

REIMAGING GOD'S KINGDOM IN LATIN AMERICA AFTER THE CRISIS OF SOCIALISM

Jorge Pixley*
Nicaragua

Abstract

Today, after the collapse of really existing socialism, we are in the need of rethinking our Christian utopia, the Kingdom of God. In this presentation some directions of this reimagining, at least as it looks from Latin America, are suggested.

1. God's Kingdom in Liberation Theology

During the last thirty years we had reached a consensus in Liberation Theology on the shape of our hope for our societies. It was based on a reading of the Bible which saw Israel's confession of its freedom from slavery in Egypt as the controlling story of the Bible. This was the place where we understood God as the God of the oppressed. It was on the basis of this Exodus confession that we affirmed the social nature of salvation and ordinary history as its location.

Along with the Exodus we also saw the Resurrection as the dominant confession in the New Testament, confirming and completing the Exodus. In the Resurrection God affirmed the life of the one who was condemned to death by the dominant power of an oppressive society. God was thus confessed as a God of life who makes an option for the poor.

We have been much impacted by the reading of the history of tribal Israel as the construction of a society built on a network of families bonded together to defend each other against both external aggression and the attempt of the richer and stronger to subdue the poorer and weaker families. Essential to tribal Israel was a conscious rejection of monarchy which was a revolutionary break with the dominant Canaanite societies of cities ruled by kings.

Reading the Exodus as a confession of faith of the tribes of Israel in a context in which we felt that our rulers were oppressive we had both a model of utopia and a model of the way to achieve freedom from oppression which seemed very near to the surface of the text. The rejection of our military dictatorships was not only the rejection of an aberration from democracy but the rejection of the capitalist system which the dictatorships were installed to protect. And it was obvious that the only way to freedom from such an oppressive bourgeois-military alliance was a peasant-worker

* Jorge Pixley teaches Old Testament at the Bautista Seminarion in Managua, Nicaragua. This paper was read at Stellenbosch University on 28 February 1995.

insurrection to achieve political power for the popular majorities and to defend it against counter revolution.

God's Kingdom is understood as a utopia in our theology. This means that it is a social ideal of the perfect society. It is not a political program because it is not a historical construction. As a mental construct it guides thinking about political action and the construction of political goals, but it is not itself a goal. Utopian thinking is not unrelated to historical reality; should this happen it would become escapist. It must be related to historical reality as a criticism of the flaws of real society and as a generator of programs which will transcend that reality. It has always been our intention that this should be so in our theology.

In the context of Latin America which we understand as a dependent capitalist region God's Kingdom takes on specific shape as socialism. This means in the first place that we reject capitalism as such because we understand that it generates inequality and that it is incapable of reproducing the conditions which make its survival possible. This inability is double: In the first place, it does not have the mechanisms to guarantee the reproduction of its peoples, the workers who created and create the wealth it undeniably generates. In the second place, its drive for greater profit makes it menace the survival of the planetary conditions which make life possible.

So, Christians in Latin America who have affirmed the God of the poor and read the Bible from the Exodus and the Resurrection universally identify God's Kingdom as an alternative to capitalism, as socialism. The option for the poor was read very quickly as a Christian version of the doctrine of class struggle. The bishops at Puebla in 1979 added the adjective 'preferential' to the phrase and we, the theologians, for the most part accepted it. What this means is that God wills the salvation of all humanity, and in fact of all of God's creation human or not. Nevertheless, in a situation where the creation is divided into those who oppress and those who are oppressed, the salvation of the whole can only be achieved by defending the lives of those being oppressed.

2. The new situation in the 1990's

Most of those Christians who confess their faith in the language of Liberation Theology were very much identified with the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. Now the Sandinista Revolution was not the same as really existing socialism, but it was a rejection of capitalism, at least of the capitalism of the total market which was being proclaimed in our geopolitical region by the Reagan government. The three pillars of our revolution were Mixed Economy, Political Pluralism and Non-Alignment.

This was a form of socialism which in its three pillars recognized what we Christians affirmed in the adjective 'preferential'. The Mixed Economy affirmed that the administration of the market would be done in terms of the welfare of the majorities but recognized the property rights of 'patriotic' producers. Their output would be regulated in terms of the social priorities of the majorities but their property

and their right to gain profits were recognized as long as they didn't sabotage the revolution or enter into collusion with its imperialist enemies.

Political pluralism was the affirmation of the right of political organization as long as the defense of national sovereignty was affirmed. The constitution of 1987 established four autonomous state powers - executive, legislative, judicial and electoral - and established periodic universal elections for executive and legislative powers.

Non-alignment was understood for a poor nation as a distribution of dependence in order to gain more room to maneuver among four blocks, the United States, the Socialist block, the other capitalist powers (Western Europe and Japan) and the Third World.

To everyone without prejudice it was clear that this was a new experience and not just another Cuba or another Vietnam. It was also clear that this was a socialist society of some sort, or as Daniel Ortega put it, a society which tended towards socialism. It was not, we confidently affirmed, a Soviet satellite.

Nevertheless, the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the block of really existing socialist nations has revealed the dependence of our socialist utopia on a world organized by the Cold War. It was only the existence of a credible balancing power over and against the capitalist block that created the space which made experiences like ours possible. Once the other power disappeared the space and protection for experiments in alternative social arrangements also disappeared.

The unexpected defeat of the Sandinista Front in the February 1990 elections creates a situation which calls for rethinking the socialist imaging of Gods' Kingdom. We had assumed in Nicaragua, at least those of us who support the revolution, that the poor, who are the majority and the beneficiaries of the revolution, would not reject the Sandinista Front in an honest election. Of course, we knew that sooner or later the FSLN would lose the government. But the change in the international situation along with the continued hostility of the U.S. created a situation we had not anticipated in which, win or lose, the Sandinistas could no longer carry out their program. In fact, the program of the I.M.F. was to a large extent already being implemented by the revolutionary government since the financial reforms of February 1988. Had the Sandinista Front won the elections of 1990, it would have found itself immersed in a world market with no powerful friends and would have had to adopt some of the measures imposed by that world in order to survive.

It is now clear that all socialist programs can exist only with a small margin of maneuver and in context where the periodic elections can easily be turned into referendums on socialism itself. Since any valid utopia must relate to the real world which it challenges with its vision of perfection this severe restriction on the possibilities of today's world must alter the shape of our hope. In the reminder of this talk I would like to propose some ideas for this reimagining of our hope.

3. Reimagining Utopia in our Unipolar World

The most obvious alteration of the setting for nation building is the current impossibility of armed revolution as the permanent transformation of a society.

History will go on after the people gain state power, and if the revolutionary party fails to meet its promises the people whom it aspires to represent, will throw it out. In a unipolar world, where the market aspires to total global control, it is very difficult to govern with a preferential option for the poor. Many concessions must be made in terms of opening borders to trade and creating conditions favourable for investment. And the banks demand balanced budgets and a stable currency which aspires to become convertible. In other words, the deck is stacked against popular governments whose constituencies are the poor.

In addition, a majority of the poor in the Third World are not labourers but those who have been thrust out of the labour market and hence out of the market, where solvency is a necessary condition. A people's government must assure minimum conditions for human living to these people, which means at least access to health services and an education so their children can aspire to meaningful employment. This requires a tax base which for a popular government must be a progressive income tax, the fairest of all fiscal bases. But this means that conditions must exist so that capital, which is mobile in most of its forms, will choose to remain in the country and pay the taxes which a popular state will find it necessary to impose. It is obvious that on occasion the government will fail, inflation will set in or the stringent conditions of the I.M.F. will be imposed, and the popular government will be unable to win in a fair electoral contest.

All of this adds up to the conclusion that the transition from a capitalist society to one built on socialist principles is neither smooth nor definitive. A stable society must have majority support from its constituency even when, as in Cuba, it does not hold elections with an opposition that might defeat it. On the other hand, socialists have a natural advantage which we must learn to cultivate in the fact that we have a constituency which is the majority. In making an option for the poor we are putting the lives of a majority of our nations at the top of national priorities. The political Right does not have such a possibility, except in developed countries where the poor constitute a minority of the population.

Before continuing our argument, there is an important factor we have not yet taken into account. The year 1992 was the five hundredth anniversary of the opening of the Western hemisphere to European invasion. In the major assessments that took place in connection with that anniversary the native populations and the Black people who descend from Africa, brought as slaves to the New World affirmed their right as peoples to autonomy. Africans, Americans and Native Americans have rights not only as individuals but as peoples with their own languages, customs and legal traditions. They are as peoples excluded from the market today, although token individuals have been able to work their way into the system. In other words, they are among the poor who make up the natural constituency of a socialist program. To preserve their rights a program of the Left must guarantee for them national autonomy within an overall program which will include several such constituencies. In other words, pluralism must become a fact not only on the general political scene but within the parties which claim to forward the interest of the popular majorities.

Returning now to our argument we have two important reasons for believing that our perfect society is going to be pluralist and open to continual adjustment. On the

one hand, representing popular interests in a world dominated by a globalizing market is going to require continual adjustments in political alliances with some sectors which are not a natural part of a 'Leftist' movement. And on the other the Left itself cannot, if it is true to its nature as a representative of the poor, be a homogeneous party but must be a coalition of autonomous national groups. To this we should also add special interest groups such as feminists and green movements, which are also a natural part of a Left coalition.

Our utopia will then not look like a stable egalitarian society similar to the tribes of Israel. Not that the tribes were stable, but the 'constitution' which excluded kings was designed to protect a stable society where there would not be a significant difference between rich and poor families. Today not even our utopia has that image of stability. Democratic consent and national (and other) pluralism are absolutely essential to cope with the tensions that destroy Third World nations. And because of the unfavourable conditions of today's world that exclude majorities from income but make them rightful claimants of the resources of the State, concessions will have to be made to capital in order to maintain the solvent State that can satisfy the claims of its population.

This raises the question: Should our utopia be Social Democratic and not any more Socialist? What is at stake is the legitimacy of the ownership of the means of production. Social Democracy recognizes the legitimate claims of most property and then aspires to represent the poor or the proletariat to secure the most it can in a social environment where capital rules. Socialism, on the other hand, recognizes the absolute claim only of life and always puts property in subordination to life's requirements. This does not mean that property is not legitimate for socialists, since we recognize that the possession of a home and of land may well be requirements for the maintenance of life. But the private ownership of resources like mines and factories may, for socialists, be recognized as in the general interests at times but cannot be granted the absolute legitimacy which investors like.

In the present world a socialist society where the rights of private property over the means of production is not legitimate is not possible. When it is attempted, as it is in Cuba, the dominant powers strangle it and force impossible conditions upon it. In such a world we cannot realistically envision what a pure socialist utopia would be. The alternatives are a social-democratic utopia or a socialist utopia which envisions the perfect society as one where socialists struggle in alliance with social-democrats and patriotic bourgeoisie in a constantly restructured league of native peoples and feminists to meet the challenges of their option for the poor.

God's Kingdom today will look like an island of peace in a hostile environment where socialists and others are constantly revising their programs and their alliances to meet the challenges posed by poverty and scarcity as well as those posed by the 'World' which will be the global market which Christians will perceive as the realm of the Idol, Capital. Peace in this island will not exclude scarcity nor inner tensions. In the world in which the utopia must be imagined television and other media will present powerful images of a consumer society which caters to the desires all have, rich and poor. Such a consumer society must be seen as a temptation and always should be rejected, and this rejection will from time to time be very difficult in the

open democratic society which is the only desirable utopia. So scarcity must be affirmed as preferable to abundance for some and misery for others. We cannot serve God and Mammon. Jesus said that we should live and travel without a bag or two tunics and this was not an affirmation of misery but the recognition of the ultimacy of life over possessions.

The tensions in utopia come from the existence of multiple peoples, each with its own language and customs. Tolerance must become a native part of the people of utopia. God's people are really God's peoples. One nation will include Mestizos and Afronicaraguans along with Miskitos and Sutiabas. At times the interests of the various peoples making up the utopia will enter into conflict generating tensions which are not to be blamed on utopia's enemies. Tolerance and peacemaking will be an essential of the people of God in God's Kingdom. God's ultimate rulership will mean that all peoples, not just all individuals, are created as God's children and must live together.

4. Conclusion

In sum, we need a utopia relevant to today's unipolar world. The Fourth Gospel makes it abundantly clear that the presence of a hostile world for the community of the Beloved Disciple is not something new to the end of the Twentieth Century. It is only the specificities of a global market which are new and require some specific characteristics of God's Kingdom in the late Twentieth Century.

Those of us which see Capital as an idol and the consumer society as a temptation to be rejected will continue in this world to be socialist as we were in the bipolar world which preceded this one. Not all Christians will understand the demands of the faith in this way and probably many will take the social democratic path. As such they will be our allies in most circumstances and our brothers and sisters always.

God in Egypt made an option for the peasant workers organized by Moses for the Exodus. We will see this option for the poor today as an option for the oppressed and excluded peoples of our nations. In this unipolar world which requires of us a constant network of different allies, this option will decidedly be preferential. All humans, and even all creatures, are God's and are worthy of salvation. If God chooses the poor it is for the sake of all. A failure to make this choice would condemn all to eventual destruction as the richest consume the resources of the earth.

We can affirm with Jesus that the time is near and God's Kingdom is coming. In consequence we must repent of our evil desires for the things of this world and believe the Good News! The God who raised Jesus Christ when he had been murdered by the powerful of his day can today raise Creation to new life.