

Liberation by Faith: Segundo and Luther in Mutual Criticism

By Robert W. Bertram

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Segundo and Justification by Faith

A leading liberation theologian, Jesuit Father Juan Luis Segundo, has complained that "Roman Catholic theology in Europe, especially since Vatican II, is drawing nearer to the Lutheran position on justification." Segundo deplores that his Catholic colleagues in "German political theology" nowadays are proceeding, alas, from "the very basis of the Reformation—the doctrine of Paul on justification by faith alone and not by works."¹ As if to confirm Segundo's fears, we of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA recently released our common statement on "Justification by Faith," in which we said of our two communions that "they are now closer on the doctrine of justification than at any time" in the past four and a half centuries.²

Isn't Segundo further reinforced in his suspicions when my cherished colleague in the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, Father George Tavard, now issues a book of his own on the subject of justification in which he suggests that "the reformation initiated at Vatican II should now be pursued in the light of Luther's understanding of justification by faith"?³ Tavard does criticize today's "utopias of progress, of Marxist promises or dreams, of future liberation" and the "dubious [theological] forms" they are assuming "of praxis theology, of several

political and liberation theologies.” But even in “this climate of the present moment,” Tavad sees “an opportunity.” For what? “For making a new effort to understand the meaning of Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith.”⁴ I concur in Tavad’s hope, though in the propositions which follow, I do not mean to implicate him in my effort at conciliating liberation theology with Luther’s theology of justification. But neither would I begrudge it if Tavad or Segundo would find something in my efforts that they could approve.

Now Is the Kingdom Coming, Absolutely

The European theologies which invoke Luther are disappointing to Segundo not because they wish to be, as they claim, “political theologies” or “theologies of revolution” but rather because “even the most progressive” among them are “revolutionary only in name.”⁵ Where these so-called political theologians fail, according to Segundo—and he may be right—is that they fail to see, for example, how Jesus’ healings of the sick and the demoniacs, ambiguous and short-lived as those healings admittedly were, could nevertheless be hailed by Jesus in such absolute terms as the kingdom’s having arrived. Rather than take Jesus at his word, the Europeans de-absolutize such concrete enactments of the Kingdom of God, in effect belittle them, on the pseudo-scientific grounds that these momentary improvements in the human condition cannot qualify as eschatologically *absolute*. For Jürgen Moltmann, they are merely “anticipations,” for Rudolf Weth merely “analogies,” for Johann Baptist Metz merely an “outline” of a kingdom which, for them, is by definition beyond all historical healings and reforms.⁶

Segundo by contrast—and he finds this to be “common and basic” for all Latin American theologies of liberation—argues the contrary view: “that men, on a political as well as individual

basis, construct the Kingdom from within history now.”⁷

Given some liberating event—say, Jesus’ curing the man who was mute or a socialist “provision of basic food and culture to an underdeveloped people”—everything depends on how we relate to that event. Do we relate to it with joy, with the kind of “‘theological’ joy” that absolutizes the event as Jesus did, as being nothing less than “salvation” and exclaim to the liberated ones, “Your faith has saved you”? Or do we instead, as the supposedly “scientific” theologies do, become so paralyzed by how fragmentary and transitory the cure is that we “use theology in order to render the liberation of a man something odious”?⁸ Do we demand of Christ, before he dares to tell the sick man “your faith has saved you,” that Christ must give guarantees that “that cure will not be followed by even graver illnesses”? If we do not, then why is it that “the political theologian of Europe requires Latin Americans to put forward a project for a socialist society which will guarantee in advance that the evident defects of known socialist systems will be avoided”?⁹

Everything depends on how we respond to, how we evaluate the liberating event. In the Synoptics the decisive term for that evaluative response is the term “heart”: “a hard, closed heart or a sensitive, open heart.” In modern terms, says Segundo, we could call it “historical sensibility.”¹⁰ In Luther’s terms, if I may interpose, we might call such a response “faith.”

Segundo is calling for us to evaluate the event from the standpoint of its “human value,” from the viewpoint of the healed patient or of the poor who stand to be liberated—not from “the side of reason calculating with the heart closed” but “on the side of spontaneity of heart open to others.”¹¹ Says Segundo, “This may seem of lesser importance in well-off countries. But, among us, it is plain for all to see. We live with it twenty-four hours a day... It all consists in giving

theological status to an historical event in its absolute elemental simplicity.”¹²

Segundo recalls the woman in the Gospels who, like today’s scientific theologians, requires of Jesus a “sign from heaven” to determine whether his liberating people from their ills was “beyond all doubt from God or if it could proceed from Satan.” Note Jesus’ reply: “The sign is in itself so clear that even if it is Satan who liberates these men from their ills, it is because the Kingdom of God has arrived and is among you.”¹³

“With this remark,” says Segundo, Jesus “discounts totally any theological criterion applied to history which is not the direct and present evaluation of the event”—that is, “from the point of view of its human value.” But that is the “instrument of cognition” which Segundo claims is “being minimized or simply neglected by scientific theology.”¹⁴

What the faithless woman in the Synoptics called a sign from heaven is like what Moltmann and Weth and Metz call “anticipations,” “outlines,” “analogies,” that is, signs “of a strictly *divine* action, something which by its very nature cannot be attributed to man or, still less, to the devil.” “Jesus replies with [‘signs of the times’] signs that are historical, relative, extremely ambiguous, at a vast distance from the absolute...” And yet he designates these signs with the very absoluteness of the kingdom come.¹⁵

The whole purpose in so evaluating the struggle for liberation—that is, evaluating its human value absolutely—is a *practical* purpose, namely, to enable participants to commit themselves to the struggle absolutely, not half-heartedly, in good conscience believing that their involvement not merely “anticipates” the kingdom or somehow resembles it but actually helps to bring that kingdom about—causally.¹⁶ But Segundo

laments, "Who consecrates his life to an 'analogy'? Who dies for an 'outline'? Who moves a human mass, a whole people, in the name of an 'anticipation'?"¹⁷ Accordingly, if we can honestly relate to a liberating event absolutely, no matter how ambiguous it may be, then the very strength of God who promotes that event imbues our own participation in it with "a genuinely causal character with respect to the definitive Kingdom of God."¹⁸

Luther Re-read

It is out of this passionately programmatic context that Segundo objects to "the doctrine of Paul on justification by faith alone and not by works," or at least to the European political theologians' understanding of Paul's doctrine. Unfortunately Segundo seems to equate their version of it with the Pauline and Lutheran originals. Would that he had checked the primary sources and judged these on their own merits. One of Segundo's European culprits, Rudolf Weth, in arguing that since the coming kingdom must be effected by God it cannot be effected by "any human action," cites Luther as his support—mistakenly, as we shall see, although Segundo uncritically accepts the citation at face value and dismisses both Weth and Luther as a lot.

Segundo might have been even more alienated by Weth's quotation from Luther had Segundo bothered to trace the precise documentary source, namely, Luther's often maligned *On the Bondage of the Will*. Those who know that book only by hearsay frequently misconstrue it as denying any ultimate consequence to human doing, as if people *coram Deo* were mere puppets. In the passage which Weth cites, Luther is commenting upon the verse in Matthew (25:34) in which "the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'" Luther observes, "How could [the sons of the kingdom] merit what...has

been prepared for them since before they were created?...The children of God must be prepared in view of the Kingdom, it is...not the children of God who merit the Kingdom.”¹⁹ That is enough to provoke Segundo to conclude, “It is obvious that [Luther’s] exegesis radically disqualifies any option between any socio-political systems which aim to prepare in a causal manner the Kingdom of God.”²⁰

Whether Segundo’s criticism is defensible against European political theology is not at the moment my question, though I do find it tempting. For that matter, in his rebuttal of Segundo, Jürgen Moltmann raises the counter-question whether Segundo himself ever accomplished what he demands of others: to provide a theological “option” for socialism against capitalism.²¹

The issue I do wish to confront is Segundo’s misreading of Luther, with the result that he is losing a potential ally and possibly a radicalizing corrective. Segundo speaks of “the Lutheran rediscovery of personal justification by faith,” implying that because it is “personal,” it has nothing to say about “cosmology and ecclesiology.” He imagines that the whole point of the “Pauline insistence” is to avoid “a paralyzing concern with justification of self.” No wonder Segundo cannot understand what the implications of this doctrine then are for “the communal demands of the building of the Kingdom.”²²

Luther’s exegesis, as Segundo misapprehends it, “begins from an *a priori* position that the Kingdom is already built in all its perfection, and only awaits the entry into it of every man by faith.”²³ “Only?!” we might exclaim. The kingdom “*only* awaits the entry into it of everyone by faith”? Even if that were all, is that really such a paltry goal, persuading millions of “heart”-less, faithless people like ourselves to enter into Christ’s new reign upon earth with all the boldness and confidence of faith?

Indeed, isn't that very nearly Segundo's own program, to arouse reluctant folks who would rather hold out for a sign from heaven to respond instead to the liberating event here and now with "theological joy," with "absolute commitment," with "spontaneity of heart open to others," convinced that "God [is] acting in events and judging them according to their true value"—i.e., their "human value"—and that God, being who he is, simply "could not attribute another value to historical facts"?²⁴ What else is that but entering into the kingdom "by faith"? What is more, so ambitious is the faith which Segundo calls for—but so does Luther—that the believers who struggle to maintain such faith against impossible odds, even perhaps against "scientific theologians," do need the assurance that their efforts are leading to the kingdom of God and—yes, I agree—that their efforts actually have something to do with bringing that kingdom about, "causally."

How can I agree to that as I do, that Segundian confidence in human cooperation with the kingdom, and still affirm the Pauline-Lutheran theology of justification by faith, as I also quite cheerfully do, if, as Segundo alleges, the latter militates against the former? I cannot answer for Segundo, of course. What I must say to Segundo and to his partisans—and I am one of them, of a sort—is what Martin Luther really was saying in that quotation from *The Bondage of the Will*, which Rudolf Weth might have been misappropriating but which Segundo in any case would have done well to investigate at first hand.

What is at issue here, of course, is not merely the "scientific" preoccupation with some sixteenth-century text or, for that matter, some New Testament text. What is at issue, as Segundo so rightly notes, is "faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ...in its human functionality." Nor, as he also says, is that a question merely of "moral theology" but rather of Christian "dogma," in terms of that dogma's "social impact on the praxis."²⁵ So then

why, if, according to Luther, the kingdom has been “prepared for you from the foundation of the world,” is it nevertheless held out to us here and now as a reward for our feeding the hungry and clothing the naked? Luther’s answer, like Segundo’s, has to do with Christian praxis: “...the words about reward, signifying what is to be, are for the purpose of exhortation and commination, whereby the godly are awakened, comforted and raised up to go forward, persevere and conquer in doing good and enduring evil, lest they should grow weary or lose heart.”²⁶ Recall Segundo’s comment that, in order to move “a human mass, a whole people,” you will need more to rally them than Moltmann’s “anticipation.” Rather, says Luther, one must be “like Paul exhorting his Corinthians and saying, ‘Be courageous, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain,’” or like “God [who] upholds Abraham by saying, ‘I am your exceeding great reward.’”

But if Paul or Luther taught what Segundo seems to imagine they taught, “that the Kingdom is already built in all its perfection,” thus ignoring “the communal demands of the building of the Kingdom,” why would Paul exhort his readers to be courageous on the grounds that “in the Lord [their] labor is not in vain” but will rather eventuate, causally, in “eternal life”? Surely Luther, Segundo’s Luther, could not have repeated such Pauline exhortations had Luther in fact denied all causal efficacy to the believers’ historical praxis.

This question, in a way, was anticipated by Luther himself. “Reason,” he quipped, “may turn up her nose and say, ‘Why should God will these things to be done by means...,’” that is, “by means of words” promising that our strivings are indeed consequential? “Why should God will these things to be done by means of words?” For doesn’t everything “depend on the power and operation of the Holy Spirit”?²⁷ To this question, says Luther, “we shall reply, It has thus pleased God to impart the Spirit not without the Word but through the Word, so as to have us cooperators with

him..."²⁸ "So as to have us coopera- tors with him": does that sound like what Segundo calls "the denial of causality...on principle to all political parties in relation to the definitive Kingdom"?²⁹ Hardly. Especially not if you grant that "political parties" (Segundo's term) must include churches who so much as proclaim the Word, publicly and "causally," to God's partisan "cooperators."

Cooperators: Meritorious, No; Causal, Yes

Not for a moment does Luther deny that believers are, as Paul says, "workers together with" God (I Cor. 3:9). He does insist "that we can do nothing of ourselves, and that whatever we do, God works it in us" so that "the good will...and the reward all come from grace alone," not "on the basis of [some inherent, native] merit."³⁰ Moreover, the consequences which follow our graced initiatives, and they do follow invariably as effects from causes, are not the consequences of merit but of natural necessity. Consequential rewards follow graciously yet naturally, says Luther—as naturally as when "you are submerged in water you will drown, when you swim out you will be saved."³¹

Still, the way God graces us, both in our volition and in its consequences, is to treat us as persons, as historical subjects and not objects, not manipulatively or invasively with infusions of power which overwhelm us from above or behind but rather vis-à-vis, addressing us from without through the Word—which itself is a cause, an instrumental, interpersonal causality—evoking our response as answerable agents of history. Could it be, perhaps, that what really offends Segundo is not some alleged Lutheran denial of human causality or cooperation (which as we have seen is a straw man) but rather Luther's denial, open and admitted, of human merit? If that is Segundo's grievance, he does not say

so. In fact, as we heard, it was Segundo who said that our relation to the liberating event “derives...its genuinely causal character” “from the strength of God who promotes it.”³² That much Luther could have said, too: humanly causative yet divinely graced.

Or perhaps Segundo is assuming that there simply can be no human cooperation with God except by appeal to human meritoriousness—as if people cannot be rallied to participate in the kingdom unless they are lured by the prospect of rewards earned by themselves. Yet if that is what Segundo assumes (and I doubt that he does), how could he speak so eloquently about “disinterested love” and “spontaneity of heart open to others”?

For Luther, too, disinterested love is of the essence of the kingdom. Not that God cannot use, as in fact God most often does use, the very opposite—namely, human self-interest and even demonic perversity—to accomplish some neighborly good and some modicum of the commonweal. “But the children of God do good,” Luther says, “with a will that is disinterested [*gratuita voluntate*], not seeking any reward but only the glory and will of God and being ready to do good even if—an impossible supposition—there were neither a kingdom nor a hell.”³³ “Lord, when did we see *thee* hungry and feed *thee*?” is the surprised response of disinterested lovers.

Absolute Criticism Needs Absolute Joy

On the other hand, the bitter truth of the matter is that ordinarily when people like us clothe the naked and welcome strangers and visit the sick and the prisoners, if we do that at all, we do so “for the sake of obtaining the Kingdom” for ourselves. If this is so, then, as Luther puts it (though this judgment is not original with him), we belong “among the ungodly who with an evil and mercenary eye ‘seek their own’ in God.”³⁴

It is that “mer- cenary eye” (we might call it the profit motive) which Luther excoriates as the fallacy about merit. In other words, although God may through our self-interest or our selfish class-interest, extort from us some superficial concessions to those whom we would otherwise neglect, yet we ourselves remain, as Luther puts it, utterly “servile,”³⁵ that is, unliberated—free to be nothing more than ourselves, which is the ultimate enslavement. And then the oppressed, as whose advocates we pose, are reduced to functioning as the exploited means to our own spiritual aggrandizement.

Such widespread, virtually ubiquitous seeking of the kingdom for oneself or one’s own, which is inherently contradictory, likewise functions as human causality in history with its own sure and tragic consequences. No matter how inwardly and privately such personal or group self-interest may lurk, it sooner or later surfaces as public and even institutionalized degradation of others. That, too, is the building of a kingdom—though not God’s—replete with its own eschatology. But in that case it is not God whose “cooperators” we are.

It is directly in the face of that devastating criticism of us, not by evading or hedging it, that we nevertheless and simultaneously need the diametric opposite of such criticism, what Segundo calls “absolute commitment,” “theological joy”—and what Luther calls “faith”—in the liberating events of our times and places, ambiguous and short-lived as those liberations always are.

But then, given the ambiguity of those events—no, worse than that: given their pervasive self-interest and their demonic self-destruction—what could there possibly be in such events to vindicate a joy in them which is theological or a commitment which is absolute? Isn’t that simply a short-sighted proposal for yet another idolatry and further exacerbation of the Last

Judgment? It could well be, and that is a risk. Yet it is exactly up against that risk of ultimate condemnation, is it not, that our Lord commends those whose faith is to the contrary, not blindly and naively to the contrary but with eyes wide open and terrified by the blasphemous riskiness of it all? He commends their faith as having “healed” them, as that which is “great” about them, as having “saved” them, and, yes, as altogether “justifying” them. For what they are then cooperating in, by their faith, is not just some remote “analogy” or “outline” or “anticipation” of the kingdom but the very kingdom here and now a-coming. At least, so Jesus promises.

Not Sparing Jesus

So Jesus promises. Isn't that finally what it comes down to? Doesn't the burden of proof ultimately lie with him? By what authority does this Jesus identify the faith of his beneficiaries—which, whomever else it is faith in, is a faith most frontally in him—as being that one thing about them which is absolutely right or, as Paul adds, their righteousness, and which therefore liberates them even from criticism, including the final one? What entitles Jesus to confer such doxological compliments upon their faith in Him?

There is no way to pursue that question without subjecting Jesus himself, not just his synoptic or apostolic interpreters or the subsequent church but Jesus himself, to the most unsparing criticism, though Christians, of all people, often manifest a pious aversion to doing that. Is the fear that their folk hero might thereby be compromised or, worse yet, might not survive the critique? Really, how does Jesus, for all his obvious helpfulness, withstand the very legitimate criticism that, in absolutizing his own liberating events (not just anybody's, but his), he thereby absolutizes himself?

And it won't do to get Jesus off the hook, as liberalism has often tried, by retreating into some version of revelationism. As if all that the historical Jesus intended was to reveal some timeless truth about a divine compassion which supposedly prevails universally with or without Jesus. That sort of unhistorical universalist Jesus clearly was not, and it is time to stop excusing him as though he were. Segundo, in another context, complains about modern theology's "phony universalism." If he wants something to expose in the vauntedly "critical" theological establishment, let him begin with this uncritical, paranoid protectiveness with which Jesus has been enshrouded.

The Kritik Is Survived

To the contrary, isn't that in fact the basis of Jesus' claim upon our faith, that he could take the criticism, the full force of the ultimate Critical Process and in fact did, and in so doing vindicated the confidence of those who follow him? I suppose other christological metaphors are at hand for theologizing his unique achievement but, since so much of this presentation has already been colored by Segundo's and Luther's treatment of the Matthean Last Judgment, why not stick with Matthew's picture of Jesus also as the *ebed yahweh*? As the Suffering Servant of Israel, let us now say of him, he endured the absolute "criticism" surpassingly. Yet not only he but Godself as well. Luther enjoyed the ancient christological picture of the crucifixion in which the divine law has no choice but to level its full accusation against this guilty sin-bearer, only to discover that in doing so it, the very law of God, has turned on its Lord, thus violating its own first and greatest commandment, and now stands discredited.

Translated into neo-Hegelian or neo-Marxist talk about *Kritik*, it is to God's own Critical Process within human history that

God the Ultimate Critic now submits, and supersedes it, so that, then and there, in the history of Jesus Messiah, and for those who risk their histories with him, that cosmic criticism no longer has the last word but only his mercy does.

A neo-Marxist who has written about the rise of the intellectuals as signalling "the rise of the new class" has described their new form of cultural capital as the "culture of critical discourse." However, as he notes, critique, to be morally consistent, must always entail self-critique as well, and, in turn, critique of that self-critique, in "an unending regress." But that inevitably poses a dilemma for human survival. "The culture of critical discourse," as he puts it, "must put its hands round its own throat, and see how long it can squeeze."³⁶ In Christ, as the gospel announces, the Final Critic, Godself, went all the way, outlasting God's own culture of critical discourse once and for all.

One of Segundo's objections to European "theologies of revolution" is that the revolution they seem to envision is little more than the theoretical-Cartesian revolution of methodical doubt, rather than practical revolution."³⁷ I take Segundo to be saying that critique unrelieved by practical alternatives is a dead end. The one exception we know is the cross, where God's critical history was itself undergone all the way to the dead end, only to initiate a new and most revolutionary praxis. If Jesus had *not* won such authority over the divine criticism, and won it not by lording it over others as the *Goyim* do but by serving and giving his life as a ransom for many, then *neither* would he have had the right to tell those who trusted him, "Your faith has saved you," or to expect "absolute commitment" to his healings and absolutions. That much, at least, does the kingdom of God depend on historical events for its causality.

But since, through his cross and resurrection, all that authority was given him everywhere, henceforth every healing and absolution and every other liberating event of "human value" anywhere is eligible to be credited to his name—out loud, *per verbum*—and is eligible to become his doing, and is eligible to share historically in his cruciform causality. Eligible, yes. On the other hand, it is the style of Jesus' servantlike authority never to impose his causality on anyone. But neither does he conduct his kingdom solo but only in concert with his friends as "cooperators." And then he enlists, never coercively, but rather by dignifying them with the invitation of his Word, addressed to them as responsible subjects.

Therefore, every participant in every liberating event, even the most passive victim or the most automated bureaucrat, is likewise eligible to believe this Jesus (or not), to take theological joy in his doings (or instead to hold out for a sign from heaven), and, if they do believe him, to be counted by him as righteous as he himself is. He is authorized to cheer them on with such compliments in view of the risks they incur by cooperating.

At times, the liberating events in our history, those which simply must be the doing of God in view of how humanly helpful they are, are proclaimed to be the doing of God's Son, Jesus, as well—"the lordship of Christ." But does the mere saying so make that true? Is that all Jesus' hard-won authority was for, that everything in history which hitherto might have been credited to the Creator must now be credited to Christ, too? Well, given the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, or rather Judaism's monotheistic bequest to that doctrine, I suppose it does follow almost tautologically that whatever God does is done by one whole God, Christ included. But, we are constrained to ask, "So what?" What does adding "the lordship of Christ" accomplish? Besides paying Jesus metaphysical compliments, what does

injecting his name into the liberating event do for the liberating event itself? If it does something only for him and nothing for those who are to be liberated, then isn't it superfluous? It mocks the law of parsimony, multiplying metaphysical entities beyond our need of them. But worse, that kind of christological tribute seems to have held little appeal for Jesus himself.

On the other hand, if attributing the liberating event—any liberating event whether socialist or otherwise, political or private—to Christ is meant instead to offer the human participants in the event the benefits of Christ, then the event does stand a chance of being Christ's doing. For in that case he is taken seriously as the sort of lord who wills to do nothing without his "cooperators." And they cooperate first of all by their consent, that is, by faith. If the purpose for crediting Christ as the author of this or that social movement (and why not?) is to encourage its partisans to locate the value of their efforts in his forgiveness, their vindication in his resurrection, their secret weapon in his cruciform compassion, then thereby that movement becomes his movement—his movement and theirs together, his causality being confirmed by their faith.

Another Kingdom: Still God's

Granted, the kingdom in which they and their Lord share is not the only kingdom in town. There is another, rival kingdom, variously called the kingdom of this world or the kingdom of darkness. It probably requires no special spiritual acumen for Christians to recognize that the kingdom to which Christ calls them, if it truly is as revolutionary as he claims, must by definition be different from its evil, outdated counterpart. Every major Christian tradition has acknowledged that much twoness, duality, between the two kingdoms, between God's new

creation in Christ and whatever its worldly antithesis might be.

The challenge enters, as I think Segundo in his own way is reminding us, in that Christians must perceive that also the kingdom of this world, even when it is the kingdom of darkness, is still somehow the kingdom of God. To be sure, it is not God's kingdom of heaven coming upon earth in Messiah Jesus, through gospel and sacraments, reigning by means of forgiveness and sacrificial love and cross-bearing. It makes its way instead by whatever human decency and approximate justice sinners can manage and, if need be, by force. Yet in that measure, at least, this antiquated world is still the work of the same Creator—perhaps, as Luther said, operating lefthandedly. Conceivably, the skeptical woman who demanded from Jesus a sign from heaven might have been right. Conceivably, it could have been Satan who healed the man. Still, seeing that the man was healed at all and knowing how God in Christ values “human value” absolutely, we can only conclude that that simply had to be the doing of God and therefore cause for theological joy. One of the cheeriest Christian charisms surely—and isn't this a major thrust of “the theology of both kingdoms,” both kingdoms as God's?—is to be able to divine the hand of God in the midst of the most mundane darkness, even where Christ and his cooperators are missing?

The kingdom of the world is, for all its darkness, still the kingdom of God: that is a world for Christians not only to marvel at as gawkers from the bleachers of the church; that is a sector for Christians to infiltrate and in which to lose themselves. For now, indeed, it is their only sector. Its modalities of reciprocity and retribution, even compromise, they are to employ expertly and respectfully (the way a physician respect the limits of her sick patient), though never contentedly and not depending upon these old ways for themselves. But that sort of dedicated independence—Luther and Paul called it freedom—should only liberate Christians all the

more for what Segundo calls “historical sensibility,” now that they can see whose history it still is.

Disappointment Is Not Despair

Christians are probably as prone as any other hopefuls are to have their historical hopes disappointed. Yet, in their case, since faith alone keeps them viable, disillusionment only reminds them to resume believing, and to begin again.

Item: Suppose, with *The Communist Manifesto*, that the history of society really has been one long history of class struggle—first between freeman and slave, then between patrician and plebeian, next between lord and serf, then between guildmaster and journeyman, finally between bourgeoisie and proletariat. The sad fact that in none of those struggles did the lowliest class ever come to power,³⁸ just as today’s poor are also not likely to, need not drive the daughters and sons of the kingdom to cynicism. But it may drive them on to faith. Remember, in the story of the Last Judgment, it is not necessarily the hungry and the naked and the prisoners who are promised the kingdom but rather those who fed and clothed and visited them without any thought of who was watching. That being so, what else is there for us to do but to proceed in faith?

Item: If it should turn out, as sociological evidence increasingly forebodes, that history’s preferential option is not going to be for the poor after all, but instead for leadership-types like ourselves who made careers of opting preferentially for the poor, as well as for our own class survival—the humanistic intellectuals and technical intelligentsia, the capitalists of the “culture of critical discourse”—then what? Well, then, there will be no one who will need faith, trusting the Judge will be merciful, quite so much as we shall. And we shall be only too glad to re-learn it from

the poor.

Item: For all our past identifications with those who suffer, what if the wild crop which now grows up in the wake of our old lib sympathies, as we are being warned, is that a new generation of moralists will have arisen who glorify suffering for its own sake but disdain the victim? As if the victim were now a hero by being a victim. As if the capacity to suffer were a sure sign of courage. As if, when she improves her material circumstance or is upwardly mobile socially, she loses her moral claim or is a "traitor to her class." As if, when he suffers from but is content with his lot, he must lack true consciousness about himself. As if sympathy extends to victims for their condition, not for their personhood. As if what counted was the suffering, not the sufferer.³⁹ As if all that we had worked for in the victims' behalf was now doomed to exploit them further. But then, as never before, what we should welcome most is not self-pity or taking refuge in our past good works, but faith in the righteousness of Another, reviving us for the second mile.

Faith = Confession = Political Causality

One last note. Segundo minimizes the political significance of the doctrine of justification by faith on the ground that it is "personal." Personal it is, and in fact that has at times been its most potent feature politically, even church-politically. In any case, personal need hardly mean private or apolitical. The faith of which Paul and Luther spoke is as often as not a faith on trial, on the public witness stand against overwhelming authorities to the contrary—a faith, in other words, to be confessed. Any such public martyrological act, surely Segundo knows better than I, is explosive in its political causality, not least of all in the politics of the church or in the

theological establishment— which, as fiercely as any right-wing political establishment or any capitalist economic establishment, could just turn out to be Segundo's own fated witness stand, his *status confessionis*. But really, Christian *confessio* is simply a dramatic, embattled version of what Luther regarded as the kingdom's usual causality *par excellence*: The Word, always to persons but always within the hearing of the whole volatile world.

References

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