made directly by the *campesinos* from the perspective of their social and political situation. A stanza from the *Misa campesina* sums up the spirit which animates it:

You are the God of the Poor.  
The humble and simple God.  
The God who sweats in the street.  
The God of the weather-beaten face.

The Kyrie is sung: 'Christ Jesus, find your identity with us, Christ Jesus, find solidarity not with the oppressive class who devours the community, but with the oppressed, with my people thirsting for peace'. Very soon in El Salvador and Guatemala, similar processes of liberation broke out. On 24 March 1980 Bishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero died a martyr.

In this new context of massive *campesino* and Christian insurrection, liberation theology took on a strongly ethical, spiritual and biblical character; it inspired an entire new body of liturgical symbol, with poetry, song and painting. Theology no longer merely reflected on itself, but now also sang, celebrated and lived communally.

### *The God of life versus the idols of death*

A theme which appeared at this time with great force was that of the God of life and the idols of death. The whole of Central America was living a brutal confrontation between life and death. The poor understood life in very concrete ways: the land, work, health, education, participation and festival. Theologians realized that the fundamental problem in the Church and in society was not atheism, but idolatry. The danger was not secularism or the denial of God, but rather the perversion of the sense of God, or the substitution of God by other gods. Idolatry develops in two ways: through perversion of the image of God, or through making human realities into the absolute and divine. Turning the true God into an idol happens when God is presented as an absolute and terrible Lord who

asks for human sacrifice and imposes laws as the means of salvation. Idolatry is not simply a spiritual perversion, but is also socially and politically dangerous. In Latin America, this form of idolatry gave fundamental legitimation to 'the system', with its widespread oppression and murder. It lay at the root of social sin.

In confrontation with this idolatry, people sought to live and think about God as the God of *life* – life as land, work, health, education, participation, solidarity and feast. With this belief that God gives life in abundance, people's discussion no longer focused merely on the political dimension of faith, but shifted to include the theological and spiritual dimensions of economics and politics too. A passage from St Irenaeus was taught to me by Bishop Romero, with whom I was in close contact for the last six months of his life. It summarizes magnificently the spirituality of the time and was often quoted: '*Gloria Dei vivens homo; gloria autem hominis visio Dei*' – 'The glory of God is the living human being; the glory of the human being is the vision of God'.

During the 1990s we lived through a profound change in the historical situation of theology and spirituality. The dictatorships of the South ended, but the *campesino* revolutions of Central America were also defeated. We in the Third World suffered the crisis of historical socialisms and the imposition of a new system of globalized economy and free markets, with a neo-liberal inspiration. The neo-liberal ideologues (such as Fukuyama and other 'ideologues of death') announced the end of history, the death of utopias, Marxism and liberation theology. They declared the definitive triumph of a system which admits no alternatives: a singular and global system, without opposition or alternative, where everything is regulated automatically by the marketplace. This is the idolatry which happens when realities such as private property or freedom are made absolute and deified. The market, science and technology – themselves positive objects – become idols when they are absolutized into subjects, gods or messiahs, which will save humanity from all evils, even death. The values of competitiveness, efficiency and success prevail, and in their name the exclusion of sixty per cent of humanity and ecological destruction is justified. The hope of the wealthy, to have a system where the poor no longer have any hope, is finally realized.

## LIBERATION AND SPIRITUALITY TODAY

*Reconstructing hope with a spirit of life*

The four great challenges for spirituality currently are: firstly, the affirmation of human life as an absolute; secondly, the necessity to create a society where all may find a place; thirdly, the dignity of all human beings as sons and daughters of God; and finally, the sacred character of the natural world. A spirituality of life needs to reconstruct hope: new foundations and new alternatives. 'Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.' I will explain briefly how we have reconstructed our theology and spirituality in the current context.

Humanity, and the Church which chooses life, have no power to construct an alternative to the *system* of globalization, but they may have the strength to construct an alternative to the *spirit* of the system. Economists themselves distinguish between the system and the spirit of the system. The Church, as an institution and human society, necessarily lives within the system, but as a community of solidarity, believing in the God of life, it rejects the spirit, the logic, the rationality of the system.

Within any economic and political system there exists a cultural, ethical and spiritual dimension. Globalization, to the extent that it is exclusive of the majority of peoples and destructive of the natural world, has a culture, an ethic and a spirit more of death than of life. The Church, which defends the life of the excluded and of the natural world, and does not share the spirit of globalization, can construct *within the interior* of the system a cultural, ethical and spiritual resistance. It can construct a culture of life against the culture of death of the system; an ethics of being against an ethics of having; an ethics of solidarity and justice against an ethic grounded solely in the values of the efficiency and competitiveness of the market; an ethics where life alone is absolute. ('The Sabbath was made for the human being, and not the human being for the Sabbath.' It is anti-Christian, for example, to affirm the legitimacy of debt payment, if making this payment destroys human life.) The Church, finally, lives the spirituality of the God of life against the idolatry of death inherent in the system of globalization. I would now like to relate this to some biblical texts.

***Resisting 'the world' in the Gospel and Epistles of John***

In the tradition of the fourth Gospel and the epistles of John, the believer's situation is described as one who is in the world, but not of the world. 'The world' in this biblical tradition is a determinate organization of society totally closed to the action of God and dominated by the forces of evil and of death (1 Jn 2:16). Christians are in this world; they do not flee from it, but they live in the world as a contrary spirit to the spirit of this world. Jesus says to his disciples whom God has given him:

This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. (Jn 14:17)

And elsewhere:

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. (Jn 17:14-16)

The spirituality of the fourth Gospel is not a spirituality of flight from the world, but rather one of resistance from within. For us today, that challenge means we must live in opposition to the spirit of globalization.

***Detaining the 'anti-Christ' of globalization***

Two biblical texts of an apocalyptic character help us to define our resistance as a Christian community. The first is Ephesians 6: 10-20. The opening verses read:

Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6: 10-12)

The struggle of Christians is not against a specific institution or person (the flesh or the blood), but against *the powers* (in the orig-

inal text: 'Principalities, potentates, dominations') who control this world. Today we would identify them as the law of the marketplace, international financing, the political élites of the G8 powers, in so far as they are effectively absolute powers who in practice decide life and death for the majority of people, and the destiny of the cosmos. Above all, Christians struggle against the supernatural forces of evil behind those powers and oppressive structures, the entire 'idolatrous spirituality of death' that legitimates the exclusion and death of so many. Essentially it is a spiritual resistance. The same text continues, recommending the weapons to be used in this combat: truth, justice, peace, faith, prayer and permanent vigilance, and especially 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God' (Eph 6: 13–20).

In this second apocalyptic text from 2 Thessalonians 2: 1–12, the author seeks to calm the souls of the community of Thessalonika with regard to the second coming of Christ. He says that nothing should make them suppose that the day of the Lord is imminent, since before the coming of Christ two situations must come about: a situation of serious 'apostasy' or rebellion, and the revelation of the 'anti-Christ'. The second situation may be recognized by the resistance of the Christian community in detaining the 'anti-Christ'. What is essential in the text reads as follows:

[the second coming of Christ will not come unless] the *rebellion* comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship . . . declaring himself to be God. And you know *what is now restraining him*, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until *the one who now restrains it* is removed. And then the lawless one will be revealed . . . (author's italics)

The term 'anti-Christ' is not mentioned in this text, but it is identified with the Hebrew term 'lawless one', 'one destined for destruction', the adversary who exalts himself above God and all that is divine. The 'rebellion' to come before the coming of the anti-Christ is a historical possibility, but the text offers a historical alternative of hope. The mystery of iniquity is already active in the world, but it is possible to impede or detain it. Who precisely detains the anti-Christ is not made explicit in verses 6–7, but the context allows one to deduce it. The text says that the coming of the lawless one will

be signalled by the influence of Satan, with all sorts of evils: miracles, signs, deceptive wonders. This wholesale satanic demonstration of power will seduce those who do not have the love of truth, who believe in lies and are complicit in iniquity (vv 9–12). This negative description of those who succumb to the anti-Christ allows us to deduce positively those who resist: the one who has love for the truth, who does not believe in falsehood and has no part in iniquity. The practice of truth and justice is what allows us to hold back the mystery of iniquity. The theology of liberation thinks of itself as rooted in such practice: a cultural, ethical and spiritual resistance to the idolatrous powers of death.

This text from Thessalonians allows us to perform a prophetic and theological discernment of our present situation within the economic system of the free market. The idolatry of the market is nowadays that mystery of iniquity which is still active in the world, leading us to believe in lies rather than truth. In the face of this mystery of iniquity, there are two possibilities: apostasy as total abandonment to the marketplace or the practice of truth as resistance. This resistance is embodied in all those who, whether as individuals or as communities, practise justice and truth, who defend life, who make of human and cosmic life an absolute criterion of truth above all institutions and laws, who seek to construct a society where there is a place for all. The theology of liberation, as theology of life, is part of this resistance.

### *Where do we live this liberating spirituality?*

Although there is no grand alternative to the system of globalization, the thousands and thousands of little 'oases of life', of small experiences, of small base communities – all embody a cultural, ethical and spiritual resistance to the system. Our spiritual combat against the system of death may be symbolized as the battle between the ants and dinosaurs. The ants are tiny, but their strength is in their numbers and their organization. The dinosaurs could not destroy the ants; indeed, we all know that the dinosaurs were destined to disappear.

These 'oases of life' develop especially within social movements. These movements are multiplying in immense variety: movements of *campesinos* and suburban dwellers, indigenous peoples and Afro-Americans, women and youth, cultural and ecological movements,



alternative movements in agriculture and health and many more. They are all creators and purveyors of hope and of spirituality.

*The strength of the Spirit, of the Word and of solidarity*

Today three forces exist that are transforming and revitalizing the Church and all the base communities, confirming God as the God of life. The first is spirituality in the strict sense: life according to the Spirit. Experience of the Spirit today is given above all in places where it has traditionally been denied: in the body, in work, in the earth, in health, in nature. The subjects bearing the Spirit are especially the poor, the excluded, the *campesinos*, indigenous people, blacks, youth, women. The creative spaces of spirituality are in the base communities and all the social movements. All this new spirituality lives in prayer and testimony, in mysticism and contemplation, in poetry and song, in festival and dance, on many occasions accompanied by signs and wonders of the Spirit. It is the liberating spirituality of the poor that transforms the Church and society.

The second force is the Word of God. A movement exists today of community reading of the Bible, handing the Bible over to the People of God. All the communities read and interpret the Bible, and with the Bible in hand and in their minds and hearts they proclaim the Word of God. The People of God tell the Word of God with authority, legitimacy, sureness, autonomy, force and efficaciousness – it is the new grammar of faith of the People of God.

Solidarity is the third force; spirituality and the Word of God have historical and liberating force if they are united to solidarity. The Church and the Base Ecclesial Communities give witness to solidarity, since they have experienced the love of the Father. The God of life, who loves us first, transforms us to live in solidarity with the world, especially with the poor and excluded. Solidarity, the new name of charity, is what roots us in a liberating way in people and in history.

These three forces are the spiritual life in the Church of God One and Triune: God the Spirit (Pneuma), God the Word (Logos), and God who is Solidarity (Agape). This relationship of the Trinity as the God of life, who is Spirit, Word and solidarity, lives in the People of God to bring about the People or the Communion of communities. This power and way of living is in the hands, hearts and minds of the whole People of God. These three forces are not 'con-

trolled' by clerical power, but rather arise out of the spiritual and divine depth of the People of God. All lay men and women, in so far as each one is priest, pastor and prophet, can encounter directly and develop these three forces. It is an eminently lay ministry and proper to the People of God.

Spirituality and liberation reach their fullness when the God of life, as a God who is Spirit-Word-solidarity, is present in this way in the Church as People of God and Communion of communities. With this fullness of Spirit we can face the coming third millennium with hope and joy.

**Pablo Richard** was born in Chile and ordained priest in 1967. He studied theology in Chile, Scripture in Rome and holds a doctorate in the sociology of religion from the Sorbonne. Among his books is *Death of Christendoms, birth of the Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988). Currently he is director of the Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones in San José, Costa Rica, which is dedicated to the formation of pastoral workers in Central America and the Caribbean.

*This article was translated from the Spanish by John Montag SJ.*

#### NOTES

1 *Campeño*: peasant, agricultural labourer.