

Prologue

What this collection of essays seeks to achieve is more important than ever. The authors, like their predecessors in the three previous volumes, are seeking, each in his or her particular cultural/political context, to foster a “teología cristiana liberadora intercontinental del pluralismo religioso.” Their goal is to develop not just a more fruitful diálogo *religioso* between Christians and followers of other religious paths but a dialogue that will also be *liberador*. This is an effort to link current theologies of religions with current theologies of liberation. Happily, this has been a concern and commitment of a growing number of Christian theologians over the past decade. And these volumes of “*Por los caminos de Dios*” have been a significant contribution to that growth.

What I hope to point out in this brief prólogo is why this task – to join interreligious dialogue with interreligious liberation – is more urgent and more complex than ever. My thesis, if I can call it such, is that the main reason and the principle cause of the growing economic injustice in the world and of the dehumanizing poverty that results from such injustice *is itself religious*. The forces that are generating so much wealth and at the same time so much disparity in the distribution of wealth have themselves *become a religion*. The global free market has become a *global exclusive religion*. The religions of the world, both individually and interreligiously, must enter into a prophetic diálogo liberador with this new global religion. Without such an interreligious dialogue with the religion of the market, the dehumanizing power of the market cannot be effectively challenged and “converted.”

Let me, briefly, try to explain.

The religion of the market

Contrary to Samuel Huntington's claim that we are now engaged in a "Clash of Civilizations,"¹ I believe that the clash that is really taking place – and, I would add, *needs* to take place -- is not between civilizations. It is between *religions*! The clashing religions I am talking about, however, are not the traditional religious communities. Rather, I'm referring to the clash – the fundamental opposition -- between the so-called world religions on the one side, and the new Religion of the Market, on the other.

David Loy, in a widely discussed article, has argued carefully and eloquently that the dominant, most widespread, religion in our contemporary world is the "Religion of the Market." Especially in developed countries like the USA, Europe, Japan, this is the religion that most people belong to, and it claims their primary religious commitments. Their devotion to the Religion of the Market *precedes and qualifies* their devotion to Christianity or Judaism or Buddhism.²

For the ordinary faithful, the Religion of the Market means the religion of consumerism. One practices one's faith, one finds salvation, by consuming in the temples that are called shopping malls. But it is a daily liturgy and worship, not confined to Sunday or Saturday or Friday.

For the prelates and potentates of this new religion, the Religion of the Market means the religion of "economism." According to John B. Cobb, Jr. the devotees of "economism" place their full, absolute (we might add: blind) faith in the belief that economic growth, pursued unrestrictedly and without government interference, by individual persons and individual nations, will bring salvation to the entire world. In Cobb's words:

Economism is that organization of society that is intentionally in the service of economic growth. All other values, including national sovereignty, are subordinated to this end, with the sincere expectation that sufficient prosperity will enable the world to meet its non-economic needs as well."³

For the Religion of the Market, based on unconditional faith in economism, the human being is an economic being (*homo economicus*)-- that is, a being "... who rationally seeks to gain as many goods as possible for as little labor as possible. His or her relations with other people are competitive."⁴

1 HUNTINGTON.

2 David LOY, «The Religion of the Market», *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65/2 (1997) 275-90.

3 COBB, BCS, 4-5.

4 BCS, 11.

This Religion of the Market bears all the features that we find in the traditional religions:

- Its *creeds* are made up of the neoliberal economics of (Pope) Friedrich von Hayak and (Ayatollah) Milton Friedman.
- Its *theologians* or *ullama* are the economists (mainly Western economists).
- Its *missionaries* are the vast army of advertisers who proclaim their message of consumption on “commercials” that fill television and radio broadcasts and on the billboards that populate our cities and landscapes.
- Its *centers of learning* are the economic departments of American and Western universities and their tribunal in the World Trade Organization.
- This religion has its *commandments*, the first of which is “Thou shalt not interfere with the free market.” (Or more traditionally phrased: “the Free Market is the Lord thy God; thou shalt not have strange gods before it.”)
- It has a clear and absolute *soteriology*: “Outside the free-market there is no salvation.” Those who are not “inside” and members of this one true religion are considered heathen or enemies, to be controlled or removed.

A fundamental difference between the religions and the religion of the market

There is a fundamental difference, which is a fundamental opposition, between the ethics of what Cobb calls “economism” (or market fundamentalism) and the ethics of the traditional religions. In amazingly different but complementary ways, the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), the Asian traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism), and the indigenous religions are in basic agreement that whatever greater, globalized unity the human race might reach, such unity has to be *based on a balance between self-interest and other-interest*.

Religious ethics are always paradoxical. In a variety of symbols and with different emphases, the religious traditions all tell humanity that, paradoxically but promisingly, self-interest equals other-interest. The grounding visions of the religions call people to a life-giving, peace-giving shift from *self-interest to other-interest*. This “other” is always different from oneself, or more than one’s present self-awareness. It is Other with a capital O (the Source or Inner Life of all) and other with a lower-case ‘o’: one’s neighbor.

So Jesus tells us that we can truly love ourselves only when we love our neighbor. Muhammad warns us that in caring for ourselves, in promoting a good society, we can never forget to care for all others,

especially the poor and neglected. For Buddha, to experience one's own enlightenment is to feel compassion for all sentient beings. In Confucian ethics: "In order to establish ourselves, we must help others to establish themselves; in order to enlarge ourselves, we have to help others to enlarge themselves."

This, therefore, is the question or the challenge that the religions must pose to the promoters of the free market. The religious community must ask the economists, politicians, corporate CEOs: is the *self-interest* you extol balanced by, rooted in, guided by *other-interest*? It sure doesn't seem so. The guiding principle of the capitalistic global system, ruled as it is by market fundamentalism, seems to be: "If we seek our own interest we will also promote that of others." That, according to the religions, must be balanced by: "If we seek the interest of others, we will promote our own." If we don't have this balance, if we don't match our self-interest with interest in the well-being of others, the religions warn, we're in for trouble. In fact, that's the reason why the so-called globalized free market is not responding to, or is actually causing, such a disparity of wealth in our globalized world.

Interreligious dialogue with the religion of the market

Difficult though it will be, the traditional religions of the world must enter into a critical, prophetic dialogue with this new universal Religion of the Market. The religions must engage the captains and the high-priests of globalization and confront them with the "clash," the fundamental difference, between the Religion of the Market and the traditional, historical religions. Religious leaders and teachers must make it clear that at the present moment, given the way the Religion of the Market understands itself, it is not possible for an individual to be a "member" of the Religion of the Market and at the same time a follower of Muhammad or Jesus or Buddha or Abraham. No "double belonging" here. One must choose: either to bow to God/Allah/the Dharma or to bow to the Market.

An interreligious dialogue with the Religion of the Market is extremely difficult mainly because the Market insists, like the Catholic Church of old and like many fundamentalist Christian and Muslim communities of the present, that it is the one and only true religion. All others are false. As is well known from the history of interreligious relations, any religion that claims to be the one and only does not dialogue with other religion; it seeks to convert them.

And yet some kind of dialogue or encounter between the religions of the world and the Religion of the Market is utterly urgent. If the Free Market has assumed the power and dominance of a world religion, if it

informs and directs the lives of people in as pervasive a manner as religion has always done – then is it not the case that the traditional religions of the world must be among the principle means of counteracting this new idolatrous religion of the Market? If it is true that often one needs fire to fight fire, then today we need the religions to “fight” and quell and redirect the Religion of the Market. Perhaps today only the religions can provide people with the vision, the energy, the hope, the perseverance to dialogue with, to struggle against, to win back the followers of the Religion of the Market who have set the god of consumerism and economic growth in the place of the one God who assures us that each of us can find true happiness only in promoting the happiness of all of us.

This collection of essays, and the project it is part of, is one small but significant contribution to promoting a dialogue among religions that will make possible a prophetic dialogue with the Religion of the Market. I am honored to have the privilege of offering an introductory word. And I look forward to the ongoing conversation that these essays will stimulate within the Christian community and within the community of religions.

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