

God's Word and man's myths

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Dr Padilla, our associate editor with special responsibility for social ethics, is well known as a speaker at international conferences, with a penchant for disturbing the equilibrium of complacent Christians from the affluent parts of the world. This article, while addressed specifically to North America, will be found to have a much wider application.

If Christian preaching is often regarded as obsolete, the solution is not to adapt the message to the mood of the day, but to let preaching be moulded by the Word of God. It is at this point that preachers for whom relevance is the most basic consideration in preaching are frequently mistaken—they fail to see the link between relevance in preaching and faithfulness to the gospel. It is only in the degree in which preaching is allowed to be an instrument of

God's Word that men and women can receive it as a word from beyond breaking into the human situation and acting with saving power. There is nothing more irrelevant than a message that simply mirrors man's myths and ideologies!

To be sure, the gospel has to be expressed in the terms and thought-forms of the people to whom it is addressed and by whom it must be lived. Indeed, faithfulness itself demands that the gospel be 'contextualized', even as 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (Jn. 1: 14). Helmut Thielicke has illustrated the importance of a general accommodation of the gospel to the concrete historical situation by pointing out that if at a mass meeting held at the Berlin Sportspalast under the Nazi regime a speaker had attacked Christianity and someone had leaped to his feet and

shouted, 'Christ is the Messiah!', people would have just looked up with some astonishment. But if someone else had shouted, 'Jesus Christ is the Lord, and all who make themselves into gods by their own power will go to hell along with the pseudo-saviour Adolf Hitler,' he would have probably been torn to pieces by the crowd.¹

The real problem of preaching is how to be faithful to the Word of God and relevant to human life *now*—both at the same time—in other words, how to be *in* the world but not to be *of* this world. Whenever preaching attempts to be relevant by conforming to the world, it has no more relevance than a mere rhetorical exercise. On the other hand, whenever preaching attempts to be faithful to the Word of God by simply repeating seemingly biblical concepts, it is a far cry from the Word that became flesh. The only way for preaching to be relevant is by being faithful to the Word of God; and the only way for it to be faithful is by being relevant to life in the world today.

Faithful and relevant preaching is preaching that projects the Word of God into the contemporary world and places men and women under God's judgment and mercy. It is preaching that, like the prophetic word of old, is sent to nations and kingdoms 'to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant' (Je. 1: 10). It is preaching geared not to please men, but to please God who tests the preacher's heart (1 Thes. 2: 4).

Faithful and relevant preaching today cannot, for the sake of pleasing men, take flight from a world where materialism is making human life increasingly meaningless. Whether embodied in the myth of economic growth or in the myth of revolution, materialism is leading humanity to destruction. It can be seen in its true colours only as it is placed under the Word of God. This is the purpose of the present paper. In the first section I will concentrate on the historical context in which man's myths operate today. In the second and third sections I will examine the two myths and attempt to show why, from a Christian perspective, they must be rejected. Finally, in the fourth section I will propose that, in contrast with man's myths which lead to destruction, God's Word is God's power at work to create a new humanity in the midst of a world whose whole frame is 'passing away' (1 Cor. 7: 31).

The world situation today

If Christians in America are to see clearly what the prophetic priorities of discipleship are at this

moment of history they need to realize (1) that they belong to a nation that with 5.6% of the world's population, controls over 40% of the world's wealth; (2) that the breach between the developed nations and the underdeveloped continues to grow in such a way that it is calculated that by the end of this century the former will be eighteen times richer than the latter; (3) that the increasing disparity between rich and poor nations is not merely an economic and political problem, but an ethical one.

1. One of the most explosive factors of the world crisis today is the intolerable division of humanity between a small wealthy minority in the developed countries and a poor majority in the underdeveloped. A few facts and figures will be enough to illustrate the point. (i) Cattle in the United States consume annually a quantity of cereal grains equivalent to that consumed by the total population of India and China together. It is estimated that each American consumes and pollutes the environment in the same proportion as twenty-five Indians, which makes the United States population, from the point of view of its 'destruction' of natural resources, equivalent to five billion Indians. According to E. F. Schumacher, 'If the "poor" suddenly used as much fuel as the "rich", world fuel consumption would treble right away.'² The United States alone has been consuming 42% of the world's production of aluminium, 33% of its copper, 44% of its coal, 33% of its oil and 63% of its natural gas. (ii) The median income of the United States families, according to a recent report, rose to \$12,840, while the poverty level for a non-farm family of four was set at \$5,038—ten times larger than the average income for a family of the same size in the Third World. The median income in Latin America at the beginning of this decade was \$440. In order for it to be raised to the level of the average income in the United States, 200 years would be needed. (iii) About ten thousand people die daily because of hunger. According to a recent statement by the General Secretary of the United Nations, 500 million people live at the edge of starvation. In Latin America, only 5% of the population have a diet comparable to that in the developed countries and between 20 and 30% consume an adequate number of calories. Forty-two million people suffer from malnutrition.

2. The breach between the haves and the have-nots, far from being reduced, is continually growing. According to one estimate, between 1950 and 1970 'the annual growth rate of the national income *per*

¹ *Encounter with Spurgeon* (London: John Clarke), p. 35.

² *Small is beautiful* (London: Sphere Books, 1974), p. 20.

capita in the rich countries was 46% bigger than in the poor countries.³ The hard facts of the situation cannot be magically changed by talking about 'developing countries' instead of 'underdeveloped countries' where about 65% of the people are today undernourished, by contrast with 38% in 1950. With a galloping population growth, which is itself a result of underdevelopment, at the beginning of this last quarter of the twentieth century the Third World has become the stage where the black apocalyptic horse has appeared and a voice is heard which says, 'A whole day's wage for a quart of flour, a whole day's wage for three quarts of barley-meal! But spare the olive and the vine' (Rev. 6: 6, NEB).

3. A number of reasons may be suggested to explain the great disparity between rich and poor nations. Thus, for instance, it may be pointed out that, because of the technological advances that took place in Europe beginning in the sixteenth century, the rich countries accumulated a surplus so that, by the time the Third World nations were free from their colonizers, the developed countries were too advanced technologically and economically for balance to be restored. Again, it may be said that the situation of the underdeveloped countries is due to their own failure to organize themselves politically, to government corruption, to lack of responsibility with regard to work. It may even be claimed that, in the case of the rich capitalistic countries, there is a close relationship between wealth and Protestant (and particularly Puritan) ethics.⁴

Whatever the value of these explanations, they must not obscure the fact that the development of the affluent and the underdevelopment of the poor cannot be regarded as two completely separate phenomena. The world has become a global village in which, as E. F. Schumacher puts it,

nothing succeeds like success, and nothing stagnates like stagnation. The successful province drains the life out of the unsuccessful, and without protection against the strong, the weak have no chance; either they remain weak or they must migrate and join the strong; they cannot effectively help themselves.⁵

One need not be a Marxist in order to recognize

³ Angelos Angelopoulos, *El Tercer Mundo frente a los países ricos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones El Sol, 1974), p. 46.

⁴ The thesis that Protestant ethics favoured the rise of capitalism more than other creeds was developed over half a century ago by Max Weber in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. Cf. R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the rise of capitalism* (originally published in 1926; reprinted by Penguin Books, 1938).

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

the fact that the main value of the poor countries to the rich consists in their role as suppliers of raw materials, cheap labour and food stuffs, and that the prices of these things are fixed by the buyers on the basis of the law of supply and demand. Even if it is admitted that if the Third World were closed to foreign capital, that would not greatly affect the rich countries, which are practically self-sufficient, there can be no denying that 'underdevelopment can only be understood if one understands the basic facts of dependency.'⁶

Once this is recognized, however, it is no longer possible to speak of underdevelopment as a merely *economic* problem with regard to which the affluent nations have no moral responsibility. Whatever the causes that have created the great gulf between rich and poor nations, the naked fact is that as things stand *now* the rich are able to exploit the poor in order to become richer, while the poor are at the mercy of the blind law of supply and demand, operating in the international markets. As long as the developed nations act on the basis of economic pragmatism and political expediency, with no concern for ethics, there is no way out for the underdeveloped countries. As long as wealth is held to be an absolute right that the developed nations can use for their own aggrandizement and comfort, the poverty of the underdeveloped nations is inevitable.

The myth of economic growth

The United States of America is today the wealthiest and most powerful country of the world. How did it get there? No answer will account for all the facts, but it is clear that, whatever the answer, it must include a recognition of the role that capitalism has played in the making of this nation. The American system is built on faith in free enterprise, hope of profit, and love of achievement. Regardless of what one may think concerning the viability of capitalism for other countries, one has to admit that in the case of the United States this system has succeeded in giving people a very high standard of living.

In the light of the material accomplishments of the American system, it is not difficult to understand those who maintain that *economic growth* is the only way out of poverty for the Third World. In their view, underdevelopment is basically an economic problem that can be solved through the use of technology to improve production and distribution. Development will come through economic growth. By the power of technology, the poor countries will necessarily follow the West in its

⁶ Peter L. Berger, *Pyramids of sacrifice* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1976), p. 58.

ascent from poverty to affluence—and they will attain the ideal of ‘plenty for all’ within a span of time considerably shorter than that required by the United States to get where it is now. This is redemption by way of imitation.

Should anybody object to this development model by pointing to the great disparities between rich and poor in countries where it has been adopted, the answer is ready-made—wealth and poverty must coexist for a time, but eventually the benefits will extend to all. Accordingly,

the message to the poor and discontent is that they must not impatiently upset or kill the goose that will assuredly, in due course, lay eggs also for them. And the message to the rich is that they must be intelligent enough from time to time to help the poor, because this is the way by which they will become richer still.⁷

Closely connected with the concepts of progress and technological control, the idea of economic growth as the answer to underdevelopment is an expression of a secularized biblical eschatology. As Peter L. Berger has pointed out, it can only be understood within the larger frame of reference provided by *modernity*.⁸ ‘At the heart of the myth of growth is the vision of the “cargo cult”—arrival of all the wondrous gifts of modernity in plentiful supply for all.’⁹ All over the underdeveloped world, capitalism will in time usher in a new era in which there will be plenty of products to choose from, private property will be an absolute right, success will be the highest value, and free enterprise will be fostered, all this in a context of political democracy. A universal consumer society, modelled on the ‘American way of life’, will thus be the final solution to underdevelopment!

The myth of growth, which is at the basis of the consumer society, is the vision of reality that the big multinational corporations are spreading throughout the world today. With the help of advertizing, it projects its image of happiness—the *homo consumens*—even into the reign of poverty. The TV set is the symbol of a mythological mentality obsessed with industrial products not only in the wealthy suburbs of New York or Los Angeles, but also in the slums of Bombay or Buenos Aires. The whole world is becoming a village united around the principle of consumerism.

⁷ E. F. Schumacher, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁸ ‘Modernity means (in intention if not in fact) that men take control over the world and over themselves. *What previously was experienced as fate now becomes an arena of choices.*’ (Peter L. Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 20, underlining his.) Cf. Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The homeless mind* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

⁹ *Pyramids of sacrifice*, p. 45.

Over against the myth of growth the Word of God must be proclaimed as a vision of reality in which people are seen in their interdependence with God, with neighbour and with nature.

1. In his State of the Union Address in 1970, ex-President Nixon spoke of the economic expansion in the United States during the sixties. Then he added: ‘But in the same ten-year period we witnessed the greatest growth in crime, the greatest increase in inflation, the greatest social unrest in America in a hundred years. Never has a nation seemed to have had so much and enjoyed it less.’ This was said of a nation where millions of people are regular churchgoers but where, in the words of a modern American prophet, ‘the Constantinian Accommodation has been marvellously proliferated’.¹⁰ The time has come for this nation to hear, ‘Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions’ (Lk. 12: 15); ‘You cannot serve God and mammon’ (Mt. 6: 23); ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ (Mt. 4: 4). But how will it hear if the church herself, far from being a factor for the transformation of society, becomes merely another reflection of society and (what is worse) another instrument that society uses to condition people to its materialistic values?¹¹

2. The advocates of the myth of growth assume that the material prosperity that characterized ‘the American way of life’ is possible for all, including the starving millions in the Third World, and that it is possible on the basis of a materialistic approach to life. All the evidence shows, however, that this is the way back to Babel, the city of chaos. The gulf between the rich and the poor continues to grow—the poor are becoming increasingly poorer and the rich increasingly richer. To practically all the international conferences called for the purpose of dealing with this problem, the comment made by a British tabloid on this year’s meeting of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States is applicable: ‘flowered phrases, false friendships—and no decisions taken.’ Materialism, on which the pursuit of wealth is based, has no built-in limiting principle. The very survival of our race is uncertain unless people in the affluent countries are delivered from materialism—an ideology that fosters greed and leaves very little room for sacrificial service—and take to heart the unity of human existence. As Senator Mark O. Hatfield

¹⁰ William Stringfellow, *An ethic for Christians and other aliens in a strange land* (Waco: Word Books, 1974), p. 46.

¹¹ Cf. my chapter on ‘Spiritual conflict’ in *The new face of evangelicalism*, ed. C. René Padilla (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), pp. 213ff.

stated at the National Prayer Breakfast in January 1976, 'What we require at this juncture in our history is a new revolution—a spiritual revolution that transforms our values and reshapes our corporate life.'¹² Economic growth as a solution to the problem of hunger in the Third World is no solution—it can produce a rich society that feeds on the poverty of the many, but it cannot create a just society in which people are members of one another, nor a world in which the nations live in peace. There is no solution without *metanoia*, without a total reorientation of life concretely expressed in terms of a revised standard of living. And the place to begin is in the church, which through the Word of God is to recognize that

there is nothing in Christian social teaching to support the widely held view that men have an inalienable human right to an ever rising standard of life, regardless of what is happening to other men in the neighbouring borough, on the other side of the tracks, or on the other side of the world.¹³

A religion that fails to promote justice is a far cry from biblical Christianity. The God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, who continues to speak through Scripture, is a God who wills justice. And the fast he has chosen is this: 'to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke . . . to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh' (Is. 58: 6f.).

3. The 1968 UNESCO Conference on Ecology concluded that 'if present industrial procedure continues, about 200 years remain before the planet begins to be uninhabitable because of air pollution'. A number of ecological studies published since then have clearly shown that natural resources are not unlimited and that technological success implies the destruction of the environment. And yet the assumption continues to be made that the so-called growth economy should not only be maintained in the rich countries but also extended to the poor! That this assumption should continue to be held in the face of the spectre of ecological doom is just a symptom of the blindness produced by a myth. If a small percentage of the world's population, in order to attain a very high standard of

living, has already plundered the earth, what kind of folly is this that would attempt to raise all to parity with the rich? Even if the resources were available, what would that mean for human life on the planet Earth? As never before, the demand of the hour is a prophetic call to a Christian discipleship that takes stewardship seriously and rejects *excess*—that 'ruthless, unbridled, unthinking excess'¹⁴ that marks the way of life in the affluent West. 'How can we begin to discern greed and envy?', asks E. F. Schumacher. And he replies:

Perhaps by being much less greedy and envious ourselves; perhaps by reducing the temptation of letting our luxuries become needs; and perhaps by even scrutinising our needs to see if they cannot be simplified and reduced.¹⁵

The myth of revolution

We have sinned against God for we have failed to see that, according to his design, life is meant to be lived in interdependence. We have made for ourselves graven images. We have refused to be our brother's keeper. We have exploited nature. How can this situation be redressed? How can justice be done to the poor? How can Christianity recover its relevance in a revolutionary situation? How can the church rise to the historical occasion?

The position is gaining ground today that the only alternative for the Third World, over against development through economic growth, is liberation through revolutionary socialism. The basic categories for understanding poverty, it is affirmed, are not development and underdevelopment, but domination and dependence. Poverty in the Third World is the other side of the coin to wealth in the affluent nations. More precisely, wealth is *always* the result of exploitation. If poverty is to disappear, imperialism must be eliminated through revolutionary violence. The only way out of poverty is liberation.

The theological version of this position is provided by the so-called 'theology of liberation'. At the risk of oversimplification, I would define it as an attempt (mainly identified with Latin America) to articulate a way of life that combines a Marxist analysis of historical reality with biblical insights. The claim is made that

a Christian option cannot take place except through mediations—a theological and ethical reflection which incorporates a certain analytical and ideological understanding of history into a

¹² 'Celebrating the year of liberation', *Christianity Today*, Vol. XX, No. 13 (26 March, 1976), p. 13.

¹³ Douglas Hyde, *Dedication and leadership* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 154.

¹⁴ John V. Taylor, *Enough is enough* (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 21.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

careful and intelligent listening to the words of Scripture and the tradition of the Church.¹⁶

And the 'analytical and ideological understanding of history' chosen is that of 'scientific socialism'.

No full discussion of this position can here be attempted. I will limit myself to a few observations.

1. Like the myth of economic growth, the proposed overthrow of imperialism in order to usher in a new society can only be understood within the framework of the mythology of modernity, with its secularized biblical eschatology. Its advocates bear the mark of the Western world—at least in their action if not in their thinking, they cannot go beyond a technocratic society able to provide 'all the wondrous gifts of modernity in plentiful supply for all' (Berger). As a matter of fact, their socialism is, in Jacques Ellul's words, 'a means to accomplish that which capitalism has already accomplished elsewhere.'¹⁷ It is true, of course, that the myth of revolution carries with it an amount of 'counter-modern themes', outstandingly the search for a redemptive community.¹⁸ In actual practice, however, the critique of growth is also largely applicable at least to the Soviet model of growth. As Peter L. Berger puts it, 'The apocalyptic angels become Pavlovian dogs.'¹⁹

2. Those who maintain this position are quick to point out the avarice, selfishness, and dehumanizing effects of the capitalist form of production. 'Insofar as this sham culture kills in the people even the awareness of their condition of dependence and exploitation,' it is said, 'it destroys the very core of their humanity: the decision to stand up and become agents of their own history.'²⁰ True! Exactly the same judgment, however, can be turned against the socialist system. No-one who has read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag archipelago* and is superficially acquainted with the social cost at which communist totalitarianism has been imposed and maintained in Russia, China and the Eastern European countries, can ever believe that capitalism has a monopoly on a selfish and arbitrary use of power. Exploitation and violence, torture and terror, jailings and murders, have no ideological convictions—they are equally serviceable across all kinds of political boundaries. 'To believe that Russia (or any of the other communist countries, we may add) has got rid of the evils of capitalism

takes a special kind of mind. It is the same kind that believes that Holy Roller has got rid of sin.'²¹

3. Over against the myth of revolution, the Word of God must be proclaimed as the power of God already at work to create a new community. It is not accidental that the advocates of that myth are unable to agree with regard to the kind of socialism that is most desirable for the Third World—their projects of liberation are essentially utopian; their new society is a phantom with no historical reality. As Christians we are called to work on small but concrete changes *here and now*, within the existing system. To be sure, we will undoubtedly be criticized by those who seem to believe that simply by adopting a Marxist sociological analysis of reality they have *ipso facto* become the agents of radical change. But our task is to discover the relation between God's universal sovereignty and creature responsibility in terms of a practical obedience modelled on Jesus Christ, and small changes are better than great (though beautiful) dreams.

God's new creation

Thought and action related to human life in the world are permeated with mythology. Expelled from Paradise, humanity is increasingly searching for a way back. All of history may be interpreted as a history of unconscious attempts to return to a primeval state characterized by harmony with God, with neighbour, and with nature. The angel of the Lord guards the way to Eden with a flaming sword.

The contemporary attempts to achieve a new society, as we have seen, turn out to be different expressions of the mythology of modernity. Despite all appearances to the contrary, both the myth of economic growth and the myth of revolution are pushing man in the same direction—a totalitarian technocracy, a mechanized paradise under the spell of 'the rulers of this age'. The subhuman society imagined by Aldous Huxley in *Brave new world* and George Orwell in *1984* is proving to be far more real than we would have ever imagined a quarter of a century ago.

Preaching in this context cannot be anything but a way to point to the kingdom of God, to the future that has already begun in Jesus Christ, to the new creation that is taking shape in the womb of the old by the power of the Spirit. 'The time is fulfilled,

¹⁶ José Míguez Bonino, *Doing theology in a revolutionary situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 171.

¹⁷ Jacques Ellul, *¿Es posible la revolución?* (Madrid: Unión Editorial, 1974), p. 110. Only the Spanish translation was available to the author.

¹⁸ Cf. Peter L. Berger, *op. cit.*, pp. 24, 25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁰ José Míguez Bonino, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²¹ H. L. Mencken, quoted by Peter L. Berger, *op. cit.*, p. 64. Berger's affirmation with regard to Marxist governments is indisputable: 'These systems are ruled by political elites which, whatever the original circumstances in which they came to power, have progressively suppressed the actual or potential checks on that power. This thrust toward absolute power carries with it a growing threat of arbitrariness and corruption' (*ibid.*, p. 93).

and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel' (Mk. 1: 14).

Because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, we can look at the future with hope. The powers of the new age have been released in history. Consequently, we are called to be 'steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord', knowing that in the Lord our work is 'not in vain' (1 Cor. 15: 58). We do not have to wait for a total change of the structures of society (promoted by us or by others) to take place before we begin to act as members of a new society—we are God's 'workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them' (Eph. 2: 10). We need not wait for a sort of 'metaphysical jump' which will place humanity on a superior level before we begin to live as a 'cognitive minority', as 'a group of people whose view of the world differs significantly from the one generally taken for granted in their society.'²² We are not called to make a revolution but to lead a revolutionary life in the midst of the institutions of the world. And as Jacques Ellul has put it, 'More virtue is needed to accomplish a slow revolutionary action throughout an entire life than to die at a barricade.'²³

The gospel does not need to be ideologized in order to become relevant. It derives its relevance

from a vision of reality that stands over against man's myths—a vision of reality centred in the Lord Jesus Christ. In Jurgen Moltmann's words, 'Jesus himself stands between the Christological faith and the divinized lords who dominate this world, the personal and social cults, as well as the political fetishes of society.'²⁴ The purpose of preaching is to shape a new style of life which points to Jesus Christ—a sign of the kingdom that has already come and a promise of God's final future in which history will find its ultimate meaning. Man's myths speak of a progress that is no progress, for it lacks a real goal; the Word of God points to a destiny which is God's gift in Jesus Christ and can already be adumbrated in the church.

It is to be expected that in the face of the crisis of the world we feel overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness. We may even think that since we cannot make what we would regard as a significant contribution toward solving the problems, it is better to do nothing than to do too little. We then need to remember that 'it is the fact of *living*, with all its consequences, with all that it involves, which is the revolutionary *par excellence*.'²⁵ We are followers of a crucified and risen Lord who by his sacrifice has conquered the world.

²² Peter L. Berger, *A rumour of angels* (Penguin Books, 1970), p. 18.

²³ Jacques Ellul, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²⁴ Jurgen Moltmann, *El Dios crucificado* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1975), p. 206.

²⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The presence of the kingdom* (London: SCM Press, 1951), p. 94.