

Latin American Liberation Theology

The Next
Generation

Ivan Petrella, editor

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1.

The Human Being as Subject

Defending the Victims

Jung Mo Sung

Any kind of Christian theology today, even in rich and dominant countries, which does not have as its starting point the historic situation of dependence and domination of two thirds of humankind, with its 30 million dead of hunger and malnutrition, will not be able to position and concretize historically its fundamental themes. Its questions will not be the real questions. It will not touch the real person. As observed by a participant in the Buenos Aires gathering, "theology must be rescued from its cynicism." Certainly, in the face of the problems of today's world, many theological writings are reduced to cynicism.¹

—HUGO ASSMANN

THEOLOGY AND ETHICAL INDIGNATION

IN THE BEGINNING OF THE 1970s a group of Latin American theologians introduced to the world and to the Christian churches a theology with two new epistemological novelties: a new methodology and the perspective of the poor. This theology received, as we know, the name of liberation theology. As I consider the current and deep crisis of this theology, I realize that its essential proposition was neither its name nor the historical objective implicit in the name: the *liberation* of the poor. It was rather those two epistemological novelties. From the beginnings its theologians have made it clear that liberation

theology was and is a second moment. The first moment is the praxis of liberation, born out of the ethical indignation in view of the situations in which human beings are reduced to subhuman conditions. Such indignation is strong enough to make people assume one another's risks and pains. This was perceived as a spiritual experience—the experience of finding the person of Jesus Christ in the face of the oppressed and crushed ones.

This intrinsic relationship between liberation theology and praxis was seen as one of the fundamental differences between liberation theology and other theologies. Certainly it was taken for granted that “traditional” theologies were also somewhat related to Christian practice. However, as stated by Assmann, “the fundamental structures of the traditional theological language are not historical. Its determinant categories aim at establishing the truth in itself, without the intrinsic connection with a praxis. That praxis is seen as something which happens later, as a derivative, as an ‘application’ of the ‘preexisting’ and real truth.”²

I think that it is fundamentally important to rescue and recover this basic and original intuition of liberation theology, considering that we are frequently tempted to search not only in books (including the “Holy Scriptures”) but also in theories that happen to be in fashion for some previous truth, unrelated to the real problems of praxis, that might enlighten us and help us cope with the crisis in which the Latin American theology finds itself immersed. In other words, liberation theology cannot wish to solve its impasse by means of analysis and/or deductions of the concept of God or any other concept but by starting with experiences of God in the center of history and with critical analysis of the concepts we use to interpret such experiences.

To propose building a theology intrinsically linked to praxis does not mean to abandon the rigor of thinking. It means precisely the opposite. For Gustavo Gutiérrez, for instance, such theology must be “a serious discourse, aware of itself, in full possession of its conceptual elements” with “a clear and critical attitude regarding the economic and socio-cultural issues in the life and reflection of the Christian community” so as necessarily to be “a criticism of society and the Church in so far as they are called and addressed by the Word of God.”³ Thus understood, he used to say that theology carries out its liberating function regarding human beings and the Christian community to the extent that it avoids “every fetishism and idolatry.”⁴

To talk about this intrinsic relationship between the praxis of liberation and liberation theology may sound *passé*, since only a few

people still use the expression *praxis of liberation* or even *liberation of the poor*. The collapse of the socialist bloc, the crisis of the popular movements in Latin America, the aggressiveness of the media with its daily message from which there is no escape, and to which there is no alternative, the capitalist market system, and the desire to imitate the success of the “religious shows” appear to have forever buried such expressions. Certainly we must recognize that there was an exaggerated expectancy regarding the liberation of the poor, a point we will consider later. However, the first moment of liberation theology never was such expectancy. It certainly was not what the theologians were talking about. The first moment was always the practice of what, at the time, was known as the liberation that results from the spiritual experience of finding Jesus Christ in the face of oppressed persons. In other words, the first moment was, and is, service in defense of the life and dignity of the victimized poor. In the 1970s and 1980s this service was seen as the praxis of liberation. However, this usage does not exhaust the wealth of possibilities that can emerge from such experience. There are other ways to interpret this expression. To quote Gutiérrez: “The Christian community professes a ‘faith which works through charity.’ It is—at least ought to be—real charity, action and commitment to the service of others. Theology is reflection, a critical attitude. Theology *follows*; it is the second step.”⁵ This strangeness related to the “languages of liberation” indicates that we live in a time quite different from the 1970s and 1980s. It further reflects the limitations of the “traditional” language of liberation theology in interpreting and expressing the faith experience of those who are feeling ethical indignation regarding today’s massive social exclusion as well as other forms of oppression of human beings and their environment. At the end of the 1960s, the gestation period of liberation theology, Rubem Alves wrote that

man’s language is a mirror of his historicity. It does not emerge only from the metabolism that takes place between man and his world, but rather expresses itself as an answer to concrete situations that surrounds him. . . . It conveys the *human interpretation* of the message and challenge that he sends to the world, stating what he believes to be his vocation, his place, his responsibilities, his direction and his function in the world. . . . Therefore the emergence of a new language announces the birth of a distinctly new experience, a distinctly new self understanding, a distinctly new vocation, and consequently a distinctly new man.⁶

Liberation theology was this new language of a new self-understanding on the part of the Christian community in Latin America and the world. However, today we experience a certain fatigue in this language of the 1970s.

I myself believe that this language can be rescued, provided that some structural problems are solved.⁷ On the other hand, I also think that what matters most is not the “survival” of liberation theology, but the continuity of the theological production reflecting a critical reflection about the charity/service born out of ethical indignation in view of the situations and rationale that reduce human beings to sub-human conditions. The perspective of the victims must be prominent in such a theological endeavor. In other words, we must pursue the formulation of religious and theological languages that enhance a better expression as well as a critical understanding of the experience of faith, of ethical indignation, and of commitment, in defense of the lives of the victims.

To that end we need to accept the permanent challenge to reflect critically about our presuppositions and concepts. In this chapter I want to contribute to this task with some considerations regarding the concept of historical subject, which has always been associated with the concept of liberation of the poor.

ETHICAL INDIGNATION AND THE SUBJECT

The founding experience, called by liberation theology the first moment, is, as stated before, the experience of ethical indignation. Not everybody feels such indignation, no matter how grave the social problems are. There are those who do not feel it because they do not see the victims, or because they have excluded the victims from their vision field, or even because they no longer consider the victims as persons. There are also those who feel uncomfortable with the unveiling of the victims’ suffering, but since the discomfort does not result in ethical indignation, they forget about it as time goes by.

What happens when one feels ethical indignation? It is clear that this question cannot be fully answered. Each experience is different and presupposes worlds and histories of the involved persons. But I would like to point out for our reflection two aspects related to the concern.

For a person to be indignant in view of a situation in which someone is being mistreated or reduced to a subhuman condition, such a

person must recognize the humanity of that individual. Without this recognition no ethical indignation is possible, for nobody feels indignant regarding a situation in which a subhuman being is being treated as subhuman. This is so because, in this case, the humanity of such a mistreated person is not recognized.

This difficulty in recognizing the victim's humanity in such situations is due to the difficulty in differentiating the social place and role from the dignity of persons as human beings. More and more human dignity is confused with social status. In a consumer culture the pattern of consumption is the determinant factor in defining both the identity and the dignity of individuals. Non-consumers are seen as non-persons; the lower their place in the sociocultural hierarchy, the less human they are.

In ethical indignation the humanity of persons is recognized irrespective of their social place or role. Persons are recognized in gratuity, that is, independently from their consumption capacity, as well as their social, sexual, religious placement in society. For instance, just to mention an extreme possibility, if we find an individual who is a poor, black, lesbian, AIDS-infected, disabled, ugly, and old prostitute, and still see this individual as a human being in her fundamental dignity, we will be undergoing a spiritual experience of grace (recognition of pure gratuity, beyond all our social conventions) and faith (seeing what is invisible to the eyes of the world).

In our society, characterized by the irrepressible pursuit of success as a way to "justify" human existence, this gratuitous recognition among subjects, in the face-to-face subject-subject relationship, is a true spiritual experience of grace and justification by faith. It is an experience that justifies the existence of not only the oppressed person but also of the person who feels the indignation. That is why this experience is perceived as liberating for the one who feels the indignation, as well as for the victim, then recognized as person. That is also why the experience of ethical indignation, which leads to social commitment, has been and must be interpreted as a true spiritual experience.

A second important aspect, presupposed in ethical indignation, is its horizon of utopian desire, that is, the utopian horizon of an environment where persons are recognized and respected, irrespectively of their social condition. Such a vision leads one to see the prevailing situation as ethically unacceptable, that is, as a situation that must be transformed. Without this yearning for a different world we could not feel indignation. In its turn, indignation is what makes us "see" this utopian horizon.

In a first moment this horizon looks to us as a product of a utopian imagination, that is, as the dream of a free world, a world liberated from all kinds of oppression and objectification of human beings. In due time this image is further developed and appears to us as a *project* for a new society (sometimes, in Christian circles, as *God's project*).

To the extent that this (imaginative or utopian) project is what permits us to understand the prevailing reality as unacceptable, while being, at same time, an object of desire, we begin to believe—because we so desire—that this project is fully doable in the interior of history. From the desire of its possibility we come to the belief in its possibility. And sometimes such desire leads us to believe that the project is not only possible, but unavoidable.

Believing it doable, we must then face the need of a subject that will make it real, or “build” this project/horizon in the interior of history. At this point the utilization of concepts such as *historical subject*, *history's subjects*, and *history's protagonists* enters the scenario.

These two aspects of ethical indignation, which are complementary and intrinsically related, carry two notions or features of the subject: (1) the subject is recognized and recognizable irrespective of roles and social status; and (2) the subject is a doer or builder in the fullness of either the utopian horizon or the project of a wholly new society, the one of the new earth and the new human being. At this juncture we want to submit some reflections about this concept of a subject.

HISTORICAL SUBJECT AND HUMAN CONDITION

The concept of a historical subject was so deeply identified with liberation theology and Christian communities committed to the lives of the poor that, when it was confronted with a crisis, beginning with the fall of the socialist bloc, there were several attempts to rescue it. Probably the most recurring one was the use of the expression *new historical subjects* or *new emerging subjects*. Acknowledging the crisis of the concept, then applied to the working class or to the poor, many submitted other social groups (such as women, blacks, indigenous people, and others) as new subjects. Thus they kept the concept alive and simply changed the concrete definition of who the subject would be.

Another attempt to preserve the concept came up from the theological dialogue with the new theories of physics. Frei Betto, one of the most influential people in the Latin American Christian left, is

one of the exponents of this line. For instance, in his article “Indeterminação e complementaridade,” he proposes a dialogue with quantum physics in an attempt to supersede the crisis of the utopias. In the last page of the article, which has the meaningful subtitle “Resgate quântico do sujeito histórico” (Quantum rescue of the historical subject), he implies that this subject would have the mission of “confronting the great challenge of ensuring that the capital—in the form of money, technology and knowledge—would be at the service of human happiness, by dismantling the racial, ethnic and religious barriers. Then we would rediscover the paths that lead to the Garden of Eden.”⁸

We do not want to discuss here whether we are going through the crisis of the utopias or watching the victory of a utopia—the capitalist utopia—over all the others. Neither do we want to discuss here if it is possible for human beings to arrive at the Garden of Eden, that is, to build a fully just society, or even if the theories of quantum physics could be so directly applied to the field of human and social relations. What we want, in this essay, is to call attention to the weight and importance of the concept of historical subject in modernity, especially for Latin American Christians committed to the liberation of the poor.

The concept of historical subject has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which developed a notion of God as the subject of history, that is, of a God who stands outside history, and outside the world, yet directs or determines history. The transcendental God, who is beyond the limits of the human world, was seen as the subject of history; and history was seen as the object of God’s will and action. Our modern world replaced this notion of God as subject of history with the notion of the human being as the subject of history. In this sense, secularization can be understood as a process of disenchantment of the world and of re-enchantment of the human being. Modernity usurps from God the image of subject and transfers it to the human being. As Alain Touraine says: “Upon entering modernity, religion explodes, but its components do not disappear. *The subject, ceasing to be divine or to be defined as Reason, becomes human, personal, transmuted into a kind of relationship of the individual or group with themselves.*” Touraine also points out that “the subject of modernity is no other than the secularized descendant of religion.”⁹

With this deep transformation, which is an authentic anthropological revolution, history begins to be seen as an object in relation to the human being. In the construction of the subject of history, there happens, at the same time, the construction of the concept of history as

an object to be built by the human subject. During the primordial times of humankind, the predominant notion was the one of destiny written by the gods or by the spirits of nature, since there was not yet any notion of history. As time went by, there appeared the notion of an ethical evil, sin, and with it the notion of human freedom, from which sprang the notion of history. The Hebrew Bible is an example of this cultural rupture in the vision of history as a tension between God's will and human will. However, human history was perceived mostly as defined by the gods or by reason. With modernity comes this novelty: the perception of history as being constructed by human subjects.

Agnes Heller says that a dynamic concept of man plus the notion of history as that of personal and society's development appeared with the Renaissance. With this notion "the relation between individual and situation becomes fluid; past, present and future are transformed into human creations. However this 'humanness' becomes a generalized and homogeneous concept. It is then that 'liberty' and 'fraternity' are born as immanent ontological categories. Time and space are humanized; the infinite is transformed into a social reality."¹⁰

In the construction of history by the modern human subject, reason has a central role. The individual becomes a subject to the extent that he or she creates a world ruled by a rationale that is intelligible to human thought. This creation of a rational world is seen as the achievement of the progress that would lead us to the "Garden of Eden." God, the ordainer of the world and history, is replaced by the human subject, the ordainer of the world and history, according to reason.

This changes not only the concept of human being, the concept of subject, and the concept of history but also the "localization" of "paradise," the utopian horizon. The historical subject is the builder of history, which, in its turn, must flow into plenitude. The medieval paradise, which was to be found beyond human history, is placed in the interior of history, in the future. Here one finds a process of making medieval eschatology immanent. The human subject "constructs" history and "ordains" it so as to enhance, through progress, not only the abolition of all human and social contradictions but also the achievement of full harmony between human beings and nature. Karl Marx calls this the construction of the kingdom of liberty, and many Christians call it the construction of the kingdom of God.

I believe that the insistence on maintaining, recovering, or reformulating the concept of historical subject without questioning its

presuppositions is tied to this deep desire to see such a utopian horizon shaping up in the interior of our history.

Some authors like Franz Hinkelammert and Hugo Assmann have criticized the transcendental illusion of believing that it is possible to construct, with finite human actions, a holistic world that presupposes infinite knowledge, time, and spaces. This type of illusion lies at the real center of neoliberalism's projects of perfect markets, the Soviet model of socialism's perfect planning, and even of many projects of construction of the kingdom of God. The problem with this illusion is not limited to the theoretical field. It also generates sacrificial systems, that is, social systems and institutions that demand sacrifices of human lives as the "necessary price" for reaching the "paradise," or the redemption of history and humankind.

Besides this transcendental illusion and its sacrificial logic there is an underlying theological problem that we want to consider briefly. The notion of God that is at the origin, and in some ways continues to undergird the notion of the human being as the subject of history, is a notion of God as the ordainer of the world and history. All fullness, all fully harmonious social or natural order, is conceived as an order free from evil and conflict.

Western thinking, or much of it, was influenced by a key characteristic of Greek philosophy: the search for God as the foundation of order. From this perspective Greek philosophy thought that human beings lived out their destiny to the extent that they held their place in the cosmic order, submissive to the God-established and God-ruled universal order. However, ethical indignation does not result from the awareness of lack of materialization of destiny or preestablished order. Ethical indignation—let me emphasize the ethical character of the indignation—is born out of the recognition of the humanity that is being denied to persons in relationships and/or social systems. It is the face-to-face experience that comes out of the contestation of the injustices and evils of the world. Indignation that results from any theory, without this face-to-face element, is not sustainable. It is soon forgotten or vanishes amid some pragmatic rationalization.

It is from the experience of mutual recognition of the subject-subject relationship, irrespective of any necessary institutionalization in society, that is born the conviction that in this ethical indignation we experience the grace of the God who is Love. The experience of God as Love, which may only happen in relationships of gratuity and liberty, cannot be explained and systematized by either philosophies or other theories that, by their own nature, are dependent on necessary

logical relationships. The God experienced by the biblical people is different from the gods of philosophers and even theologians who only know the concept of God, and only look for God as the foundation of the perfect order.

As José Comblin says, "In the Bible, everything is different, because God is Love. Love does not establish order, but disorder. Love breaks the whole structure of order. Love establishes liberty, and, therefore, disorder. Sin is the consequence of God's love."¹¹ To say that God is Love is to say that the human vocation is liberty and that we fulfill ourselves as human beings as we live in liberty and love.

Liberty only exists when we face the possibility of being wrong. Love only exists when we are able to forgive the wrongdoings of our loved ones. The perfect social order, the new society without suffering, oppression, and injustice, the one of perfect harmony, not only cannot be constructed in the interior of history but also must not be desired. Yes, indeed! We must not desire the construction of such "perfect" social order. What we desire is a *utopian horizon* of God's kingdom, and we must always remind ourselves that such a horizon, like all horizons, can only be reachable by the eyes of desire; it is impossible to reach by human efforts. What we can and must construct is a more just, more human, and more fraternal society, but there will always be, in such a society, whether intentional or not, the possibility of errors and problems.

Christianity is not a proposal for running away from the world and the inherent contradictions and possibilities of the human condition. It is precisely the opposite. It is a proposal for loving our human condition and for living out love and liberty inside the boundaries of such condition. It is the proposal of faith in a God who

emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave
being born in human likeness (Phil 2:7).

This is the scandal of Christianity!

Sometimes I have the impression that we in liberation theology, due to our renewed emphasis on the Exodus in Christian theology, often overestimate historical possibilities. One of the greatest contributions of the Hebrew Bible to the history of thought was its repositioning of the center of God's revelation from nature to ethical relations, that is, by moving it from a conception of destiny to the notion of human history. No more was God primordially looked for in nature

but rather in justice relationships in the interior of human history. An important departure of Christianity from Judaism was not a return to nature or destiny but rather the acknowledgment of the limits of human history. In other words, by acknowledging that a defeated one, a crucified one, is the Risen One, the promised messiah, Christianity acknowledges that God does not undo the boundaries of history and human condition. Christianity acknowledges that God's promised liberation cannot undo human liberty and human condition, because, if that were the case, such liberation would neither bring us liberty nor be enjoyed by human beings. Christianity is built on the paradox of a crucified God, of a defeated liberator-messiah, and so too is our struggle's proposal for the life and dignity of the victims of the prevailing—that is, victorious—political systems and social relations, no matter if we end up with more defeats than victories. In other words, instead of reading the Jesus Christ event from the perspective of the Exodus paradigm, we should read the Exodus from the perspective of the crucifixion-resurrection event of Jesus of Nazareth.

If these reflections have any foundation, we are obliged to rethink seriously the concept of historical subject in our theology as well as in our social and pastoral endeavors.

SUBJECT AND SELF-ORGANIZATION

A second problematic aspect of the notion of historical subject is that the concept of subject appears counterposed to the concept of object of history. History is seen as an object to be built or molded by human action. The social sciences have for a long time criticized this notion, which undergirds many political and social theories. History (or society) is a very special object, to the extent that the subject of the relationship is part of it, inside it, and at the same time, both influenced or determined (depending on the stream of thought) by it, no matter if such object is one of study or transformation. Thus the concept of subject-object relationship could not be applied to the field of history and society, as a whole.

New concepts are gaining strength in the field of social and natural sciences and are further questioning this notion of historical subject, or of a "history builder" subject. These are concepts such as self-organization, self-regulation, self-making, and dissipative structures, coming from several fields of knowledge, including biology, physics, chemistry, and cybernetics. They are influencing the human

and social sciences.¹² It is not the purpose of this essay to develop reflections about these new theories; for lack of space, we only highlight some of them here.

Hugo Assmann, in the excellent glossary that is the central part of his book *Reencantar a educação*, starts an entry note on “self-organization” by pointing out that such concept refers to the “dynamics of spontaneous emergence, in a system, of patterns of order and chaos, due to recurring internal relations and/or interactions with the environment. The unveiling of these emerging qualities is accompanied by an increase in complexity.”¹³ Strange language for those not acquainted with these new theories.

These concepts and theories are being utilized either as new metaphors or as instruments of analysis of social phenomena and social dynamics. But let us remember that the theory of spontaneous order is very old and has a long tradition in the history of social thought. It precedes Darwin’s concept of evolution, even though it has gained strength in social thinking only since the 1970s. This theory is based on the notion that most of the things that bring about general benefits in social systems, or enhance their reproduction, are the result of unintended human actions, that is, of actions that are not under one’s direct conscious control or conscious planning.

This notion of self-organization, or spontaneous order, raises a very important question for the challenge of rethinking the underlying notion of subject in our endeavors (previously known as the practice of liberation) in behalf of the life and dignity of victims, and also for our theologies.

For brevity’s sake, let me quote a provocative text by Assmann, while assuming the risks it sets forth. Assmann, who during the 1970s was radically against the market, states:

Among the undeniable realities, in the field of human interactions in complex societies, is the existence and functionality of partially self-regulating dynamic systems related to human behavior. In economics, this question has a name that, to this day, barely acquired any traction in sectors of the left: the market. Do we know how to connect social consciousness and ethical subject with the (partial) self-regulation of the market? The critical but positive acceptance of the market, without the loss of solidarity goals, demands a new reflection even about the conception, whether individual or collective, of the ethical subject. . . . This means to concurrently consider the ethical and individual options as well as the material and institutional objectification of

values, in the form of normalization of human conviviality, with strong self-regulating connotations.¹⁴

So, to prevent possible misunderstandings, it is important to point out here a fundamental difference between the use of the concepts of self-organization, self-regulation, and spontaneous order, as stated by Assmann, and their use by neoliberals or liberals such as Paul Krugman. For these, the market is a spontaneous order that always produces the best possible result. Assmann recognizes the existence of self-regulation in complex (social or natural) systems and their positive aspects, while at same time criticizing the neoliberal blind faith in the market, a blind faith that does not allow neoliberals to see the negative effects of this same process. That is why he criticized the *idolatry* of the market, that is, the sacralization of the market, but not the market, as such.¹⁵

SUBJECT, SOCIAL ACTOR, AND LIBERATION

We saw above that the experience of subject-subject relationship, face-to-face relationship, is one of the fundamental aspects of the founding experience we have been considering and represents one of two ways of understanding the concept of subject in the praxis of liberation. We dealt mainly with the notion of the subject as builder of history. Now we want to go back to some aspects of the notion of the subject as related to this face-to-face relationship.

To speak about the subject as subject, namely, of the subject that we experience in face-to-face relationship, is an impossible task. This is so because “when referred to as the subject, it is treated as an object, even when referred by the subject itself. When one labors in the realm of institutions, one is dealing with people transformed into object of the institutions, even when dealing with a person singled out as the superior of the whole institutional system.”¹⁶

This does not mean that it is impossible for one to live out the subject being, but only that any theory and any institution is, in a way, bad theory and bad institution, because it treats the human being subject as an object. Yet, since we cannot live without language and institutions, what we can and should do is to distinguish the concept of subject from the social actor, that is, from the individual “living out” a social role in a given institutionalized relationship. The human being, the individual, is a subject that transcends all his or her objectifications in language and institutions. The individual cannot live

without social institutions and roles, but the subject is not the sum total of these roles and does not identify himself or herself with a single role. Totalitarian oppressive institutions strive to deny the subjectness (the quality of being subject) of the individual, reducing the person to a social role or a set of roles, thus objectifying him or her in the interior of the system.

Let us take, as an example, the reduction of the individual to an economic actor. When the capitalist market system tells a person excluded from the market that he or she does not have the right to eat for not being a consumer (without money to act out the role of consumer), what is really happening is the negation of the subjectness of this person and his or her reduction to an economic role. The same happens when a worker is treated as a simple object in the chain of production. In the face of such a situation the following kind of protest of the poor is not uncommon: "I am poor, but I am a child of God's too!" This is someone claiming to be a subject prior to any and all institutionalizations that objectify him or her into a social role.

The subject being does not unveil himself or herself in our everyday life, when we act out our social roles as parents, husbands or wives, teachers, or consumers. The subject unveils himself or herself by resisting being reduced to a mere social role or to a set of roles. This is good both for those who hold high places in a given institution and for those who stand at lower levels.

For this to happen the person must deny the legitimizing rationalizations produced by the institutions. Such rationalization is in fact irrational, because it reduces the subject to object. This is why some authors, like Hinkelammert, are considering the concept of liberation not only as an anticipation of the kingdom of God through the construction of more just societies, but also as the recovering of the human being as subject. In the words of Hinkelammert: "When we talk, today, of the return of the repressed and crushed subject, we are talking about the human being as subject of this rationality who confronts the irrationality of the rationalized. In this perspective, *liberation* becomes the recovering of the human being as *subject*."¹⁷

When individuals unveil themselves and experience themselves as subject in the resistance against oppressive relations, they can recognize themselves as subject, and at the same time, recognize the subjectness of other persons irrespective of any social role. This is what we previously referred to when we considered the experience of gratuity in the face-to-face relationship. If we cannot talk about the subject as subject or build institutions where persons will not be objectified,

we can at least live out our subject being in a resistance as well as in subject-subject relationship.

This means that the subject being is intimately linked to the resistance and struggle against objectifying and domineering institutions. The problem is that in order to struggle we need to channel our resistance and struggle through some social or ecclesial group or movement. In other words, for us to live out our subjectness in the resistance and struggle against oppressive institutions, we need, first, to participate in one or another institution, that is, we need to act out as social actors. Obviously, we must struggle for such an institution to be less oppressive and domineering than the social institution or system we are fighting against. Yet, to participate in an institution is to act out a social role and to obey, at least minimally, the institutional rules that objectify us. By doing so, the subject reduces himself or herself again to a social actor, that is, to a transforming role of social relations, which is a “reducer” of the individual’s subjectivity. This is a tension it is impossible to resolve. And it is why to be fully subject is not attainable in the interior of our history.

In the case of social groups, when people get together to protest and resist the negation of their human dignity, we can say, analogically, that they form a subject community. But when this social group begins to strive to make its rights respected, it also begins to behave as a collective social actor.

The only way to preserve our subjectness is for us not to accept being reduced to any social role—no matter how important, how “holy,” or how “revolutionary” it may be—and not to accept the sacralization of any social institution or system. This relates to our need to criticize idolatry and fetishism, as previously stated in the quotation from Gutiérrez.

TENSION BETWEEN THE MICRO-SOCIAL AND MACRO-SOCIAL

The experience of being a subject in the face-to-face encounter, as well as in the struggle for the dignity of self and others, is a truly gratifying one, and a giver of deep human meaning to our existence, that is, a spiritual experience of grace. Certainly our most propitious environment for this experience is the communitarian one, and the one of local social struggles. It is where we have more opportunity to engage in face-to-face relationships, for the simple reason that we can only cultivate such relationships in smaller environments, those not involving many people.

Two kinds of temptations may result from this fact. The first is the temptation of closing ourselves in communitarian environments and in micro-social local struggles. To the extent that big institutions and big social struggles do not allow for immediate face-face relationships, we are easily tempted to believe that the solution for religious and social problems is to be found only at communitarian and micro-social levels. However, no matter how much we try to deceive ourselves, the reality of economic globalization, the global Internet, and other "globalized" relations will continue to affect our lives. For example, a financial-exchange crisis in the Far East may cause unemployment for members of communities in Brazil.

Another temptation is for us to wish that the big religious, economic, and political institutions will come to function as our small communities do, or to fight for the project of a society that will be merely a quantitative enlargement of our community relations. In other words, this is a wish for a harmonious society, where all persons will respect one another, and relate to one another as if they knew one another and lived in the same community, that is, a society with no need of laws and regulations and, therefore, with no oppressive institutions.

These two temptations are fully understandable, to the extent that these relations and experiences are understood as the basis of social commitment, the fountain of strength and sustainability of the struggle, as well as the "guarantee" that liberation is possible. However, we should return to the theme of incarnation and remember that our struggle for solutions should be carried out from inside human and historical conditions. The temptation we feel to shut ourselves in communities, or a micro-social environment, is the temptation to shut ourselves away from the Spirit who "pushes" us, who calls us to get out of our communities and face the challenges of the world.

As for the temptation of wishing for our society to be a community, it results from the error of not recognizing the qualitative difference between one level and another, that is, the error of making linear projections from the micro-social to the macro-social. When we go from one level to another, whether from a micro-social to a macro-social or from the physical to the biological, new properties emerge. And it is precisely this emerging of new properties that allows us to perceive our transition from one level to another. If we are capable of perceiving this transition, we will also be able to acknowledge that in this other level the system functions in a different way. That being the case, things that functioned well in the previous level do not function in the same way in the new level or may not even function at all.

These confirmations challenge us to think about the relation between our experience and actions at the community and micro-social level, on the one hand, and the macro-social aspects of our problems and solutions, on the other. It is clear that this question has to be thought through as one considers other emerging concepts, such as self-organization and self-making, as previously mentioned.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Latin American theology is going through a moment of delimitation of its challenges, as indicated by the numberless gatherings of theologians, all over the continent, to evaluate and discuss such challenges. This also indicates that the first moments of the crisis have been superseded. Since no theological stream can deal with all questions, it is fundamental for us to know how to limit and define our challenges properly. In the course of this essay I anticipated some themes and questions. Now, in conclusion, I just want to touch upon some others that are related to the previous ones.

For many of those who have been longer in the journey, who in the name of shared faith, in the hope that meaningful liberation or changes—in church and world—were emerging, it is important to find answers to disenchantment. It is the same disenchantment of the disciples at Emmaus: “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Lk 24:21). We need answers for the crisis of the failed messiah, for the crisis of the failure of our expectations.

An easy answer, the one adopted by the disciples and many Christians of our time, is that if he failed, he was not the Messiah (as implied by the disciples on their way to Emmaus); or, if we lost, and there is no way to victory, we were mistaken (as expressed in the current attitude of many former militants). The disciples were able to go beyond the immediate and easy answer in order to understand the paradox of the defeated Messiah. Yet, even after two thousand years of Christianity, this second answer is not easy to understand. Our generation needs to come up with our own answer. The answer must be faithful both to the experience of the disciples and to our own experience. We need to find the meaning of the struggle in behalf of the lives of the “little ones” without certainties and promises of victory—and often without expecting either the understanding or the support of our churches.

To that end I think it is fundamental that we continue deepening our reflections, aiming at developing and reviewing concepts and

ways of thinking that will help persons of good will perceive, in ethical indignation and in the struggle for the life of the “little ones,” with all its contradictions and limits, how we can live the most profound of all spiritual experiences, the experience of the grace of God that is in our midst.

Finally, allow me to touch upon a challenge that comes from liberation theology’s previous reflections. Latin American theology had, as one of its central themes, the notion of God as the God of Life. Much was written to show how the God of the Bible is the God of Life. Yet, the second part of the expression, “Life,” was assumed to be something obvious. Certainly it is easy to distinguish those who are alive from those who are dead. It is more difficult to say what life is. I believe that we should, in dialogue with the sciences of life and human sciences, accept the challenge to a better understanding of what life is, and of how it functions (in the biological, personal, social, and ecological contexts). This may enable us to better understand the meaning of the expression God of Life, and help us defend, more effectively, the threatened life.

—TRANSLATED BY JOVELINO RAMOS

NOTES

¹ Hugo Assmann, *Teología desde la praxis de la liberación*, 2nd ed. (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1976), 40. H. Assmann wrote this text—probably one of his most quoted paragraphs, worldwide—in 1971. Over thirty years later the text continues to be relevant.

² *Ibid.*, 63.

³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10. It is worth pointing out that the critique of idolatry and fetishism is not addressed only to oppressive systems but also to Christian communities and popular movements.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶ Rubem Alves, *Da esperança* (Campinas: Papyrus, 1978), 46–47.

⁷ For some of these problems, see Jung Mo Sung, *Teologia e economia: repensando a TL e utopias*, 2nd ed. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1995).

⁸ *Interfaces* 1, no. 1 (July–December 1997).

⁹ Alain Touraine, *Crítica da modernidade* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1994), 324, 22.

¹⁰ Agnes Heller, *O homem do renascimento* (Lisbon: Ed. Presença, 1982), 9.

¹¹ José Comblin, *Cristãos rumo ao século XXI: nova caminhada de libertação* (São Paulo: Paulus, 1996), 6.

¹² Examples of scientists utilizing or in dialogue with these concepts are N. Luhman, Paul Krugman, Pablo Navarro, and I. Wallerstein. The last two have several texts available on the Internet.

¹³ Hugo Assmann, *Reencantar a educação* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1998), 134.

¹⁴ Hugo Assmann, *Metáforas novas para reencantar a educação* (Piracicaba: Unimep, 1996), 64.

¹⁵ Hugo Assmann and Franz J. Hinkelammert, *A idolatria do mercado: ensaio sobre economia e teologia* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1989).

¹⁶ Franz J. Hinkelammert, *A crítica da razão utópica* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1988), 282.

¹⁷ Franz J. Hinkelammert, "La vuelta del sujeto humano reprimido frente a la estrategia de globalización," *italics added*. Available online. For a wider reflection about the theme, see Jung Mo Sung, "Sujeito como instrumentalidade ao interior da vida real," in *Sujeito e sociedades complexas*, ed. Jung Mo Sung (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2002).