

Ignacio Ellacuría, “Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America,”

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I. Ellacuría and J. Sobrino, eds., Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993, pp. 290-328.

I. CHRISTIAN UTOPIA [AND PROPHECY] (pp. 290-94)

The danger of separating utopia and prophecy; the danger of subjectivist or transcendentalist disincarnation. Latin America is a place to historicize prophecy and utopia today.

1. The Kingdom of God as Utopia (290-91)

Christian utopia has general characteristics (the “Kingdom of God”) that must be “historicized,” that is, spelled out for particular historical contexts. The same spirit of prophecy which gave rise to the general utopia is necessary for its theoretical and practical concretion today.

2. Prophecy: Contrasting the Kingdom of God with a Particular Historical Reality (292)

“Prophecy is understood here to be the critical contrasting of the proclamation of the fullness of the Kingdom of God with a definite historical situation” (292). History and transcendence go hand-in-hand.

3. Historical Commitment (292-94)

Christian utopia inspires commitment. Christian utopia inspires prophecy, and vice versa. Along with other past revelations, Christ is the model for such commitment. But the Spirit, too, through the signs of the times, helps historicize (Zubiri: actualize) the general Christian utopia (Kingdom). Again, history (the “categorical”) and transcendence go hand-in-hand; this can be seen by attending to the *ethical* drama of history.

II. LATIN AMERICA TODAY: PROPHECY AND UTOPIA (294-96)

Latin America, the Suffering Servant of God: a prophetic “light to the nations.” The facts themselves denounce the present world order. TL and church of the poor as utopian vanguard. But prophetic-utopian elements are mere seeds today, facing stiff resistance in society and in the church itself.

III. [PROPHECY:] A NEW FREEDOM AND HUMANITY (296-309)

1. Radical Prophetic Critique (297-301)

- *Dependency (297)*

Current North-South and East-West conflicts generate misery and dependency in the South. Interdependence (globalization). External debt is a primary symptom of imperialism.

- *The Capitalist System (297-300)*

Historical prophecy mainly criticizes capitalism, which today “exports” its most evil consequences to the poor countries. The logic of capitalism dehumanizes: fear and insecurity lead people to seek happiness through wealth and consumption; unhealthy competition undermines solidarity. Wealthy countries exercise cultural imperialism; they promote democracy and human rights in an ideological, manipulative way. The capitalist development model is not universalizable (Kant). It is anti-Christian.

- *The Institutional Church (300-1)*

Despite recent heroes and martyrs, the church is largely silent in the face of injustice, tolerant of the evils of capitalism. It is not inculturated into Latin America.

2. Prophecy: Denunciation and Utopia (302-309)

“Prophecy’s *no* . . . generates utopia’s *yes*” (302). We need a universalizable global project.

- *Preferential Option for the Poor (302-4)*

“Universalization must be done from the preferential option for the poor” (302). Up to now people have tried to order the world and organize the church based on a preferential option for the rich and powerful, imitating them. The key question: What do the poor majorities need? The key agents: the “poor with spirit,” conscious and struggling.

- *Hope (304-5)*

Hope vs. meaningless consumerism. It often appears to be “hope against hope,” but it is neither mere stubbornness nor desperation. Fiesta (celebration of life) vs. entertainment.

- *Beginning Anew (305-7)*

Radical transformation does not mean a total break from the past, as in dialectical materialism. The Gospel: “born again,” the “new person,” the seed that dies and brings new life, the fall of Babylon and the New Jerusalem. The fundamental criterion: “life in abundance” for all (PP).

“Material life . . . the primary gift” is the basis of the other dimensions of life. The contours of “abundant life” are difficult to define precisely; it is easier to specify what it is *not* and how *not* to bring it about.

- *Prophecy and Liberation* (307-9)

Prophecy of *liberation* points to the utopia of freedom. Liberation engenders freedom, more than vice versa. The liberal project of negative liberties (Bill of Rights, etc.) is ambiguous.

“Liberalism . . . in Latin America is today the juridical and formal cover-up for those who have already been liberated from certain oppressions and dominations and who in turn see to it that others do not achieve the same” (307). It is hypocritical to claim one’s country is free when the majority does not enjoy the material conditions necessary for exercising basic freedoms and rights. “[F]reedom and conditions of freedom are not given to but are won by people in a historical liberation process.” There is an “axiological priority of liberation over liberalization in attaining freedom” (308). Liberation = freedom *from* + freedom *for*.

“In more explicitly Christian terms, [this] implies liberation from sin, from the law, and from death,” conversion and following Christ, reproducing the “features of the Son” (Rom 8,29).

IV. [UTOPIA:] A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH (309-28)

1. The New Human Being (309-313)

The “old human being”: The human being of “the so-called North Atlantic and Western Christian civilization” (310) is not the model to imitate: insecure, competitive, seeking prestige and individualistic. This is not “human nature,” as T. Hobbes supposed. This human being lacks solidarity; is ethnocentric, chauvinistic, aggressive, imperialist, superficial (hedonistic); lives as if self-sufficient and destroys the environment. Latin Americans should not only avoid imitating imported models of behavior but also overcome their own typical defects (machismo, religious fatalism, etc.) (311).

To envision and to become new human beings, we must “return to the fundamental gospel theme of wealth-poverty.” Poverty today is “not a purely optional counsel but a historical necessity”; for wealth and greed are the “fundamental energizer of a heartless and inhuman culture” and the greatest obstacle to the Kingdom of God (310).

The option for the poor is the key to “combat[ing] the priority of wealth in the shaping of human beings.” The solution is not for the poor to become like the rich but for the non-poor to become like the poor-with-spirit (the conscious and active poor). We become the new human being through solidarity, which is a matter of “permanent struggle,” finding oneself by losing oneself in service (312).

The new human being is motivated by *mercy and love* (not hatred of the oppressor) and characterized by *hope* (312). This is an open hope that does not absolutize either achievements or the popular organization (313).

The new human being is a friend of nature (*el don de la madre tierra*).

The new human being integrates contemplation and efficacious action.

N.B.: "Other historical **features of Jesus' life** ought to be projected also on this new human being" (313).

2. The New Earth (313-25)

Utopian imagination allows us to appreciate that, although historical inertia is real and heavy, social transformation is possible. "The utopian ideal, when it is . . . assumed by the mass of the people, comes to be a stronger force than the force of arms" (314).

- *A New Economic Order*

a.) *A Civilization of Poverty*. From the Christian perspective: a "civilization of poverty" must replace "the present civilization of wealth." (Ellacuría means evangelical poverty, not pauperization.) From a sociological perspective: a "civilization of work" must replace "the dominant civilization of capital." Today capital and wealth are the principal elements shaping the present-day civilization. That civilization proposes

- "the private accumulation of . . . capital . . . as the fundamental basis of development,"
- "accumulation of the most possible wealth as the fundamental basis for [individuals' and families'] security,"
- "consumption as the basis of their own happiness" (314-15).

By contrast, the civilization of poverty makes

- "the universal satisfying of basic needs the principle of development" (use value takes precedence over exchange value),
- "shared solidarity the foundation of humanization" (315) and
- "the dignifying of work" the "dynamizing principle [for] the perfecting of the human being" (316).

(Marginal utopias are not enough –p. 317.)

"The great benefits of nature -- . . . in general all the natural resources for production, use, and enjoyment -- need not be privately appropriated by any individual person, group, or nation."

"Personal initiative cannot be confused with . . . private and privatizing initiative" (317).

b.) *Capitalism and Socialism*. "In Latin America the failure of capitalist models . . . is quite clear." Moreover, "only a radical transformation of the capitalist economic arrangement is minimally reconcilable with what the Christian utopia is." "On the other hand, the economic

results . . . of the socialist arrangements are not satisfactory either.” Moreover, “there are also serious problems in the realization of the socialist model as the most effective instrument to historicize Christian utopia” (318). Although “in economic matters the socialist ideal is closer than the capitalist to the utopian demands of the Kingdom, . . . it does not prosper precisely because of its moral idealism.” Socialism underestimates human weakness, whereas capitalism prospers by rewarding egoism. While “At times the church’s social teaching has been too naïve and tolerant toward . . . capitalism, . . . liberation theology has also on occasions been naïve and tolerant toward . . . Marxism” (319).

- *A New Social Order*

We need a new social order “in which it will be possible for the people to be more and more the agents of their own destiny and to have greater possibilities for creative freedom and for participation” (319-20). “[T]he social should be given more weight than . . . the political dimension, but not take its place.” We need neither individualism nor statism, but “a socialization that promotes a communitarian and social initiative that is not delegated either to the state or parties or to vanguards or to bosses.” The public sphere is larger than the political sphere. “The social represents . . . a mediation between the individual and the political”; it is the space where “the individual’s essential communal dimension is primarily realized” and where the “permanent problem” of reconciling freedom with equality and justice can be solved (320). We need to make “excessive and conflict-producing inequalities” disappear, although “the utopian ideal of Jesus goes much further . . . [T]he follower of Jesus seeks to take the last place”. “Social institutions, unlike political ones, can be impregnated with” Jesus’ spirit of austerity, humility and sacrifice (321).

- *A New Political Order*

Ellacuría does not propose a Christian “Third Way” between capitalist liberalism and Marxist collectivism, or, in political language, between liberal democracy and the centralized “democracy” of classical socialism. (Christian faith prescribes no specific social model for today.) Rather we must seek to put in place the best practices of both models, which seem to be opening up a bit, with a democratization of socialism (glasnost, perestroika) and a possible socialization of democracy. The current promotion of human rights and advances in democracy and global solidarity “point toward possibilities of change through reform.” Nevertheless, in Latin America, because societies are so radically unjust and because “the prevailing dynamism” is intensifying this injustice under the guise of reform and development, revolution is needed, “an anti-capitalist revolution --‘anti’- to the capitalism found in the underdeveloped and oppressed countries—and an anti-imperialist revolution.” This revolution must synthesize freedom and justice (322). Imposing either liberalization (mere political rights) or classic socialism (“the so-called popular democracies”) will not turn the present “common evil” into a

“common good.” Rather than abstract dogmas, “It is better to stick to the more radical principle of reality as this is experienced by the poor majorities.” That principle leads to advocating “a duly prioritized system of human rights. . . . From this perspective, social liberation appears more necessary and urgent than political liberation” in poor countries. “[S]atisfying the basic needs of the masses and support[ing] the autonomous exercise of social life” are more important than political freedoms. [Trans. modified.] In the present situation, “the socialist ideal appears more connatural” to the Christian message “than the capitalist ideal.” Despite its criticism, the church’s social teaching has sometimes affirmed capitalism’s basic goodness (323). “Liberation theology . . . propose[s] that the Marxist form of revolution . . . be profoundly transformed,” because of tendencies that diverge from the Christian utopian ideal (324).

- *A New Cultural Order*

It is necessary to avoid mere imitation of Western culture and to resist the imposition of consumerism, a cult of novelty and decadence. It is necessary to re-invigorate the age-old Latin cultures so that these can further develop and assimilate from others what is beneficial. Culture must liberate from ignorance, fear and coercions, helping all, not just an elite, to flourish.

3. A New Heaven (325-28)

This refers to “a new presence of God among humans,” which needs to be made “explicit and visible” (325).

- *A Christological Heaven*

It refers to the “increasingly operative and visible presence of God among human beings and public human structures,” according to the pattern we see in Christ who must become “all in all” (Col 3,11). The world cannot be regenerated simply by imminent historical dynamisms (326).

- *The Church of Christ*

“[O]ne of the principal forms in which this new heaven ought to be historicized is the church of Christ as historical body of Jesus crucified and risen.” The sacraments (baptism, eucharist) must manifest the presence of Christ in the lives of his disciples and the church.

“Only a church that lets itself be invaded by the Spirit [of Jesus] renewer of all things and that is attentive to the signs of the times can become the new heaven” (326). This requires overcoming the habitual exaggerated recourse to laws. The signs of the times point in the direction of the future. Prophecy and utopia uncover and interpret them.

The church is called to conversion: from its alliance with the civilization of wealth, to become the church of the poor, the home of “new human beings” and a concrete sign of the “civilization of poverty” (327-28).