CHAPTER TWO

WHEN THE WINDOW CLOSES: THE CHALLENGE OF IDOLATRY

INTRODUCTION

Pablo Richard, a Chilean-born theologian long based in Costa Rica, notes in his essay on “Theology in the Theology of Liberation” that “[i]n Latin America, faith in God does not come up fundamentally against atheism, but rather against idolatry”.  

Richard and his companions at DEI (Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones) in the Costa Rican capital, San José, have led the way among liberation theologians in their attempts to describe the particular form of this idolatry, and their work will be frequently cited in this chapter.

Why has the concept of idolatry, which may appear to be little more than a quaint relic of the disappeared world of the Old Testament, proved to be so helpful for analysing the problems and challenges faced by the poor of Latin America? In order to respond to this question, it will be useful to remind ourselves of the journey we took in the previous chapter. There we saw how liberation theologians have sought to identify who the poor are, and some of the problems associated with that search. It was evident from the investigation carried out in the first chapter that, whatever else liberation theology has had to say about the poor, it has always understood that there is a necessary economic content to any talk of poverty. The discussions have tended to focus on whether this is a necessary and sufficient condition for describing poverty, or whether it is necessary but insufficient.

It may be useful, before proceeding any further, to note the lack of clarity sometimes present in the terminology, with terms such as the economy, economics, the market and capitalism being used either interchangeably or to mean different things by different authors. Strictly speaking one would expect liberation theology to use economics to reflect on the economy. However, given that it wants to deny some of the presuppositions of economics, especially neo-liberal economics, it also has to reflect in a direct theological fashion on both economics and the economy, in order to criticise both. The Brazilian theologian, Jung Mo Sung, whose work in this

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2 See above 1.1.1.3, The Poor Today, and 1.2.1 on the practical problems.
3 I return to this question below, 2.1.2
4 This would be more in keeping with the description of the socio-analytic mediation proposed by Clodovis Boff, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.1.2.1 The point he makes is that theology, as a theoretical discourse, should use other theoretical discourses – in this case, economics. Economics would give access to the actual economy of a given country or region.
area I will consider later in this chapter, has made the following distinction which will serve as a guide for the discussion that follows:

When we speak of the autonomy of the market, it is important to remember the difference between the market – a social space for exchanges of economic goods – and the market system. The market existed before capitalism and will exist after capitalism, because it is a necessity for broad and complex societies. As to the capitalist market, or the market system, this is something specific to capitalism: the market as the only co-ordinator or the principle of the social division of labour, and, apart from this, as K. Polyani says, self-regulatory.

As we shall see, some of the leading liberation theologians have been criticised for their inattention to the economy, or perhaps more strictly, to economics, but they have at least noted that poverty is an economic condition. Given this, it is necessary to find and employ a language that will enable the reality of poverty to be discussed theologically. In other words, they have had to decide on a theologically appropriate language to discuss and name the structures which cause poverty. As Richard suggested in the quotation with which I began this chapter, this led them to use the notion of idolatry.

In this chapter, I will investigate what liberation theology has understood by idolatry. To do this, I will offer a brief account of liberation readings of the Bible on the topic of idolatry, which will enable me to isolate two separate idolatries, one focussed inwards and the other outwards. With this hermeneutic tool, I will then look at how liberation theology has dealt with the economy / economics, and especially with capitalism in its various forms. Here I will be asking what sort of idolatry it sees in modern global capitalism. Because both capitalism and liberation can be, and are, seen as utopian, I will consider the power of utopias to be either idolatrous or critical of idolatry. These discussions will serve to show the enduring power of the metaphor of idolatry to name the problems which are faced by the poor of Latin America.

Having done this, I will also investigate the relation between idolatry in its different forms and ideology, and the way in which liberation theology has engaged in ideology critique. This will also entail a discussion of the

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5 Jung Mo Sung, “‘Teologia, espiritualidade e mercado’”, in Luiz Carlos Susin (ed.), *Teologia para outro Mundo Possível*, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2006, pp.337-350, here p.338. This is one of the papers from the Fórum Mundial de Teologia e Libertação (World Forum of Theology and Liberation), which was part of the 5th World Social Forum held in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in January 2005. Given Sung's strong critique of the language of utopia, he may not be best pleased with the book's title, “Theology for another possible world.”

6 Especially by Jung Mo Sung, discussed below.

degree to which liberation theology itself is ideological. Liberation theology has frequently responded to the “idols of death” by emphasising God as the “God of Life”. I will ask how useful this terminology can be in overcoming ideology. In conclusion, I suggest that the poor are at times not only victims of idolatry from the outside, through the demands of the market, but also, at least potentially, from the inside, from the demands made on them by liberation theology itself to be “sacraments of God”.

2.1 Idolatry: Its Causes and Effects

2.1.1 Idolatry in the Bible from a Liberation Theology Perspective

As in the previous chapter, when I dealt with the poor in the Bible, my intention here is not to provide an in-depth assessment of what the Bible has to say about idolatry, nor even what contemporary biblical scholarship has to say about the matter. Rather, I wish to consider what liberation theologians have drawn from their reading of the Bible on this topic. This will enable me to propose an interpretive key for the continuing discussion on idolatry today. I begin by looking at a distinction made by Pablo Richard in his essay “Biblical Theology of Confrontation with Idols”. Richard notes that there are two distinct understandings of idolatry in the Old Testament, what we might call internal and external forms.

The internal form, which I propose to call Idolatry 1, concerns Israel’s relationship to Yahweh, its perception of its own God and the way in which it seeks to control its own God. In the Old Testament, this form of idolatry is rarer and the discussion centres on two main texts: Exodus 32, the story of the Golden Calf, and 1Kings 12:26-33, the story of Jeroboam’s golden calves. For Richard, in the first story the problem is not that the people were constructing a new god. Rather, they “were … constructing the seat, the throne, the symbol of the presence of Yahweh in their midst.

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8 See my treatment of this in Chapter 1.1.3
9 For an especially interesting introduction to this theme, see Christopher Wright, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative, Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 2006, pp.136-188, which also contains some useful bibliographical references. Wright, from an evangelical perspective, is in general well-disposed towards liberation theology and takes up the challenges it brings. So, although he is not himself a liberation theologian, his reading is certainly relevant for my purposes.
11 I do this in conscious allusion to Clodovis Boff’s use of the terms “Ideology 1” and “Ideology 2”, which I treat below. I will look at the relation between the two forms of idolatry and ideology later in this chapter.
12 Pablo Richard, “Biblical Theology…”, p.5. The second form which Richard introduces here, the external form, will be dealt with below. See on this also, more recently, but following the same argument, Pablo Richard, Força Ética e Espiritual da Teologia da Libertação, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2006, p.101: “There are two types of idolatry: when the proper meaning of God is perverted or when he is substituted by other gods”.
There was no sin here against monotheism, but rather against God’s transcendence, which also entails a sin against the people”.

It is a sin against the people because the reduction of God to the material is an attempt to rein in the power of the Transcendent.

The Transcendent, a term I use with some frequency in this chapter, is to be understood here as to an extent synonymous with God, but with God in his absolute Otherness, the irreducibility of God to any other category or class.

The material reduction of God curtails God’s power to set his people free, because God is excluded from his place at the heart of Israel’s life and worship. In other words, any material representation of God runs the risk of reducing God to the material, and, as such, unable to challenge or transform life.

Richard suggests that this story shows the Israelites rejecting the leadership of Moses, and thus the God who had appointed Moses to that leadership. In doing so they are rejecting the sort of liberation which God offers them, in favour of something less challenging, a return to the certainties of slavery. He writes “[t]he sin against the transcendence of God… consisted in the people’s refusal of its own liberation, and in the construction of a false liberation through the alienating worship of a God who would console them, but not set them free”.

The second, external, form of idolatry, which I propose to call Idolatry 2, is one which receives a great deal more attention in the Old Testament. It is the question of false, or at least other gods. The commandment against idolatry, primarily though not exclusively in the shape of Idolatry 2, is central to the Old Testament, and to the practices of Judaism. Thus, for example, one rabbinical stream claimed that anyone who rejected idolatry was by that fact alone a Jew.

God reveals himself as a God who is not simply arithmetically singular, but ultimately and definitively Other, One,
because there is simply nothing with which to compare him. This perception lies at the heart of the Jewish understanding of God in the Old Testament.  

Old Testament scholars have discussed whether there is a development from henotheism, the idea that there is one God for Israel, to monotheism, the idea that there is only one God. Henotheism is understood as the decision by, in this case, Israel, to have only one God for itself, whilst allowing for the possibility that there might be other gods for other nations. The move to monotheism is from saying that “we have one God for us” to “there is only one single God for all of humanity.” In what Richard sees as the henotheistic phase, the critique of idolatry serves as a form of protest against royal injustice. Here Idolatry 1 is at stake, for it touches on the internal relationship of Israel to its God, which the King is meant to defend and in some sense realise. In assuming the powers of God, acting as rather than representing God, the King leads the people not into freedom but slavery.

It is only beginning with the immediate pre-exilic period that the condemnation of idols (Idolatry 2) becomes more universal, both in terms of the idolaters, and of the meaning attached to the idols. In Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah Richard argues that what is under attack is the human origin of the power claimed for the idols. Idols are thus seen as mechanisms for using and controlling power. Essentiaaly, the argument is that the Babylonian gods or god, Marduk, had not, as the henotheistic position might suggest, triumphed over Yahweh, which would have made him now deserving of Israel’s worship. Rather, the Babylonians had triumphed over Israel, because it was Yahweh’s plan. The idols, the statues of the gods, were simply manifestations of their power. But, as the paean to Cyrus (Isaiah 45:1-6,13-14) makes clear, their oppressive power is not due to some other divine intervention. Only Yahweh is God, only he has transcendent power. The idols, the figurines, statues, and the like, which were present in homes and temples, are consumer goods, which like all such goods exist to meet a need, in this case the need for protection against misfortune.

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19 Thus, Burggraeve et al., “True Faith in God…”, pp.10-16
20 See Richard, “Biblical Theology…” p.9. On henotheism, see also Burggraeve et al., “True Faith in God…” pp.17ff. They note that it can lead to violent exclusivity – whoever does not worship our god in our territory must either be forced to do so, or violently excluded, lest our God be displeased. Wright, The Mission of God, pp.137-138, is somewhat more sceptical about this development, preferring to argue that from the beginning Israel regarded its God as unique – if it were not apparently tautological, one would be tempted to say “uniquely unique”, since of course at one level anything claimed as divine or even human is unique, but as mentioned above, YHWH is unique in a transcendent way. See further on this theme, pp.80-83, but really throughout Chapters 3-5.
21 Richard, “Biblical Theology…” pp.9-10
22 Specifically, Jeremiah 10:1-16, and Isaiah 44:9-20
It would be wrong, though, to reduce the idols to mere physical representations. The problem is not just a more or less aesthetically pleasing piece of wood, stone or metal. The issue is not so much whether Israel thought that pagans were worshipping the material object, but rather that they thought that, ultimately, this was all the pagans could do, because there was nothing behind the material form. As Marcel Poorthuis puts it, “the word idolatry is not descriptive but normative. No one would call his own religion idolatrous”. People do not unwittingly engage in something which they would call idolatrous. Idolatry is always a pejorative term, which is why it can be used as a way to seek to control others. At the heart of the polemics, though, is an insistence on the part of Israel, especially through its prophets, on the one single, singular transcendent reality, the God of Israel. The fundamental problem of Idolatry 2 is one of substitution, putting a false god in place of the true God, something which happens when human beings absolutise or divinise realities they themselves have created: money, capital, power, prestige, technology, institutions or functions…

As Gustavo Gutiérrez remarks, “[i]dolatry is, first and foremost, a behaviour, a practice”. The emphasis on the practice of idolatry is carried through in liberation theology’s readings of the New Testament epistles, both the Pauline corpus and the Johannine writings. As Marcus notes, given the background of many of the believers in the churches to whom Paul wrote, it is not altogether surprising that idolatry should be a problem. A number of very practical problems faced these new Christians, notably in terms of

24 As Joel Marcus notes, “[m]any pagans would have viewed the images of their gods as visible objects separate from the invisible divinities they represented but participating sacramentally in their numinous power”, Joel Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament”, Interpretation 60:2 (April 2006), pp.152-164, here 153. One may quibble with Marcus’ use of the term “sacramental” in this quotation, but the meaning remains clear. Wright, The Mission of God, pp.149-151, argues that Israel was well aware that pagans did not worship the products themselves, but wanted to show that in fact that was all they were doing: “the psalmists and prophets make no distinction between the images and the gods they represented – not because they did not know that such a distinction was there in the minds of pagan worshippers but because ultimately there was no such distinction in reality.” (p.151, italics in original).


28 For a more extended consideration of idolatry in the Pauline corpus, especially with regard to Ephesians 5:5 and Colossians 3:5, but ranging more widely, see Brian Rosner, Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor, Grand Rapids, Wm.Eerdmans, 2007, especially pp.130-148, where he seeks to define idolatry. His definition is perhaps more appropriate to my Idolatry 2, though elements of it are present in Idolatry 1. Rosner says (p.148) that “idolatry is an attack on God’s exclusive right to our love and trust”.

their relationships with their friends and neighbours and the possibility of eating meat.

For Richard, the New Testament both continues and radicalises the Old Testament message. He groups the texts into four sections, dealing with, respectively, idolatry as destructive of human nature, idolatry and money, idolatry and the law and idolatry and oppressive power. He contends that in each of these areas the New Testament argues against the fetishisation of the divine, the reduction of the transcendent to something immanent and therefore controllable – what I have called Idolatry 1. However, this reductionism leads also to forms of slavery, since what is immanent and tangible becomes a focus of desire, (Idolatry 2) and as such also controls.

There is a move here from two distinct forms of idolatry to two dimensions of one idolatrous act. It begins as an attempt to control the Transcendent, to reduce the power of God in order to be able to utilise it for one’s own ends. However, because he serves those in power, this reduced God is transformed into a false god, something which is presented as worthy of worship. The control and power which the immanent then exerts become destructive of human life, among other things because the idol deprives people of the Transcendent. Pablo Richard expressed something similar in a book he published in 2006. There he writes:

> Ideology is not only a theological or spiritual perversion but also an economic, social and political one, because all perversion of the meaning (sentido) of God – idolatry – implies criminality, and all criminality implies a perversion of the meaning of God.

This brief look at how liberation theology reads the Bible on idolatry has allowed us to identify two forms of idolatry, which I have named Idolatry 1 and Idolatry 2. The first speaks of an idolatry which seeks to control God, or reduce the infinite transcendence of God to one image or concept or idea. This shackled God is no longer able, or allowed, to liberate his people. Idolatry 2 concerns the idolatry which replaces the true God with some other god, and attributes to this god the powers of the transcendent God. In what follows we will see how these two forms of idolatry are present in different situations. We will also see, as we noted with the New Testament, that often it is more a question of two dimensions of one reality rather than two distinct forms. In reducing God to something less than God,

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31 Marcus, “Idolatry in the New Testament”, not written from a liberation perspective, reaches similar conclusions. He suggests that the Biblical message must be understood as a polemical attack on the surrounding world, whilst at the same pointing to problems which confront both Jews and Christians who are tempted to put their ultimate trust in the non-ultimate.

32 Richard, Força Ética..., p.133

33 These terms are not entirely synonymous. However, here I do not wish to make any great distinctions between them.
a new god is created who is put in the place of the One God. That which brings death, because it cannot bring life, is worshipped.

2.1.2 The Economy in the Light of Liberation Theology

My aim here is not to treat of the relationship between theology and economics. This is a complex area, and one in which theologians are liable to make some rather basic errors in their understanding of what economics is about. Rather, I want to show that liberation theology turned to the Biblical treatment of idolatry for a very specific reason. Pablo Richard’s list of potential idols, quoted above, begins with money and capital, namely with economic categories. Liberation theologians saw something in the systematic impoverishment of many of the inhabitants of their countries which they understood could be best described by recourse to the language of idolatry. Thus it is that we need to turn now to the at times fraught relationship between liberation theology and the economy, and especially its critique of capitalism as an idolatry.

Again at this point a terminological clarification is called for. It is not always exactly clear what liberation theology is criticising. Below I refer to a distinction between the market and capitalism, where the main target of the critique is the market, which is seen as the major impacting factor of the capitalist system on especially the poor. Perhaps in the first years of liberation theology, there was a genuine belief that there was an alternative politico-economic system available which could replace the market. So, for example, Clodovis Boff, writing very soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall could still say that, although “the fundamental option of the Church of Liberation is not a socialist option”, Christians might still choose socialism.

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34 I will discuss this further below. At this point, it is worth stating that the precise meaning of the terms “life” and “death” in liberation theology is not always clear. Jung Mo Sung, “Implicações Teológicas da Realidade Econômica”, in Antônio Abreu (ed.), “Teologia e Economia, Ídolos e Fetiches. Leitura teológica das interrelações”, Atualidade em Debate, Caderno 45 (1996), pp.21-35, has noted that liberation theology has frequently had recourse to the notion of life, but that “often the concept ‘life’ became much too abstract, losing much of the ‘dialectic’ in which life is involved...” (p.29).

35 For an interesting contribution from a British perspective, including extracts from key texts, see Malcolm Brown and Paul Ballard, The Church and Economic Life. A documentary study: 1945 to the present, Peterborough, Epworth, 2006. They refer on various occasions to liberation theology, but are more interested in the specifics of the British debate. Their discussion on the failure of theologians to understand correctly the nature of economics can be found on pp.13-16. For a good, if in general non-critical, introduction to the role of economics in liberation theology, see Valpy Fitzgerald, “The economics of liberation theology”, in Christopher Rowland (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp.218-234

36 This use of language is by no means something restricted to the relatively distant past of liberation theology. The final document of the 2007 5th Conference of CELAM at the Brazilian Marian shrine of Aparecida speaks of “the idolatry of money” as one of the causes of increasing violence in many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean (DA 78), and notes later on that “Faced with the idolatry of earthly goods, Jesus presents life in God as the supreme value” (DA 109). Although the Document notably does not refer directly to liberation theology by name, it is clear that the liberation approach has made itself felt in many of the statements. See on this João Batista Libanio, Conferências Gerais do Episcopado Latino-Americano do Rio de Janeiro a Aparecida, São Paulo, Paulus, 2007, pp.130-137.
but that they “declare themselves in favour of socialism precisely to the extent that it incarnates the cause of the poor”.37 But, as Jung Mo Sung notes, writers such as Franz Hinkelammert, Hugo Assmann or Julio de Santa Ana do not criticise the market as such, as many people mistakenly think. They are not proposing a society without mercantile relations, for this is impossible in complex modern societies. What they criticise is the absolutisation of the market and the faith that the market will always produce unintentional beneficial effects for society. From this faith comes the demand for sacrifices of human lives (as the economists put it, “social costs”) in the name of the laws of the market. The idol is the human institution elevated to the category of the absolute which demands the sacrifice of human lives.38

Other writers will also speak of neoliberalism, globalisation, or the liberal-capitalist system. This lack of terminological agreement over what specifically is seen as the idol may simply show that most of the writers are theologians rather than economists, and referring to effects whose causes they want to name. However, it perhaps adds further weight to the critique which Jung Mo Sung offers concerning the absence of the economic in liberation theology, and which I consider below.

One sometimes gets the impression that there is something the theologians do not like, even if they are not quite sure what it is. In general in what follows I will use the language chosen by the particular writers I am discussing, and I will presume that they are talking about roughly the same thing, unless they themselves particularly draw attention to differences in terminology. This may lead to occasional problems of consistency, but that seems to me both to reflect the actual situation among liberation theologians and to be methodologically justifiable, since the situation is changing39 and any one fixed view of the economy would be inaccurate anyway.

The history of the relationship between theology and the economic situation goes back to the very beginning of liberation theology, for which the economic reality of Latin America has always been extremely important. In A Theology of Liberation Gustavo Gutiérrez had already discussed the theory of dependence and its division of the world into centre and periphery, with capital, operating from the centre, exploiting the


39 I write this in the autumn of 2008, when the world financial markets are in freefall. The implications of this for Latin America will have to be judged later, but it adds a certain piquancy to the discussion.
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periphery which it needed to keep poor. Although Gutiérrez’s main emphasis was on politics, as the sub-title of his book made clear, this did not rule out economics. Still, whilst asserting the primacy of economic poverty, he actually concentrates on politics as the response to the problems caused by such poverty. This suggests that there may be some validity in those criticisms which accuse liberation theology of paying too little attention to the economy by moving too quickly to the political. The problem is not that theologians are not economists, but that they address economic realities with political solutions. In doing this, they act neither as economists nor as politicians, nor as theologians. In what follows, I wish to look at some liberation theologians who have tried to rectify this fault.

2.1.2.1 The Economic Roots of Idolatry

One of the first writers to give a detailed analysis of the economy from a liberation perspective was Franz Hinkelammert. Born in Germany in 1931, Hinkelammert grew up during the Second World War, strongly influenced among others by his father, a conservative Catholic who rejected Nazism. He studied and eventually taught economics in various universities in Germany, before accepting an invitation to go to Chile in 1963. There, as well as teaching, he became involved in politics, and had to leave the country when General Pinochet seized power in 1973. After a few years back in Germany he returned to South America in 1976, to Costa Rica, where he has lived and worked ever since, with the exception of four years in Honduras from 1978-1982. In San José he has taught economics at the University and worked full-time at the DEI, a research institute which also offers courses for lay people.

Hinkelammert moved, then, in the opposite direction to most liberation theologians. While the latter tend to be theologians who perceive the importance of economics, he is an economist who perceived the importance of theology. At this point, I will concentrate on Hinkelammert’s careful

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41 On the problems of liberation theology’s treatment of the political, see, for example, Daniel Bell, Liberation after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering, London /New York, Routledge, 2001

42 Hinkelammert makes this point in an interview with Germán Gutiérrez in José Duque, Germán Gutiérrez (eds.), Itinerários de la Razón Crítica: Homenaje a Franz Hinkelammert en sus 70 Años, San José, Costa Rica, DEI, 2001, p.32
analysis of the language of capitalism, showing how it has adopted religious terminology. The market,\(^{43}\) Hinkelammert argues, has its own metaphysics, what he calls “entrepreneurial metaphysics”. Precisely because it is a meta-physics, it needs to have its own form of transcendence, or object of devotion.\(^ {44}\) This is perhaps most famously expressed in Adam Smith’s “invisible hand”.\(^ {45}\) Hinkelammert points out that it is also present in Hobbes’ Leviathan, Hegel’s Idea, and Weberian destiny, to name but three. The object of devotion is what gives legitimacy to the rules and values of the market.\(^ {46}\)

An especially clear example of this is given in the treatment of freedom, which is why there is an inevitable clash between liberation theology and those theologians or others who seek to defend capitalism.\(^ {47}\) Confirmation of the importance of this, and of the contested ground, can be found in a work by two economists based in America, Raghuram Rajan and Luigi Zingales, entitled *Saving Capitalism from the Capitalists*. As two leading proponents of the current manifestation of the Chicago School\(^ {48}\) and the importance of a free-market, they are a good example of the sort of economics which Hinkelammert opposes. Their work is a plea for the removal of all restrictions from capital flow. They begin by saying that

> Capitalism, or more precisely, the free market system, is the most effective way to organise production and distribution that human beings have found. While free markets, particularly free financial markets, fatten people’s wallets, they have made surprisingly few inroads into their hearts and minds.\(^ {49}\)

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\(^{43}\) Capital is not of course limited to the market, though it is the market which most directly affects most of us. In the edition of *Concilium* (1997/2) entitled “Outside the Market No Salvation?”, the editors, Dietmar Mieth and Marciano Vidal, put it like this, p.vii: “We have chosen to analyse the overall problem in terms of one of the elements or factors essential to present-day capitalism, the market. This, however, is not to take ‘the market’ in its natural sense of the reality of economic life or as a category in the science of economics. We are considering it as a set within an economic system, specifically within the capitalist economic system of the end of this century, marked as it is by the globalisation of all aspects of human life”.


\(^{46}\) Hinkelammert, “The Economic Roots of Idolatry”, p.166


\(^{48}\) See below note 53 for a brief comment on the Chicago School.

\(^{49}\) Raghuram G. Rajan, Luigi Zingales, *Saving Capitalism from the Capitalists*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004, p.1. Rajan, originally from India, is Director of Research at the International Monetary Fund, and Zingales, originally from Italy, is Robert C. McCormack Professor of Entrepreneurship and Finance at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business. He has, among many other articles, also co-authored a paper on the influence of religious belief on economic growth: Luigi Guiso, Paola Sapienza, Luigi Zingales, “People’s opium? Religion and economic attitudes”,
Their book is, then, an attempt to win converts to the cause. At one point, they even acknowledge that

Markets will always create losers if they are to do their job. There is no denying that the costs of competition and technological change fall disproportionately on some. Unfortunately, it is largely their voice, rather than the desires of the silent majority or the interests of future generations, that will influence politicians.\(^{50}\)

It is precisely against this aspect of the market, its necessary creation of losers or victims,\(^{51}\) that Hinkelammert argues. He is clear that what is at stake is not simply a morally neutral choice as to which particular one of a number of equally harmless economic models is adopted. Rather, as he puts it starkly, what we are facing as a result of global threats - ecological and scientific, if market-driven - is “a general crisis of human existence”.\(^{52}\) Earlier he had made much the same point when he noted that

bourgeois thinking entails an unlimited justification of violence, and of the violation of human rights. Bourgeois thinking leads to the most unrestricted legitimising of the violation of human rights when confronted with any group capable of replacing the bourgeois society.\(^{53}\)

The direct link of bourgeois thinking and the market may need a little more explanation for Hinkelammert's claim not to fall into the category of empty rhetoric. It tends to encourage a classist view of society which no longer commands widespread support.\(^{54}\) The synonymous use of 'bourgeois' and

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\(^{50}\) Rajan, Zingales, Saving Capitalism..., p.19

\(^{51}\) Cf. Gutiérrez, The God of Life, p.55 “When we see the victims of the various fetishes we understand more clearly the meaning of idolatry and the reason why God rejects it in such a radical fashion. Idolatry brings the death of the poor; money victimises the have-nots”. The last phrase is rather over-condensed, and is perhaps an example of the unnuanced treatment of economic questions that Hinkelammert and others criticise. It is simply not true that money in itself victimises the have-nots. One could perhaps say that the power which money affords is used to victimise the have-nots, or that the possession or not of money in a world which is now largely dependent on a cash economy divides the world into those who can survive and those who cannot. Nevertheless, the basic intent of the statement is clear and, from a Latin American perspective, entirely justifiable. The point is that the way the world economy is structured means inevitably that there will be victims, and arguably even that this is a desired effect of the structures.

\(^{52}\) Franz Hinkelammert, “Globalization as Cover-Up: An Ideology to Disguise and Justify Current Wrongs”, in Jon Sobrino, Felix Wilfred (eds.), Globalization and Its Victims (= Concilium 2001/5), pp.25-34, here p.26

\(^{53}\) Hinkelammert, “The Economic Roots of Idolatry”, p.168. If this seems too fanciful, then one might consider the case of Chile, where the Pinochet regime was perhaps the most enthusiastic of all practitioners of Milton Friedman’s Chicago School approach to economics. The adherents of this school of economic thought argued for a strong monetarist policy for regulating economic activity, and for a free market approach with practically no role for government. On their activity in Chile, see Michael Reid, Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America's Soul, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007, p.180. Although Reid is a convinced apologist for the free market, even he acknowledges that some of what the so-called “Chicago boys” did was at least in policy terms wrong.

\(^{54}\) As is well-known, Gustavo Gutiérrez removed the section on class conflict from A Theology of Liberation when the revised edition was published in the late 1980s.
'capitalist' may have Marxist justification, but it does not help Hinkelammert's argument. This is perhaps better expressed by Eric Gans who has similarly argued, this time from a Girardian perspective, that the way in which the market produces *ressentiment*, which he defines as “the sentiment of exclusion from the centre where significance is generated”, will lead to violence, in Girardian terms to scapegoating.  

In his analysis of the sort of language used to talk about the market, Hinkelammert shows how capital or money or the market are often personified, and how religious language is used to talk about them. We can speak of economic miracles, of the freedom the market offers, of the way in which the market can be in good or poor health, and so on. For Hinkelammert, all of this is nothing else than what Marx meant by fetishism. In terms of our earlier discussion on the two forms or dimensions of idolatry, in this sense it is perhaps closest to Idolatry 1. The producer (or God) is not denied, but ignored. Devotion is paid not to the producer but to the product. There is, however, one new element which comes into play with “entrepreneurial metaphysics”. The idol produced by this metaphysics is, Hinkelammert suggests, unintentional as a product, since it stems not from “labour”, but from human interaction. In other words, capitalism and the market treat of human relationships. The ultimate end of these relationships is to do with profit and loss. The product, which is seen as of greatest value, is, then, the result or the end of a relationship. It is not concrete as a product but as an image or metaphor. It remains, though, a fetish or idol,

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56 See Hinkelammert, “The Economic Roots of Idolatry”, *passim*,

57 See *ibid.*, p.172 “Bourgeois entrepreneurs call the aggregation of rules whereby they form their own personalities and that of their entire society freedom”

58 As I write this in October 2008, the world financial markets are in a deeply troubled state. Reports in the media bear out Hinkelammert's point, with words like 'trust', 'hope', 'saving', 'faith', being bandied about. Interestingly, there has been less willingness to stress that the reasons for the current crisis can clearly be put down to structural sin, although phrases like 'corporate greed' have been used. The title (ironic) of a book by two leading British financial journalists has noted and availed itself of the same phenomenon: Larry Elliott, Dan Atkinson, *The Gods that Failed: How Blind Faith in Markets Has Cost us our Futures*, London, Bodley Head, 2008.


61 This will be important to bear in mind in the next chapter when we come to look at Jean-Luc Marion’s assessment of conceptual idolatry. A similar point is made by Philip Goodchild, “Capital and Kingdom: An Eschatological Ontology” in Creston Davis, John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *Theology and the*
now in terms of Idolatry 2, since it demands servitude, and is ultimately anti-human.62

As with much theology, what is really at stake here in the discussion about idols is the question of salvation. As we have seen, economic liberalism has adopted an explicitly soteriological language. As French Canadian theologians, Michel Beaudin and Jean-Marc Gauthier, have noted of their work:

We are rather exploring the possibility of a soteriological structure involving, in its initial phase, a state of “hell” or perdition, followed by a path to salvation requiring “necessary” sacrifices and culminating with a “heaven” where salvation is finally attained. This soteriological structure would bestow upon the forces of economic liberalism and political military violence a “salvific” character such that their negative impacts – direct and indirect, human and environmental – would not be given sufficient importance or, at most, would be viewed as merely “collateral damages.” 63

In summary form, we can say that the modern idol, especially in its external Idolatry 2 form, demands sacrifice, just as the Israelites saw that the gods worshipped by their neighbours demanded sacrifice. Thus, what is proposed as “saving” is in fact destructive and leads only to loss and to death. This is a key point. The real problem with the market is not just that some people will be better off and others worse off or even poor. Much more than this, the market makes promises of universal well-being and prosperity which it knows are untrue; it holds out the prospect of fullness, well aware that this is unachievable.64

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64 I return to this point below in the discussion of modern utopian thinking, which Hinkelammert criticises for precisely this reason, that it sets out as attainable what can never be had.
At this juncture, it is worth stopping to ask just who or what is responsible for this idolatry. It must be admitted that liberation theology is not always too clear about this. The general tenor of the argument appears to suggest that there is something called the market which promotes itself as a god to be worshipped. But this does not fit into either of our forms of idolatry. An idol does not choose to be an idol itself, but is invested with power in some form by those who worship it. In Idolatry 1 what is real – God – is reduced to something less than real by those who want to control God, or are afraid of the freedom offered. In Idolatry 2 something which is not God is put in the place of God and treated as if it were God. Therefore, either there is a third form of idolatry or we need to look more carefully at the way in which the idol of the market is named and explained. If the first is true, it would seem to call into question the definition of idolatry, for the idol would now have some independent reality. But idolatry is dependent on idolaters, not on idols.

This suggests to me that what is really important in Hinkelammert’s analysis is the insistence on human interaction as producing idols. Contingent by-products of this interaction (wealth, profit, economic growth) are absolutised. In other words, elements are extracted from their place within the open-ended fullness of human interaction and given determining power. This is a form of Idolatry 1. Human interaction can be a place of open-ended encounter with God, or it can be reduced to elements which we can control. This is what happens with the market.

Proof of this can perhaps be glimpsed in the often diametrically opposed views which writers can take of the benefits or costs of capitalism.Whereas liberation theologians or economists sympathetic to them such as Hinkelammert are radically critical of the market, others (often, though not exclusively, American) are equally vociferous in their support of it. So, for example, William McGurn, a leading American financial journalist, can write that “the ideas of wealth and capital… are arguably more spiritual than material”.

Given that at least some of the statistics and “facts” on which these writers base their arguments are agreed upon, the determining factor in interpreting them seems to depend on how one views the ultimate end of human interaction and what it means to be human. To take one example, McGurn

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65 Jung Mo Sung, to whom we turn later, began his university career studying for the equivalent of an MBA, before moving to theology. In an article entitled “Teologia e a Nova Ordem Econômica”, www.servicioskoionia.org/relat/173.htm (accessed 15/10/07), he briefly outlines the relationship between the two sciences, arguing that the two can be complementary rather than contradictory, and showing how neo-liberalism uses theological language. See sections 2 and 3 (Teologia e economia, and Economia e teologia). This article is available in print form in Portuguese in José Beozzo (ed.), Trabalho: Crise e Alternativas, São Paulo, Paulinas, 1995, pp.49-72, and in English in Jung Mo Sung, Desire, Market and Religion (various translators), London, SCM, 2007, pp.6-29.

mentions that it is often considered scandalous that half the world’s population live on less than $2 a day. But, he says, what about the other half who live on more than that sum? They, McGurn argues, are becoming better off, as a direct result of countries opening themselves to the market. What the research he uses argues, at least as he summarises it, is that as average incomes rise, the incomes of the poorest rise proportionately. If that is what he actually means, however, then clearly the relative poverty of the poor remains exactly as it was.

Jan Aart Scholte, author of one of the leading textbooks on globalisation, suggests that the evidence for poverty reduction as a result of the spread of global finance is at best mixed, and an Oxford economist, the late Andrew Glyn, argued that on the whole globalisation has not delivered what it promised. There is then no hard evidence to suggest that the market is really working as it claims to. Evidence against is, it is true, also lacking, or perhaps it would be best to say that what is lacking is a clear account of what constitutes “evidence” in this case.

Essentially, most of the neoliberal commentators are utilitarian. In other words, the greatest amount of happiness (a value for Bentham, it should be remembered) will accrue through the consistent application of market forces to all political and economic discussions. Some may suffer as a result, but it will be for the greater good. This seems to indicate that the real idol, when it comes to discussing the market, is actually the human being. Here both forms / dimensions of idolatry are present. By refusing to accept the possibility of freedom inherent in worship of the true God, we make ourselves into slaves. Our slavery is to the demands and needs of the market. Because it demands things of us, we assume it must be worthy of worship. But the demands and needs of the market are to do with the power of some people to control and dictate to others. Homo economicus, the businessperson, is the idol (Idolatry 2) who has replaced homo sapiens. To

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67 Ibid, p.23
69 In fact, arguably the poor are worse off. For example, in a given country, let us say that one person earns $5 a day and another $1 a day, a proportion of 5 to 1. If both double their wages – a sign of growing prosperity – the proportion is still 5 to 1, but the richer earns $10 a day and the poorer $2, so the gap between them has also doubled. McGurn may actually mean to say disproportionately, which would make more sense. Evidence for this is mixed, however. It is true that the Gini coefficient, which measures the disparity between the richest and poorest in a given society, is slowly improving in Brazil. Nevertheless, it remains very high so any amelioration of the situation is very marginal.
counteract this, it has been necessary to rethink the agent or subject of economics. Although the neoliberals would claim that, in Tim Harford’s words, “economic growth is about a better life for individuals – more choice, less fear, less toil and hardship”, there is in fact little room for individuals in capitalism. Rather than the system deciding what sort of choices the individual should be able to make, Franz Hinkelammert, for example, has turned among others to Emmanuel Levinas to suggest that it is the individuals, especially the poor, who ought to determine, or be allowed to challenge ethically, the system. In other words, it is not necessarily the “faithful” who have the right to decide what is or is not an idol, but it is in the encounter with the other, with the one who is on the margins of the system, that we are encouraged to discover whether what we worship brings life or death.

2.1.2.2 Jung Mo Sung: Restoring Economics to Liberation Theology

Among a later generation of liberation theologians, perhaps the one who has dealt most comprehensively with the relationship between economics and theology is the Korean-born Brazilian Jung Mo Sung. In one of his books on the subject, he begins by noting that this relationship is one which seemed to be of interest to early liberation theologians, but then almost entirely disappeared from among the topics being treated. His suggestion for the reason for this, namely that there is a serious methodological problem involving the division between socio-analytic and hermeneutic mediations, will be treated in more detail when I come to examine the work of Clodovis Boff in Chapter 4. However, at this juncture it will be helpful to note what he says about the move from a traditional society, which he sees as characterised by an essential harmony between the terrestrial and celestial, to a modern society.

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72 Harford, The Undercover Economist, p.254
73 This, it should be underlined, is as true for capitalism as it is for communism. If my choice is not a capitalist one, I cannot make it in a capitalist system.
75 I will examine Levinas and his appropriation in liberation theology in greater detail in the next chapter.
76 Jung Mo Sung, Economía: Tema Ausente en la Teología de la liberación, San José, Costa Rica, DEI, 1994
77 Ibid, p.12, and see also p.48
78 Ibid., pp.120-126
in which, he says, “the figure of the transcendent disappears as do metaphysical values as bases of legitimation for society, and the challenge arises of giving legitimacy to the new dynamic society…”

What is at stake, and what makes recourse to talk of idolatry justifiable here, is the delimitation of the transcendent, what I have termed Idolatry 1.

Sung is not interested in a nostalgic or illusory claim that traditional society was better, or that the metaphysical values it used to legitimate itself were in themselves either good or right. Rather, he wants to point to the loss of the transcendent, which was accompanied by an attempt to transcendentalise concepts such as progress or the interests of one particular group. He notes that, in this system, “the private interest (maximisation of profit) of one class (the capitalist) came to be identified with the general interest. Egoism is presented as the new form of altruism or love of one’s neighbour”.

For this reason, capitalism can be described as “an ideology to end all ideologies, since it did away with the problem of morality”. In this sense, it is unlike other ideologies. These do indeed have implications for morality, but they do not deny it. Instead, they present only one choice for acting rightly, removing any autonomy from human actions or any control over moral choice. There is certainly right or wrong, but what they are is dependent on their conformity with the ideology’s own determination at any given moment in time. On the other hand, for capitalism, right or wrong are simply replaced by efficiency as the supreme criterion, and the end of human life is gain, profit. This is not a moral question, but a quantitative, measurable criterion, so what is good or fair is immaterial. Good is determined by what brings profit and by nothing else.

The result of this is the privatisation of the transcendent. Religion, and reflection on it, namely theology, are made relevant only to the private life of the individual, but have no relevance to the public sphere. Thus morality

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79 Ibid., p.136
80 He speaks of a “radical transformation in the anthropological conception”, Jung Mo Sung, Economía: Tema Ausente…, p.137
81 Ibid., p.139
82 Ibid., p.139, citing Joan Robinson, Filosofia econômica, Rio de Janeiro, Zahar, 1979, p.47.
83 This is of course reminiscent of George Orwell’s use of Newspeak in 1984. See also George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”, in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Vol. 4, In Front of Your Nose 1945-1950, (eds. Sonia Orwell, Ian Angus), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, pp.156-177
84 Note on this Rajan and Zingales, Saving Capitalism from the Capitalists, p.91, discussing the fact that there is now greater wage differentiation because skills are better rewarded, as there is less protection for workers; they conclude by saying “It is a philosophical issue whether this is fair”. Sung speaks about the ideological legitimation of modern society (which he equates with capitalist society). See Economía: Tema Ausente…, pp.140-143
85 Ibid., p.149
is reduced to an increasingly limited and marginalised area of activity.\textsuperscript{86} In terms of commenting and reflecting on the public sphere, a task which in the traditional society fell to theologians, economists can now be regarded as the new theologians.\textsuperscript{87} In much the same way that theologians have often felt the need to explain the failures of Christianity, economists also have recourse to their own form of mysticism to explain the failures of capitalism.\textsuperscript{88} If the market has not yet produced what it claimed it would, then the answer is not to change the system but to place even greater faith and trust in the market.\textsuperscript{89} This will also involve continuing sacrifice, since the market needs its victims: for the rich to be rich, the poor must be kept poor, for those in work to have jobs, some must be jobless, for some companies to prosper, others must collapse. As the quotation from Raghuram and Zingales\textsuperscript{90} admitted, it is not accidental that there are winners and losers in capitalism: it is an integral part of its structure.

All of the above goes to show why liberation theologians view the market as idolatrous. Jung Mo Sung reminds us that “idolatry does not consist in a simple absolutisation of a being. The absolutisation of an object or of a person is the mediation of the absolutisation of a horizon of understanding and of a social totality”.\textsuperscript{91} The brief investigation of liberation theology’s treatment of the Bible on idolatry made clear that, for Israel, there could not be two exclusive and absolute claims to sovereignty over human life and human affairs. Yahweh was not simply a more efficient and profitable version of the divine, but was the only God. The idol of the system, (Idolatry 1), because it is “a product of human hands which points to the absolutisation of the system of domination… demands sacrifices of human lives, demands the blood of the poor and of those excluded from the system”.\textsuperscript{92} This idolatry is not only to be limited, for Sung, to capitalist systems, since Marxist systems shared the same features of modernity, “the idolatrous intention of realising the humanly impossible – the full

\textsuperscript{86} Most right-wing political parties (and a growing number of left-wing ones too) reflect this in their policies of extreme economic liberalism allied to a call for a return to something called “family values”, rarely defined, but, containing as it does two such positive words as “family” and “values”, assumed to be a good thing.

\textsuperscript{87} Jung Mo Sung, 	extit{Economia: Tema Ausente}…, p.150, citing Joan Robinson, 	extit{Filosofia econômica}, p.22

\textsuperscript{88} Jung Mo Sung, 	extit{Economia: Tema Ausente}…, p.162. As an example, see the article by McGurn, “Pulpit Economics”, and Rajan and Zingales, 	extit{Saving Capitalism from the Capitalists}. As Sung suggests, these argue that the problem is not with the system but with the non-implementation of the system.

\textsuperscript{89} Jung Mo Sung, 	extit{Economia: Tema Ausente}…, p.163

\textsuperscript{90} Rajan, Zingales, 	extit{Saving Capitalism}…, p.19

\textsuperscript{91} Jung Mo Sung, 	extit{Economia: Tema Ausente}…, p.183. Idolatry 1 and 2 are both included here. See below, Chapter 3, for the treatment of idols in Jean-Luc Marion, which is saying something similar, although from a different perspective, at least in his earlier works.

\textsuperscript{92} Jung Mo Sung, 	extit{Economia: Tema Ausente}…, p.183
satisfaction of all needs and desires – by means of a sacralised institution”.  

The idolatrous nature of capitalism is something to which Sung has returned on several occasions. In an article published in 1997, he argues that it is important to be aware of the philosophical and theological presuppositions underlying economics. He points out that capitalism – though in reality one could say the economic systems of modernity, including State Marxism – promises paradise, not as a post-mortem experience, but in the attainable future. It has its own version of original sin as the sin which lies at the base of all others, namely, attempts by governments to restrict and interfere with the pure functioning of the market.

Sacrifices are called for, all for the sake of the market, which is compared to the Kingdom of God. Because this is a form of idolatry, the only effective response, for Sung, is to engage in desacralising the market. Among other things this requires disentangling the notions of “victory” and “power” from those of “justice” and “truth”. Simply because capitalism triumphed over socialism, it does not automatically follow that it is just and true. This, Sung argues, is actually against the Christian logic that, in raising Jesus from the dead, God sides with the loser, the one who is defeated. “In discovering that Jesus the crucified has risen, we discover that the established social order and those who hold power are not just, nor do they represent the will of God”.

My earlier question about the sense in which the market can be an idol is touched on in the discussion of the idea that the market is self-organising

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93 Ibid., p.207 The sacralised institution for capitalism is the market, according to Sung. He does not say what it was for Marxist societies, but it could be the Party. As this critique of real socialism is not something to which Sung or other liberation theologians return very frequently, it is worth noting.


95 Jung Mo Sung, “Contra la teología idolátrica…”, section headed “Bases teológicos del capitalismo”. A brief look at advertisements on the streets or in newspapers or magazines will quickly make it clear how true this is.

96 Ibid, section headed “Pecado original”. Tim Harford, The Undercover Economist, pp.206-213, is an example of what Sung has in mind. Harford is an apologist for the unrestrained market since he believes it is in everyone’s best interests in the long run.

97 Jung Mo Sung, “Contra la teología idolátrica…”, section headed Mercado / Reino de Dios. He quotes a favourite example for many liberation theologians, Michel Camdessus, former head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In this article, Sung quotes from an address given by Camdessus to the National Congress of the Christian Businessmen’s Association, entitled “Market and Kingdom: A Double Belonging”.

98 Jung Mo Sung, “Contra la teología idolátrica…”, section headed ‘Contribución de la fe cristiana’.

99 Ibid. In part this is against writers such as Fukuyama, who held that the end of communism signalled the final and definitive triumph of the market. Note also Sung’s criticism of the position held by some activists, who “believe that the struggle in favour of the poor is just, and therefore triumph is assured”.

100 Ibid. This is of course not to say that this makes the socialist regimes “winners”, since, as is clear from Jung Mo Sung’s writings, they too produced victims.
Sung notes that many economists have wanted to show that the market is an organism that organises itself, what Adam Smith had called “the invisible hand”, an apt metaphor for what gives order in apparent chaos. One of the ways in which this self-organisation is described is through recourse to ideas of evolution. According to the economist Paulo Guedes, some of Darwin’s biographers have suggested that the image of the “invisible hand” creating order out of chaos may have inspired Darwin’s theory of natural selection as the driving force for the evolution of the species. In other words, what is important in the economy is that the market continues, and the firms or businesses that thrive will do so because they are best adapted to supply the demands of a given time and place.

The market as organism does not merely promote thoughts of the survival of the fittest, but also puts the market on a par with the human, also an organism. Here we have a form of Idolatry, where humanity, which is open to transcendence, reduces itself to its organic form, and worships this. Because all organisms die, there can be only generic continuity, in Darwinian terms the propagation of the species. But the generic cannot itself propagate or give life. Again, we can see that what is worshipped as life-giving, or life-promising, in fact cannot deliver – this is idolatry, in both its dimensions.

The way in which the market demands faith is demonstrated in the notion of spontaneous order involved in economics. Here, in Jung Mo Sung’s view, the Austrian-British economist Friedrich Hayek is important, especially his work on not just the division of labour but the equally fundamental division of knowledge. One individual can never hope to know all the relevant factors which go together to make the market function, which means that we have to trust in the spontaneous ordering of the market as the only possible way to enable it to function properly. Although it is true that we can never know that the market is the best form,
because we can never have sufficient knowledge to judge it objectively, negatively we know that other forms of economic ordering do not work, so we can have faith in the market. The problem, as Sung sees it, is that Hayek’s claims, for all that they have some foundation, ultimately deny, at a macro-social level, not only the viability but also the value of solidarity.

It is perhaps worth spelling out the relevance of the preceding discussion to the topic of idolatry. Sung’s work is underscored by a belief in the need for what Paul Ricoeur called a hermeneutic of suspicion. Any attempt to make the non-transcendent into something transcendent is idolatrous, in both forms or dimensions: as Xavier Alegre phrases it, “idolatry is the basic lie, since by it we exchange the living God for something dead…”.

“The invisible hand” or the self-organising market, or whatever other similar metaphor or explanatory concept is used, all suggest an inevitability. This was what misled Fukuyama at the beginning of the 1990s to suggest that the fall of the Berlin Wall presaged the final triumph of capitalism in the guise of western democracy, the end of “ideological evolution”. That there apparently was no alternative at the time was taken to mean that there could be no alternative ever, and the triumph of democratic liberalism was inevitable. This absolutisation or self-totalisation is a form of Idolatry, since it makes the contingent the ultimate. The market is clearly not non-existent, but as soon as it makes itself all, or is allowed to claim absolute power, it becomes an idol.

It would be easy to welcome or dismiss this as a simple critique of capitalism by those whom the system does not benefit, but it should be stressed that this critique does not apply only to capitalism, even if that is, for obvious socio-historical reasons, the more common target for liberation theologians. In attacking the market, however, liberation theology has not primarily sought to offer economic solutions, for that is not the task of theology. Rather, it has sought to name the idols, both as inauthentic relationships to God and as false gods, to show how economic systems are human constructs, and not somehow natural. To claim that people are by

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105 See Jung Mo Sung, “Nova Forma de Legitimação...”, III. Hayek e a fé na evolução
106 For more on the ethical dimensions of the market, as described here, see Jung Mo Sung, “Ética y sistema económico complejo”, www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/304.htm (accessed 15/10/07)
110 At least, not as theology. As we will see in Chapter 4, this is something that Clodovis Boff will repeatedly argue.
nature capitalist is historically clearly untrue, and the superiority of the market remains always untestable, since there are no sufficiently macro-level experiments to prove or disprove the claim. In this sense, at least, the market and the economists who defend it are in the same position as theologians. This may be one explanation of the rivalry between the two groups. It may also point to two more important features. The first is the need for theologians to be constantly aware of the temptations to Idolatry, of reducing God to fit their schemes. But at the same time, and to the extent that this happens, it means that theologians are in a particularly strong position to detect forms of idolatry elsewhere, since it is a temptation they are constantly faced with.

Sung and Hinkelammert, and others who come from the DEI school, have been tireless in their critique of the current economic situation. They have refused to accept the inevitability of a global capitalism that they argue seeks victims on the periphery so that the centre may be rich. As both have training in economics, theirs are important voices. Nevertheless, the suspicion which they turn towards capitalism and its proponents should also not be ignored when discussing their own work. Does the demonisation of capitalism not in fact produce its own form of idolatry? Various writers have noted how the poor tend to demonise their problems, something which the Pentecostal churches have been particularly successful in giving space to. But the danger of demonisation is that one starts to be so impressed by the demon's power that practically it becomes the centre of one's attention and even worship. I do not want to say that this is what actually happens with Sung and Hinkelammert, but as it is clearly a risk, what methodological criteria are present to prevent it happening?

2.2 Utopias good and bad

In order for idols to have any power, they must hold out some sort of promise. One way of describing this promise is by use of the term “utopia”. Unfortunately, this same word is also used to talk about the historically realisable dimension of the eschatological promise made manifest in Christ. To give just one example of each: Rajan and Zingales, in their book calling for greater openness of financial markets, claim that “we have come closer

111 Marx may have been wrong about the inevitability of socialism, but his analysis of the move from barter to slavery to feudalism to capitalism demonstrates that capitalism, at least in the global sense in which we understand it today, is relatively recent, beginning with the re-urbanisation of Europe in the Middle Ages.


113 See the discussion in Chapter 1.2.1
to the utopia of finance for all”.

On the other hand, Jon Sobrino says “the Kingdom of God is a utopia that answers the age-old hope of a people in the midst of historical calamities; it is, then, what is good and wholly good”.

Any talk about the Transcendent, and we have seen that idolatry is really about false claims to be the Transcendent, carries with it some promise of transcendence. In this section I will examine the utopias offered on the one side by liberation theologians and on the other by the idols, or perhaps more accurately by the idolaters, those who create and maintain the power of the idols.

2.2.1 The utopia of human solidarity in the Bible

In my discussion of Jung Mo Sung above, I briefly referred to his claim that Hayek’s spontaneous ordering of the economy would lead to a loss of human solidarity. The link to idolatry, in whatever form, is important. Only what is truly one, or, for Christians, triune, can enable unity and solidarity. Because idols are ultimately non-existent, they will always cause fragmentation and disunity. It is precisely solidarity which liberation theologians have proposed as an alternative reading to neo-liberal globalisation. Here two essays from an issue of Concilium from late 2001 are relevant. José Luis Sicre offers a reading of the Biblical presentation of the utopia of humankind. Starting with a discussion of Genesis, he argues that it can be read as the story of God’s initial plan being spoilt and revised. There is something like a reverse utopia, where the beginning of the story presumes a utopian world of harmony, among people and between humanity and God. This world is gradually destroyed.

Nevertheless, God’s continuous response is to try to rectify human relationships, interpersonal, but also between nations. For all that the reality of Israel is marked more by conflict than harmony, the prophets can occasionally remind us of the vision of God’s initial plan. However, even these occasional utopic visions disappear with the coming of apocalyptic.

As we will see later, Franz Hinkelammert will equate utopic reason and the apocalyptic, for both of them lead to fragmentation and death.

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114 Rajan and Zingales, Saving Capitalism from the Capitalists, pp.66-67. They are referring among other things to the development of such institutions as the Grameen Bank developed to provide micro-loans to Bangladeshi villagers by Muhammad Yunus, whose efforts were interestingly rewarded in 2006 with the Nobel Peace Prize rather than the equivalent for Economics.

115 Jon Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, p.72

116 Cf., for example, Leonardo Boff, Holy Trinity, Perfect Community, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 2000


118 He does not deal with the complex theological issues regarding the nature and sovereignty of God which such a reading raises.

119 Sicre, “The Utopia of the Human Family...”, p.90

120 Ibid., p.94, referring especially to Isaiah 2:1-4 (=Micah 4:1-3) and Isaiah 19:24-25

121 See below pp.138-144.
However, for Sicre, Jesus manages to transform the pessimism of the apocalyptic. In other words, though the world is not perfect, though the Kingdom is also and always still to come, nevertheless in the following of Christ we can become part of “a humankind that reflects, even if palely, the splendour of God’s initial plan.” Sicre does not spell out the implications of his brief article, but we might say that in “the struggle of the gods” between the market and the Kingdom, the solidarity of humanity, however tenuous or difficult that might be, is what the Kingdom offers against the globalising appeal of the market. In the same volume of *Concilium* José Ignacio González Faus, a Catalan Jesuit who has taught frequently in Latin America, develops this idea more explicitly. He begins by reminding us of the signal importance for the Jewish and Christian traditions of humanity being formed in the image and likeness of God, and goes on to argue that in Jesus we are shown how someone deeply rooted in their Jewish identity is also able to go beyond the particularity of that identity to embrace the other. This other cannot be defined, as González Faus admits. Nevertheless, certain contemporary understandings of humanity - the figure of “homo consumptor”, the technological imperative, the need for victims, and the excusing of violence as self-defence – can be rejected. González Faus argues that this will only happen through that category of ‘encounter’ and communion, the image of the Triune God, in whom there is no priority of one over the others, nor of the others over the one, but what is primary is full communion. This is a decisive feature for a humanity that can be made truly global.

In other words, the response to the idolising of the human by making human beings to be what they are not, refusing their openness to the Transcendent, is the encounter with the other in solidarity. This will be important later on when we turn to the role of the poor as other in enabling liberation theology to avoid its own idolatrous temptations.

### 2.2.2 J.B. Libanio: Utopia and Eschatological Hope

The two-volume collection *Mysterium Liberationis*, which can be regarded as the *Summa* of the first generation or so of liberation theologians,

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122 Sicre, “The Utopia of the Human Family…”, p.95

123 Ibid., p.96

124 The title in Spanish – *La Lucha de los dioses* – of Richard et al., *The Idols of Death and the God of Life*

125 José Ignacio González Faus, “The Utopia of the Human Family: The Universalisation of the Truly Human as Real Globalisation”, in Sobrino, Wilfred (eds), *Globalization and its Victims*, *Concilium* 2001/5, pp.97-104

126 Ibid., pp.97-98

127 Ibid., pp.100-102

128 Ibid., p.104
contains a contribution on utopia by João Batista Libanio, a Brazilian Jesuit. Its importance for my argument lies in the way in which he introduces a mechanism for preventing utopias from becoming idolatrous, even if that is not precisely his language. Libanio spends some time discussing the word “utopia”. It is, he says, capable of a double etymology, *ouk-topos* and *eu-topos*, that is, no place and good place. “It [utopia] corrects the unreal dimension (*ouk-topos*) with the desired real (*eu-topos*), thus constituting the ultimate semantic root of the term in its intentional ambiguity of real/unreal”. Utopias always offer both a glimpse of a possibility, and implicitly a criticism of the actual. There is, for Libanio, a paradox in contemporary society. People have spoken of the end of utopia. This is seen in the rejection of the great utopian narratives of the twentieth century. It is also seen in those places where people consider that their needs have already been adequately met, so they do not need utopias. Libanio links this to a decline in faith in the resurrection, since there is no need to suspend post-mortem the rewards of life. On the other hand, he notes that especially in Latin America there has been a growth in utopian language, particularly talk of liberation. “Liberation… is the great utopia. And given that it has been born, germinated and grown in Christian soil, it is intimately linked with Christian eschatological hope. It implies, in the final analysis, faith in the resurrection, and thus constitutes an intimately interlinked trilogy”. However, for Libanio, utopia is differentiated from eschatological hope by being intra-historical, whilst eschatological hope is a theological quality. Utopia points to what could be here and now, whilst hope reminds us that

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130 In Libanio, *Utopia e Esperança cristã*, he refers to the danger of utopias becoming totalitarian (see for example, pp.115-118, The Totalitarian Dynamism of Utopia). The language of totalitarianism is clearly related to that of idolatry.

131 Libanio, “Esperanza, utopia…”, p.499. Thus, he goes on to say, utopia is “a critique of the existing present and proposal of what should exist”.

132 Although the text is now twenty years old, it would seem reasonable to use the present tense, since much of what Libanio says remains relevant.

133 Libanio borrows this phrase from Marcuse, who gave a lecture with this title in Berlin in 1967.

134 In a later article, Libanio returns to the negative aspects of this. See João Batista Libanio, “Ideologia da Morte da Ideologia”, in VV.AA, *A Esperança dos Pobres Vive: Coletânea em homenagem aos 80 anos de José Comblin*, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2003, pp.533-545. The claim that ideology has ended is really the obverse of the claim about the death of utopias, and is equally damaging. As Libanio concludes: “the death of ideology is an illusion. As long as there are people and groups who defend their interests at the cost of others, ideology will exist. Its aim is to make universal what is particular, so that a few can dominate many”. (pp.544-545)

135 See Libanio, “Esperanza, utopia…”, p.496 He does not address this point, but it may be that interest / belief in reincarnation rather than resurrection may support what he says, since reincarnation is generally understood in terms of reward / punishment (though principally reward for self and punishment for others in most western understandings, it should be said). It is the desire for the same, but more and better.

136 Libanio, “Esperanza, utopia…”, p.497
even that is not everything. In this sense, we could say that eschatological hope is what prevents utopia becoming idolatrous.\footnote{See Libanio, “Esperanza, utopia...”, p.502} There is a historic hope,\footnote{Ibid., p.498} but that is not enough, for it is limited to what could be materially realised. In the end, although Libanio does not say this, there would be idolatry in its internal form (Idolatry 1), since the power of the Transcendent would be reduced to what we humans can control and organise. But if all our hope is only historic hope, then it is self-defeating.\footnote{This is perhaps the force of Agenor Brighenti’s critique. He argues that “utopia as eutopia is a myth. And as the myth is subject to a close interdependence with the society which elaborates it, it almost always ends up justifying the established order”. See Agenor Brighenti, “Esperança e Utopia: Estatuto Epistemológico e Formas de Relação”, in VV.AA., A Esperança dos Pobres Vive, pp.365-376, here p.368.} This is one of the underlying points of Paul’s treatment of the resurrection in 1Cor 15. If our hope is not eschatological, transcendent, we are the most hopeless people of all.

For Libanio, to be human is to be utopian,\footnote{Libanio, “Esperanza, utopia…”, p.501} to be human is to be always called to be more,\footnote{As a good Jesuit, Libanio is, as many other liberation theologians, deeply influenced by the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, and the desire for the magis, for what is “to the greater glory of God”.} it is to be in movement, to be dynamic.\footnote{See on this also Roger Burggraeve, “Humans Created and Called in the Image of God”, in Burggraeve et al, Desirable God?, pp.61-93, here pp.68-73, where he argues that the fact that humankind is created in the image and likeness of God means that we must have a dynamic understanding of God.} But, of course, such an existential reading of human life is not always experienced in practice, and Libanio makes use of the two forms of the verb “to be” in Portuguese and Spanish\footnote{Both languages have the form “ser”, referring to permanent states or matters of long-term identity, and “estar”, which deals with impermanent states: as an example, “I am English”, a permanent state, whether I like it or not, as compared to “I am in my office”, which I hope will not be permanent!} to express this fact. There is the fundamental being, this dynamic utopian individual, (“su ser”) and then there is the concrete existence (“su estar concreto”) within the complex and often negative reality of Latin America. The tension between what people know themselves to be and the sort of lives they are forced to lead brings about the desire for liberation.

This desire for liberation has obvious political implications. Utopias have both been proffered and attacked by politicians. Marxists have seen utopias as forms of alienation\footnote{Libanio, “Esperanza, utopia…”, p.503. Marx, on some readings at least, draws also on the Romantic utopian traditions of his youth in Germany.} because they serve to maintain the status quo and others have noted how utopias have been seized and turned into ideologies.\footnote{We turn to this shortly, for this is one of the critiques made by Franz Hinkelammert, especially concerning the utopia promised by the market.} For all the weight of these critiques, Libanio still wants to argue that utopia is necessary, as the driving force for change and the transformation of history. There is something analogous to the Ontological
Argument here. We can think of a better society, and we can think of a better society that actually exists, so it is our task to make sure that it does exist.\(^{146}\)

The fact that utopian ideas can be abused does not make them in themselves bad, though it does point to the need for care in their use.\(^{147}\)

What is really important, then, about utopias is that they refuse to believe that things are as they are permanently and that nothing can be done about it. In that sense they retain the ability to be iconic, to look beyond the dominating actual towards a new possibility.\(^{148}\) This point needs to be noted. Utopias remain unrealised, because to the extent that they are realised, they cease to be utopic. It is precisely through their open-endedness that they retain the power to draw people on, to allow them to work for and believe in the possibility of transformation.

The need for utopia to be allied with eschatological hope, thus the need to retain a form of transcendence which prevents the idolisation of any form of utopia, is also seen by Libanio as present in the biblical accounts of utopia.\(^{149}\) The centrality of eschatological hope means that, in contrast to Sobrino, he says that

\[\text{… the Kingdom of God is not a utopia, because its true, definitive, final place will be that of victory over sin and death. If historically it has been a generative source of utopias which have reduced it to a purely terrestrial condition, that does not mean that it ceases to be the major critical instance of all utopias, including the Church itself, which is a sacrament of it.}^{150}\]

In other words, the Kingdom is irreducible to something other than itself. Thus, it always critiques any attempt to incarnate it fully, to say “This is the Kingdom of God on earth”. In this sense, the Kingdom,\(^{151}\) or its proclamation, represents the prophetic impulse to denounce all forms of idolatry which Ignacio Ellacuría links to utopia.\(^{152}\)

\[^{146}\text{I do not want to overstretch the comparison with the Ontological Argument, though some of the problems with utopia may not be altogether different to those with Anselm. On this see one of Anselm's most careful contemporary commentators, Brian Davies, “Anselm and the ontological argument”, in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (eds.), The Cambridge Companion to Anselm, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.157-178}\]

\[^{147}\text{Libanio, “Esperanza, utopía…”, p.504}\]

\[^{148}\text{Again, I am drawing here on Marion, see below Chapter 3.}\]

\[^{149}\text{As he says, “Esperanza, utopía…”, p. 505, clearly the actual term is not biblical, but that does not mean that we cannot legitimately speak of utopian passages in the Bible. See similarly Sicre, “The Utopia of the Human Family in the Biblical Tradition”, p.89}\]

\[^{150}\text{Libanio, “Esperanza, utopía…”, p.508}\]

\[^{151}\text{Jesus Pelaez has considered the multiple meanings of basileia and their relationship to utopia in some detail in his article “El núcleo central de la utopía del Reino: la liberación de los pobres en el contexto de hoy” Exodo 66 (Diciembre 2002), pp.19-28}\]

\[^{152}\text{Ignacio Ellacuría, “Utopía y profetismo”, in Ellacuría, Sobrino (eds.), Mysterium Liberationis vol.1, pp.393-442. “By prophecy is understood here the critical contrast between the proclamation of the kingdom of God and a given historical situation”, p.396}\]
2.2.3 Ignacio Ellacuría: The Need to Realise Utopias

Whereas Libanio is at pains to stress the non-finality of any utopian vision, Ellacuría wishes to emphasise that utopias need to have some degree of realism, some degree of effectiveness. He does not disagree with Libanio\footnote{See, Ellacuría, “Utopía y profetismo”, p.397, “even though the utopia may not be fully realisable in history, as is the case with the Christian utopia…”. However, the sentence finishes, “it [the utopia] does not for all that cease to be effective”.} but rather emphasises that utopias are prone to be idolatrous to the extent that they offer something that is clearly unrealisable. An example might help to explain the difference between a degree of realism and the clearly unrealisable. To a homeless person, it may be imaginable that they would one day be able to build a small hut. That is a potentially realisable utopia, a better world that could come about. However, to tell the same person that, without any extra money or help, they can build a twenty-room villa in which they can live, is also utopian, but unrealisable. As such it will destroy any hope, eschatological or historic. Then utopias will indeed become “the opium of the people”, aids to pacification and to acceptance of the status quo rather than challenges to change and transformation. In order for utopia to function, according to Ellacuría, there needs to be the simultaneous presence of the Transcendent and the categorical, something which is only possible through the action of the Spirit in history.\footnote{Ellacuría, “Utopía y profetismo”, p.399} This is really one way of acknowledging the centrality of the incarnation,\footnote{It is probably not irrelevant that most of the Jesuits among the first generation of liberation theologians studied with Karl Rahner at some point in their lives, or were at least heavily influenced by his theology.} the unity of the utterly Transcendent and the categorical, or contingent.

This emphasis on the unity of the material and transcendent is one reason why, with Libanio, Ellacuría sees the need for utopia to be both critical of what is and promissory of what is to come. This is because the material reality of the present can always be transcended, but there is, at least in this life, always the need for some other material reality to take its place. Human beings do not exist non-materially. This can be seen in the prophets. It is true that the primary task of prophecy, especially clear in the Old Testament, is to denounce.\footnote{See Ellacuría, “Utopía y profetismo”, pp.402-409. He singles out as especially necessary denunciations of international relations, of the capitalist system and the institutional church.} However, every denunciation carries at least an implicit promise, “the ‘no’ of prophecy… generates the ‘yes’ of utopia”.\footnote{Ibid., p.409} The utopia underlying the rejection of the status quo emphasises the possibility of a transformed humanity.

The example of this which Ellacuría gives may help clarify what is being claimed here. As we saw when looking at the treatment of the economy by liberation theologians, there is a sense in which they have had to accept the reality of globalisation, and thus try to respond with what might be termed...
a counter-globalisation. The general charge against globalisation is that, perhaps paradoxically, it is too particularist, since it concentrates wealth and power in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Thus what is needed is a project which will be truly global, changing for the better the lives of the many rather than the few.\textsuperscript{158}

An integral part of this project is the announcing of the new humanity, the new earth and the new heaven.\textsuperscript{159} For Ellacuría the old humanity is characterised by domination and oppression. To overcome it, he draws on the option for the poor, as indicating the possibility of a humanity which does not seek only riches, but seeks to live in solidarity, and thus to overcome poverty.\textsuperscript{160} I will return to this point later in the chapter, but it should be noted that the poor are here given a key role in the construction and realisation of utopias. The new human being should be at once contemplative and active, one who listens to and does the word.\textsuperscript{161}

The new earth should see the installation of new orders in politics, economics, society and culture.\textsuperscript{162} Ellacuría struggles in this essay, as in much of his work, to make sure that this utopia remains realisable. Underlying this is the question as to whether idolatry in whatever form or dimension is bound to happen. Ellacuría is slightly hampered in his treatment by what seems to be a Hegelian understanding of history\textsuperscript{163} as inevitable progress. At the same time, recognising that the progress does not seem to be heading in the right direction, he wants to affirm that change is possible, and human solidarity with the poor can be an effective means of bringing about a new world. This tension between the inevitability of progress and the need to act for change tends to mean that he permanently has to give with one hand and take with another, but the underlying thrust remains.\textsuperscript{164} In as far as history is an inevitable procession, everything that

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., pp.409-410. Here we can remember the Marcan pollion (Mark 10:45, 14.24), the “for many” which points to the universalisation of the salvific activity of Christ.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., pp.419 ff. See Ephesians 2:15, Revelation 21:1, the Biblical expressions which Ellacuría deliberately uses here.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., p.422


\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., pp.424ff.

\textsuperscript{163} See G.W.F Hegel, \textit{Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte} (Sämtliche Werke II), Stuttgart, Fr. Frommann Verlag, 1961

\textsuperscript{164} Ellacuría was a tireless worker for peace and transformation amidst the ruinous conflict of the civil war in El Salvador, and this very devotion to the cause of peace cost him and his companions their lives, killed in a brutal fashion by allies of the government. Thus, he was not given the luxury of rethinking and re-assessing his positions, something which most of the other theologians I am dealing with have enjoyed and used. To that extent, his writing is particularly historically situated and must be read against that background. Nevertheless, the problems I draw attention to here are precisely caused by his starting point and his struggle to combine his philosophical and theological beliefs into a coherent whole.
happens, including idolatry, has its place in the eventual triumph of the Absolute Spirit (even if that is God). Idolatry is then inevitable. However, Ellacuría also wants to reject the apparent determinism of this Hegelian approach, and to assert the transformative power of the Holy Spirit at work in creation. For this reason, he believes that change is possible. Because the utopian needs a specific form, Ellacuría argues that a socialist order would be better for the new humanity than a capitalist one, even if he also acknowledges that “the theology of liberation has been on occasions ingenuous and tolerant when faced with the theory and praxis of Marxism, owing to a certain inferiority complex towards the commitment of the revolutionaries”.

Thus, he is not calling for the implementation of Marxist regimes. The critique of private capitalism applies also to state capitalism, that is, the then economic system of the Marxist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. A utopia needs to be in some sense realisable or at least to offer steps which lead in the direction of an always incomplete realisation, so some choices have to be made. The need then remains for utopias to be self-critical, or to allow themselves to be criticised by the transcendent in the form of eschatological hope, as Libanio suggested. As well as the new humanity and the new earth there is a new heaven, which Ellacuría sees as the presence of God amongst us in a new way.

This heaven is not a question of “the final place of the risen in grace, but of heaven present in history”. Note that Ellacuría seems here to equate heaven with the utopic, at least as Libanio portrays it. Heaven, for him, reflects the fact that, as Gustavo Gutiérrez has noted, “salvation is an intrahistorical reality”. Ellacuría understands this primarily in terms of the church, as the visible presence – sacrament, we might say – of Christ on earth. The church needs to become the church of the poor, and in this sense it will be a sign of the possibility and the presence of a new heaven. Thus, for Ellacuría, the utopic has a central role in the vision of liberation theology. Even if he is aware of the danger of utopias turning into idols, he is in fact less attentive to this fact than Libanio, which suggests that we need to read the two contributions in conjunction.

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165 Ellacuría, “Utopía y profetismo”, p.431
166 Ibid., pp.439 ff.
167 Ibid., p.439
168 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, p.86
169 Ellacuría touches on this, “Utopía y profetismo”, p.440, arguing that this is true, but that what is needed is a richer understanding of sacramentality, one which gives due scope to the transforming action of the Spirit.
170 Ibid., pp.441-442
171 At least human utopias, as his critique of Marxism suggests. Whether he sees the type of prophetic utopianism he speaks of as susceptible to idolatry is not clear, but it seems that he does not. He does not treat this issue, at any rate.
When it is iconic, in the sense I am using the term in this work, then a utopian vision opens up a way to transcendence and to the Transcendent. It allows us to question the totalities of the present, the apparent inevitability or necessity of things being as they are. For writers such as Ellacuría this was no merely theoretical discussion. The question of an alternative future for El Salvador, without death squads, was one to which he devoted much attention, and which cost him his life. The vision of a realisable other world, based on the values of the Kingdom, as he understood them, was an important motivating factor in all that he did. However, such visions can always become idolatrous, if they too become a form of totality, of offering not new possibilities but the only way. Utopias which challenge the present require, themselves, to have mechanisms which allow them to be questioned in turn.

2.2.4 Utopic Reason and its Critique
As an example of how utopias, or more precisely utopian thinking can be idolatrous, we can return to Franz Hinkelammert and Jung Mo Sung. The idolatry in question is both Idolatry 1 and Idolatry 2, as a double dimension of a single act. Something which is in fact transcendent and unrealisable is portrayed as eminently achievable, and thus as material. This limits it and means that it cannot liberate, but leaves people enslaved to an ideal which is always beyond their capacity. Nevertheless, its very materiality and presence leads to its being worshipped and trusted as able to transform life immediately.

Franz Hinkelammert’s main treatment of the theme is found in a book he wrote in the early 1980s, but I will use here his reflections on the book ten years later in an interview with Norbert Arntz on the occasion of the book’s appearance in German. This has the advantage of offering Hinkelammert’s own summary of the book’s major themes, as well as subsequent reflections, especially after the collapse of communism in Europe. It is important to note that what Hinkelammert is criticising is not utopias as such but precisely the utopian reason which he regards as being one of the chief features of modernity.

172 The examples of this throughout history are numerous. At their least damaging, many reform movements, for example, end up being exclusivist and thus divisive – some of the early Anabaptists. At their worst, they lead to persecution and death, where a supposed utopian inclusivism can lead to killing those who do not want to be included. Possible examples of this would include Augustine’s treatment of the Donatists, or the mutual killings of Catholics and Reformers in the 16th century.

173 The book is Franz Hinkelammert, Crítica a la razón utópica, San José, DEI, 1984. The interview “Utopismos y utopías de la modernidad: Acerca de la Crítica a la razón utópica. Entrevista de Norbert Arntz” is in José Duque (ed.), Itinerarios de la razón crítica, pp.61-78

174 A very similar argument is made in a fascinating book by John Gray, Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia, London, Penguin, 2008. Gray is Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics. His book looks at how modernity and its offspring (including Nazism and Marxism) have been fundamentally influenced by Christian roots which have led to the development of
Thus, he says, he came to see in his early work in Germany in the 1950s that there was a close relationship between the Soviet utopia and that of capitalism: “both identified themselves with a technical-economic progress projected towards the infinite”. Neither of the two sides, who assumed they were radically different, noticed either that their positions were similar, or that they were in fact dealing with utopias. The Soviets did not (at least not publicly) suggest that the dream of a workers’ paradise was unattainable, nor did the capitalists imagine that the promise of perfect ‘freedom’ for all would never be realised. The problem with this, Hinkelammert came to see, lies

in the fact that the thinking of modernity has utopias as its central root, that the utopias are not something from outside, as an invasion of the apocalyptic in the beautiful and transparent reality, but that reality itself is completely apocalyptic, is utopian. In other words, as the title of the book suggests, the problem is not with utopias per se but with a way of thinking, a way of understanding and thus re-presenting the world which is at heart utopian and apocalyptic. The link is important. Apocalyptic is essentially negative in this context, the image of destruction, of final terror and catastrophe. It is, then, life-denying. In this sense it is fundamentally idolatrous, for it involves claiming that what is not in fact is, or at least that what is not except in a secondary and derivative sense exists in a primary and foundational or originary way. Thus it is that the writers of modernity (as two examples he cites Adam Smith and Karl Marx) introduce into their theories, albeit unwittingly, an expression of the utopic. Further examples can be seen, he suggests, in the development of the idea of the “perfect market” in the capitalist sphere or “perfect planning” in the Soviet sphere. Human interaction, as we saw above, is capable of transcendence, so this is also an example of Idolatry 1, because the transcendent is now reduced to one particular and controllable

unrealisable utopias. Gray is presumably unaware of Hinkelammert, but the two coincide at least in the basic premise of their argument.

175 Hinkelammert, “Entrevista de Norbert Arntz”, p.63. See Goodchild, “Capital and Kingdom: An Eschatological Ontology” for a critique of capitalism which uses different language, but has a similar aim. Goodchild outlines “the eschatological illusion particular to capitalism”, (p.144) and the way in which a Christian eschatological vision always challenges the intention to finality present in capitalism.

176 Hinkelammert, “Entrevista de Norbert Arntz”, p.66. Hinkelammert argues from a different perspective, but here one might note the criticisms of Slavoj Žižek from a Lacanian position, where the real as perceived, the Symbolic, is precisely a construct.

177 One might call this dystopia, which, in the arts certainly, has been the dominant form of utopianism in the twentieth century. It is also worth noting here that Hinkelammert argues more as a social scientist than a biblical scholar. Latin American biblical scholars would generally see the apocalyptic as a form of resistance.

178 I draw attention to this point with reference to my discussion in Chapter 4 on Clodovis Boff's reading of recent developments in liberation theology, where he suggests that it has precisely confused the secondary for the primary or originary: that is to say, the poor have taken the place of God.

form of existence. But to the extent that human interaction is sacrificed or at least modelled on achieving something which does not exist – perfect market, perfect planning, or perfect anything else – these latter become idols, false gods (Idolatry 2).

The problem with this, as he sees it, is that a utopia is created and proposed as a perfection towards which we must move. But because it is not named as a utopia but a logical consequence of the way things are, we are in no position to question this progress, and everything serves as a means to achieving this end. If we were prepared to admit that the basis for modern social models such as capitalism or communism was utopic, then we would recognise them as actually unattainable. But such models themselves do not wish to be unveiled as utopian, since this would deny them the legitimacy they crave. Thus, they persecute their critics as “enemies of the good”. The problem with these movements is that they seek to materialise what is at best an abstraction, but more, something which does not exist, nor can it ever exist.

In order to overcome this abstraction and this denial of the value of the actual human, it is necessary, in Hinkelammert’s view, to return to the other, or as he puts it, in Levinasian terms, “And real life is, ultimately, always the life of the other, which is the condition of my own life”. Yet he recognises that even the recourse to the other can itself turn into a form of utopia. In order to avoid this, he argues that the importance of the other can never be reduced to a concept, which would result in the formulation of another type of perfect society in which all would be subject to the command of the other. What is needed is a utopian horizon, a ground against which the other can be encountered as other.

It is in part for this reason that Hinkelammert, whilst criticising the utopian reason of modernity, nevertheless also insists that part of the problem of modernity has been its anti-utopianism. As he remarks in his interview with Arntz,

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180 Ibid., p.68
181 Or ideologies. However, I wish to avoid using the word “ideology” as much as possible until my discussion of it below.
182 As Hinkelammert points out, this brings with it the paradox that empirical sciences end up being divorced from reality. This is because such science “promises solutions, quantitatively calculable, which replace the necessary discussion of reality as the reality of the life of a human being, which always includes nature. It is an abstraction which in the name of the empirical sciences substitutes reality. And this abstraction is called empirical”. Hinkelammert, “Entrevista de Norbert Arntz”, p.69. Another way of looking at this is as a form of idolatry, a reduction of the infinite variety of existence to the measurable.
183 Ibid., p.70 As we have seen earlier, Hinkelammert has worked with the ideas of Levinas, and there is no reason to assume that he does not have Levinas at the back of his mind here.
184 See Hinkelammert, “Entrevista de Norbert Arntz”, pp.70-71. I am extrapolating from his ideas here, though I think that what I say is in fundamental accord with what he has to say.
The thesis of the end of utopia is a thesis of utopians; of utopians who seek to pass themselves off as total realists, and thus contribute to the destructive process which is to be found in full flow today.\textsuperscript{185}

Hinkelammert develops this idea of anti-utopianism further elsewhere. This may perhaps also be termed a dystopia, since what is at stake is an inversion of the utopian, what he terms an anti-corporal universalism.\textsuperscript{186} Corporal universalism is based on love of one’s neighbour. However, as soon as this becomes an absolute law, even the absolute law, it runs the risk of becoming idolatrous, of preventing the transcendent from being liberating by reducing it to a particular mode of behaviour.\textsuperscript{187} For Hinkelammert, such absolutisation of the law of love of one’s neighbour is bound to end up as an expression of anti-corporal universalism, denying the equality of human beings.

He sees Nietzsche as the founding impulse for these anti-utopian ideals. At the heart of this is Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God. By accepting this, the total destruction of humanism (corporal universalism, the love of each for the other) is enabled: “the motto is: recover the human by the destruction of humanism. By resisting, the oppressed are now seen as those who rise up against the human”.\textsuperscript{188} This vision of humanity on the road to self-destruction\textsuperscript{189} is clearly dystopic, in the sense that such works as George Orwell’s 1984 are. It is also a form of idolatry, indeed a supreme form of idolatry, where what brings death is not only accepted but promoted.

Thus, the systemic utopias such as capitalism or communism are, as Hinkelammert sees them, secularised theologies and thus they fail.\textsuperscript{190} In other words, they have claimed to talk about God, but they have no god to talk about, and their discourse will collapse. In this sense they are therefore idolatrous.\textsuperscript{191} There are at least two theological responses to this. One is what Hinkelammert terms fundamentalism, in its American and Vatican forms. Both these

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., p.72
\textsuperscript{186} Franz Hinkelammert, “Paradigmas e Metamorfoses do Sacrificio de Vidas Humanas”, in Hugo Assmann (ed.), René Girard com teólogos da libertação, pp.160-185, see here pp.175-176
\textsuperscript{187} Cf., ibid., p.174
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., pp. 180-184, quotation from p.184. See on this also, Hinkelammert, “Entrevista de Norbert Arntz”, pp.72-73
\textsuperscript{189} Hinkelammert, “Paradigmas e Metamorfoses…”, p.184
\textsuperscript{190} Hinkelammert, “Entrevista con Norbert Arntz”, p.73
\end{footnotesize}
are theologies of catastrophe, because they see that the conservative utopia in reality leads to apocalyptic catastrophe, and as fundamentalists they glory in apocalyptic catastrophe.

The other response would be a vision of the possibility of the implementation of the Kingdom. As Hinkelammert acknowledges, there is always a tendency to absolutisation when talking about the Kingdom, and thus we could say to idolatry. He suggests, though, that the very fact that the Kingdom contains an element of life after death ("la vida más allá de la muerte") militates against this. This is analogous to Libanio’s point about the presence of eschatological hope as an open-ended questioning of all utopic visions and plans.

One task of theology, which liberation theology has taken on board in a special way, is to offer resistance to the utopianism of the market by appealing to the transforming power inherent in the Kingdom of God. Of crucial importance here is the fact that the Kingdom cannot be realised fully in history. There is always a “more”, a beyond which cannot be reduced to the here and now. In part the market has attempted to destroy the power of resistance and criticism which this understanding of the Kingdom offers. The task of liberation theology is, then, to point out how the market has essentially made the rational irrational. This is one of the chief contributions of Hinkelammert’s critique of utopian reason, namely, that in fact it is irrational, because it is ultimately self-defeating. The logic of the market demands that reason consists in totally giving oneself over to the laws of the market, and that in doing so total happiness and perfection will be found. Resistance to the market or criticism of it then become irrational. But, Hinkelammert argues, following the laws of the market in this uncritical way means that the market cannot avoid its own destruction, or at least the destruction of humanity and nature, on which the laws depend.

2.2.5 The inadequacies of liberation theology treatments of utopia
Liberation theology offers a place from which a critique of the irrationality of the market can occur. Jung Mo Sung, working with ideas taken from

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192 For Hinkelammert, neo-liberalism and Stalinism are both forms of conservative utopia, since they are organised on the same underlying principles.
193 Hinkelammert, “Entrevista con Norbert Arntz”, p.73
194 Ibid., p.74
196 See Hinkelammert, “Entrevista con Norbert Arntz”, pp.74-75. This is not quite a Marxist critique of the market or of capitalism, since the problem is external to the actual market. Essentially it says that a market which leads to a situation where there is nothing to sell and no one to buy it – the result of the destruction of nature and humanity – would end up having destroyed itself de facto.
Hinkelammert, has tried to demonstrate this. In the work we have already examined concerning the absence of the economy in liberation theology, he turns to Hinkelammert's critique of utopian reason. Sung, too, is aware of the dangers of the Kingdom becoming another form of absolute, and notes the need for the “eschatological reserve”, as Metz terms it. Only thus can liberation remain liberating, without the introduction of forms of idolatry, such as the state or party under communism.

In this section, I deal with the limitations of liberation theology’s adoption of the idea of utopia, making use primarily of Jung Mo Sung. He considers especially Gustavo Gutiérrez, Libanio, and the Brazilian Dominican writer and political activist Frei Betto. He criticises Gutiérrez for failing to move beyond the limits of the utopic reason of modernity. Because this sees utopias as positive, or more accurately presents programmes which it does not even acknowledge as utopian, it will discount the possibility of something inimical to it having a utopically driven programme. In other words, for Sung, Gutiérrez remains unable to criticise utopian reason.

As far as Libanio is concerned, the problem is found in the realisability of utopias. Although Sung welcomes Libanio’s distinction between utopia and eschatology, he criticises him for assuming that utopias are realisable. For, in that case, we are left with what might be termed “an eschatology of the gaps”. The more the utopia is realised, the less need and space there is for the transcendent. And, when the transcendent (or Transcendent) is excluded, as we have repeatedly seen, we have idolatry in one form or dimension or the other. Rather, for Sung, the task of theology is to critique all historical human projects from the standpoint of the transcendent.

Sung’s critique of Libanio for failing to see that capitalism also has its utopias is perhaps less convincing. He claims that Libanio’s position, that the absence of a search for meaning in Western societies means the end of utopias, will have as an ultimate logical consequence that the poor need...
to stay poor in order to keep a utopia. This clearly need not be the case. The poor are poor, and Libanio is looking at what can help transform that situation. Utopias exist to lead us to a new situation, even though that is not the implementation in full of the utopian ideal. Otherwise, one would have to argue that nothing ever changes, which is not something Sung wants to claim. The further question as to whether rich Western societies have a collective sense of existence, and thus for Sung, a utopia, is more complex. Libanio’s claim that present happiness means there is no need to search for meaning, and Sung’s claim that present happiness implies that the present is happy because there is some meaning to it may not be as mutually exclusive as the latter assumes.

The treatment of Frei Betto\textsuperscript{204} is briefer. Sung’s main critique is the separation which he sees in Betto between the fullness of the Kingdom of God, which for Betto is something to be expected historically, and salvation.\textsuperscript{205} It seems to me that Sung is here rather hasty. For a start, it is not immediately apparent that Betto makes such a stark separation, though admittedly he does seem to think that the Kingdom can be fully implemented historically. Moreover, there is a distinction between the Kingdom and salvation, though not therefore, it is true, a separation. Rather the problem lies again in the presumed facticity of the utopia, in this case of the Kingdom, which ignores the eschatological dimension.

Sung’s main critique of these three authors is their failure to realise the presence of utopian reason. Because of that, for all that they may wish to introduce a critique of idolatry, they have actually failed to do so, and run the risk of introducing other idols. Sung writes:

> Only the awareness that the historical project which we wish to construct as an anticipatory sign of the Kingdom is not identified with it, that it is a negation of the Kingdom, despite being a necessary mediation, and that therefore it should continually be countered by other institutional forms which offer greater possibilities of life in abundance for all, only this awareness allows us to overcome the idolatrous temptation of sacralising human institutions.\textsuperscript{206}

In other words, and as Hinkelammert claimed, there is the need for constant critique of any utopia. At least for Sung there is no possibility of living without some form of utopia, the desired real questioning the present unreal, as Libanio put it.\textsuperscript{207} As long as that utopia allows space for the Transcendent, as long as it realises that it cannot ever be fully realised in

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{204} Frei Betto, who coincidentally is Libanio’s cousin, spent time in jail during the Brazilian military dictatorship and was a special adviser to the Brazilian President Lula in his first term in office.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{205} Jung Mo Sung, “Economía: Tema Ausente…”, pp.195-198.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{206} Jung Mo Sung, “Economía: Tema Ausente…”, p.203. Liberation theology has often faced these criticisms in terms of its relationship to countries like Cuba, or, in the first phase, to the Soviet-bloc countries. This seems to me unjustified. Perhaps, if this is a real problem, it would be more to do with the understanding of CEBs, which are often attributed an almost utopian character.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{207} Libanio, “Esperanza, utopía…”, p.499}
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historically, it is life-giving. But all utopias run the risk of absolutising themselves, or of leading to institutions which are responsible for their implementation, against all opposition. Thus, they need to be open to critique, and it is one of the tasks of theology to do this. However, at the same time, it is necessary for theologians to be aware of their own temptations to idolise and absolutise the tools they use to critique other positions.

Nevertheless, as the Spanish theologian Juan José Tamayo has argued, there still seems to be a role for utopia or some form of utopic vision, precisely as a tool for criticising all attempts at giving definitive accounts of reality. In this sense, he both acknowledges the critiques of writers such as Frank Hinkelammert and Jung Mo Sung, whilst insisting that there is a viable and valid use of the term “utopia”. He writes:

> Utopia is necessary: as a mobilizing image for human energies, for without it human beings would be paralysed; as an horizon which guides and orients praxis, for without it life would be a journey to nowhere and human action would be carried out without any sense of direction; as a critique of reality, for without it history would continually repeat the same mistakes; as an alternative to the system, for without it the system would be imposed fatally like a tombstone, suffocating freedom and the possibility of change; as a visualising and anticipatory image of an ideal, for without it the only image in front of our eyes would be that of the past which inexorably repeats itself; and finally, as “perspective for the prospective”.

2.2.6 Some interim conclusions on liberation theology and utopias

At the end of this section, it may be useful to offer a brief summary of what has been seen. One of the results of this survey has been to show, as in so many other areas, that liberation theology is far from being monolithic in its approach, and indeed is often self-critical. Thus, views of utopia differ, or perhaps we could say more accurately that the word “utopia” is used in different ways by various authors. Libanio, with whose position I would most closely identify myself, sees utopia as necessary but insufficient. It is the possibility of real change in history, a sort of blueprint of another,

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208 Hinkelammert, “Entrevista de Norbert Arntz”, p.72, notes “The so-called secularised society sacralises itself in a utopian way”. The process becomes the end, the contingent and limited becomes the all-embracing.

209 This is perhaps one way of understanding the arguments of Gregory of Nyssa against Eunomius, and his plea for the open-endedness of Christian journeying. It is this refusal to accept any form of closure or defining the Infinite which is of importance here. On Gregory’s dispute with Eunomius, see Ivana Noble, “The Apophatic Way in Gregory of Nyssa” in Petr Pokorný, Jan Roskovec (eds.), Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2002, pp.323-339, here especially pp.327-330

210 Juan José Tamayo Acosta, “Rehabilitación crítica de la utopía en tiempos oscuros”, available online at www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/338.htm (accessed 25/10/06), quotation from section 5.1.
achievable world. At the same time, this other achievable world is always provisional and incomplete, because the eschatological hope in the Kingdom prevents fixing on any historical form of social life as the final manifestation of God’s plan for his people on earth.

The problem with the idea of utopia is seen precisely in the way in which it claims more than it can deliver. There is a tension here. As Ellacuría points out, utopias need to have some degree of realisability, but to the degree to which they do, they also become dangerous. Instead of being partial and limited, they are presented as complete and unbounded. But if that is the case, as Jung Mo Sung has argued, they actually remove the possibility of the Kingdom, since the Kingdom is no longer needed. The Kingdom always challenges any claims to utopian realisation, always points to the radical incompleteness of all human constructs. As we shall see later in this chapter, salvation does indeed happen in history, but it is does not end in history. Eschatological hope is what allows us to glimpse the presence of God now, but to recognise that this presence, or our ability to face it, is limited.

The fundamental question which liberation theologians have faced is how to talk about liberation for the poor, something which has to have at least some degree of historical grounding, without falling prey to the ultimately self-defeating irrationality of utopic reason. Liberation cannot be left as a purely spiritual term, in the sense of something divorced from the actual life experiences of men and women living in poverty. This is what liberation theology wants to argue against. On the other hand, any attempt to make a particular strategy the way to liberation will lead to idolatry (Idolatry 1 – the reduction of God’s power to one concrete manifestation of it, which is then made into all of God). Too unnuanced a discussion of the Kingdom of God can have this effect, as can a neglect of the eschatological dimension of hope. How this can be done is one of the questions I seek to answer in this work.

2.3 Idolatry and Ideology

So far, I have tried to avoid using the term ideology to describe the actual or potential idolatrous nature of utopias. However, it is now time to examine the relationship between the two terms, or the way in which ideologies are also idolatrous. I will begin with an investigation of how
liberation theologians have treated ideology, note how the term has been extended by other authors, and then examine in what sense liberation theology is itself an ideology.

2.3.1 Ideology in Liberation Theology
In this section, I examine two ways in which liberation theology has dealt with the theme of ideology. The first works with a form of ideology bearing some relationship to the two forms of idolatry discussed earlier in this chapter. The second adopts a more developmental approach, suggesting three phases through which ideologies pass. Here we are invited to consider how something becomes ideological and what enables ideology to be overcome. Both these ways of looking at ideology will then be used to ask if liberation theology itself is ideological.

I begin with a treatment of the two kinds of ideology. As developed by Clodovis Boff, this is primarily a discussion of the ideological nature of knowledge. The starting point for his discussion is the recognition that theology – or better theologies – should always be accompanied by an indefinite article. Any theology which has pretensions to being “the” theology, the only way to do theology, will be what Boff calls ideological, or what we have so far termed idolatrous.

In order to deal with the potential problem of ideology in theology more clearly, Boff borrows from the Althusserian school and divides ideology into two types. The first which refers to the autonomous dimension of (in this case) theological knowledge he calls Ideology 1. This is similar to what we have been calling Idolatry 1, now on a strictly conceptual level: “It is a case not of pure and simple error, but of illusion, that is, of error which believes itself to be true”.

The second mode of ideology is more related to practice than to theory: “the ‘unjustifiable’; …but the unjustifiable under the guise of the justifiable, it is a case of the immoral under the guise of the moral.” Here we can draw parallels with Idolatry 2, for what is not, what has no positive force is proposed as something real. In this sense, then, we

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215 Boff, *Teologia e Prática*, p.96 (ET, p.40)


217 Boff distinguishes between the autonomy and dependence of theology, what is proper to theology and the mediations on which it depends to practice its autonomy.

218 Boff, *Teologia e Prática*, p.99 (ET, p.42)

can say that ideology is a specifically conceptual form of idolatry, and that it therefore mirrors the two dimensions/forms of idolatry which were noted above.

A different classification of ideology is offered by João Batista Libanio and Francisco Taborda, two Brazilian Jesuits, in their contribution to *Mysterium Liberationis*. They suggest that there are three phases. The first is called the intuitive phase, when what has worked up to now becomes inadequate, and a new dominant class begins to form, with its own values, ideas, and interests (i.e., its own ideology). Because the chief factor is an awareness of what is wrong, critique of the new policy is often suspended and thus it is easy for a new ideology to be formed. Here we are most likely to encounter Ideology 1 and Idolatry 1. The problem with the status quo is noticed, and the plan to transform it (the utopian vision) proposed. These plans are not necessarily entirely wrong, but in believing them to be entirely right there is illusion.

In a second phase, the ideology becomes “common sense”, which first leads to the failure of the previous dominant ideology, and then becomes a new hegemonic ideology. This second phase certainly shows the way in which the first dimension of idolatry can change into the second. The problem here, for theology as for other disciplines, is that the new paradigm does not simply criticise and propose to remedy the inadequacies of the previous dominant model. Now, it is so firmly entrenched that it considers itself above criticism, as self-evident to all. To deny it is an act of deliberate perversion which frequently draws censure.

Finally, the new dominant ideology encounters criticisms, and the dominated start to reject the ideological values of the oppressors and to develop new utopian, future-oriented values. Here idolatry is recognised for what it is. Liberation theology will want to situate itself in this third phase, helping the poor and oppressed to give voice to their criticisms of the ruling hegemony. Although these phases are successive, it is perhaps best to understand them as forming a sort of hermeneutical spiral – the third

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220 I refer here to João Batista Libanio, Francisco Taborda, “Ideología”, in Sobrino, Ellacuría (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis* vol. 2, pp.579-600. See also Francisco Taborda, *Cristianismo e Ideologia: Ensaios Teológicos*, São Paulo, Loyola, 1984 especially pp.91-98, addressing the question “What is ideology?”

221 *Ibid.*, p.582. They take this idea of the intuitive phase from Stanilas Breton *Théorie des idéologies*, Paris, Desclée, 1976, p.60. A fascinating example of this in action can be found in Ed Hussein, *The Islamist*, London, Penguin, 2007, which shows how militant forms of Muslim practice were introduced into Britain in the early 1990s. There is very little in the vivid description he gives that could not be applied to a Marxist vanguard, at least if the references to Islam are removed, as he himself makes clear. For a somewhat overwrought, but fascinating attempt to develop an Islamic liberation theology that pays attention to the notion of alterity, it is also worth referring here to

222 Libanio, Taborda, “Ideología”, pp.582-583. This is the ideological equivalent of paradigm change as described by Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970 (2nd ed.)

223 Libanio, Taborda, “Ideología”, p.583
phase will soon give rise to a new first phase, and the process begins again. Libanio and Taborda do not rule out the possibility of the co-existence of phases, either. \footnote{224}{As an example, liberation theology may take Marx’s social analysis as “common sense” (second phase), in its desire to criticise the market economy (third, but perhaps even first phase).}

How does this dual classification of ideology play out in specific cases? We can start with a discussion of ideology as knowledge. \footnote{225}{Cf. Libanio, Taborda, “Ideología”, pp.584-587.} Ideology is, we have already seen, conceptual. Concepts do not, however, emerge \textit{ex nihilo} but are formulated and spread by agents, often intellectuals. As idols are the work of human hands, so ideologies are the work of human minds, and they serve as organising and structuring principles or hermeneutical keys for the understanding of the world. This enables them to act as “an horizon of order and security for social groups in the face of uncertainties”. \footnote{226}{Ibid., p.585} All forms of knowledge, including science, are subject to ideological influence. \footnote{227}{Ibid., p.587. There are numerous examples of this, perhaps the most notorious being the support given to Trofim Lysenko, and his Lamarckian biology by Stalin. On this, see David Joravsky, \textit{The Lysenko Affair}, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970.} This may be Ideology 1, investing a part-truth with the significance of the whole, or it may be Ideology 2, dissimulation, reworking evidence for specific ends. \footnote{228}{Ibid., p.588}

Libanio and Taborda note how political ideology, especially the dominant ideology in any given situation “exercises a clear function of dissimulation and distortion under the guise of traps, of covering and of legitimation”. \footnote{229}{Libanio, Taborda, “Ideologia”, p.589} In other words, it is an example of Boff’s Ideology 2. The two authors offer what is really a Marxist critique of the superstructure as providing ideological support for the base, so that social institutions (schools, courts, family, etc.) are seen as at the service of the dominant class. \footnote{230}{Ibid., p.588} Because they emphasise the concern of ideologies for values and interests, they also point out how ethics can have an ideological dimension. One manifestation of this is that ideologies tend to make themselves into ‘religions’, “creating their idols, their liturgy, their rites and ceremonies, their priests and above all sacralising and divinising their doctrine”. \footnote{231}{Ibid., p.591. Note how close this is to the criticisms of the market we saw above.} Here is the problem especially of the second phase of ideology, where the two dimensions of idolatry are most clearly visible.

Drawing on Enrique Dussel, one of the foremost writers on liberation ethics, who, as we shall see in the next chapter, makes frequent use of Emmanuel Levinas, they note the totalising intent of ideologies, which,
consequently, leads to “a negation of the other, attempting to assimilate him or her to the same, to the identical.” The response to this, the concrete “other who judges ideologies, is the poor person, the one who is oppressed, humiliated, who has no place in the ruling system... The poor person is presented here as ethical call and transformative action”. It is the ability of the poor to challenge and call to conversion that also serves as the major criterion for Libanio and Taborda in the overcoming of ideological temptations for theology, especially in ideology’s first phase which is often marked by a conceptual naivety.

The poor are at a second level, it is true, since their ability to pass judgement on ideologies from a standpoint of faith is dependent on the fact that “God’s love made manifest in Christ Jesus is concretised in the preferential love of those on the margins, the oppressed, the needy, the least”. It is for this reason that “the concrete poor person (particular) is converted into the principal critic of all ideologies (universal)”.

This emphasis on the particular is important, since it aims to counteract the totalising effect of ideologies.

On the other hand, it is love for the poor which is the prime mediation of love for all humankind because to love the poor is to love the human being qua human, not because of anything the person may possess. But the authors go even further, when they suggest that there is also a universality of the poor. By this they seem to mean that the ultimate criterion for the life of the church is the presence of the poor, given that the option of God in Jesus is so thoroughly for the poor.

It is not entirely clear to what extent this manages to avoid introducing another form of ideology, however. As

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232 Ibid., p.593. Although there is no direct reference to Levinas or Dussel at this point, the preceding and following paragraphs both have footnotes referring to Enrique Dussel, *Etica comunitaria*, Madrid, 1986, and it would be reasonable to assume that they have the same author in mind in this paragraph. On Dussel and his use of Levinas, see below, Chapter 3.4

233 Libanio, Taborda, “Ideología”, p.593

234 Although the section is headed “Theological Dimension”, the treatment is of faith and ideology. However, faith cannot be reduced to theology, and as soon as faith seeks understanding, it has recourse to ideas, symbols, stories, all of which are at least susceptible to ideological pressures. The question as to whether there exists some kind of “pure faith” is not one they address. Of course, as a presupposition for Christian theology or indeed life, this is important, but in practice faith is always articulated, however incoherently.

235 Libanio, Taborda, “Ideología”, p.598. It is perhaps helpful to note that, though I have translated the final adjectives in the plural, they are in fact singular – marginado, oprimido, necesitado, ultimo. The same in general applies to what they say about the poor – it is the poor person, not a class, to whom they refer.

236 Libanio, Taborda, “Ideología”, p.598.

237 I am always reminded in this context of the wonderful scene in the film *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), where the crowd gather outside Brian’s window and demand that he speak to him. He tells them that they don’t need him, that they are all individuals. Obediently, they chant together “Yes, we are all individuals”. “You are all different”, says Brian. “Yes, we are all different”, they respond, but then a lone voice pipes up, “Um, I’m not”. The act of dissent always destroys the totalising intent of the ideology.

238 Libanio, Taborda, “Ideología”, pp.599-600

239 Ibid., pp.599-600
soon as the poor are turned into a universal category, it would appear that they run the risk of becoming another form of ideology, or at least idol. The question that remains, then, is whether universalising an object, person, concept, necessarily results in totality, and therefore ideology, here in its second phase. The ideology, to the degree that it is successful, becomes desirable, and because it is to be desired, it is to be worshipped, so becomes idolatrous. In the terms of our discussion in this section, we can describe it as follows. An explanation offered in the intuitive phase of ideology development, couched in terms of an illusion that thinks its partial truth is everything, (Ideology 1), is so persuasive that it moves on to become the new “common sense”, (second phase) and, even while those who argue for it become aware of its limitations, they continue to pretend that it has universal explanatory power (Ideology 2). The question which remains is whether liberation theology or any other theology is able to situate itself in the third phase, of recognising ideology for what it is, without itself falling prey to the trap of creating its own ideology.

2.3.2 Ideology from outside liberation theology briefly considered

One attempt to address this question has been made by the British theologian Peter Scott in his book *Theology, Ideology and Liberation*. Scott wants to take seriously Marxist critiques of Christianity as ideological to see how theology can escape from its own tendency to be ideological and become itself liberative. The issue at stake in his book, he notes, is “the idolatry of ideology: the tendency of Christian theology, even in discussions of liberation and cognate areas, to be ideological, and thereby to misrepresent human beings to themselves and to misrepresent the Christian God.” Scott suggests that the Marxist critique of theology is that it relates to the individual, and that it is not capable of dealing with social structures. Part of the response to the problem is, for Scott, a greater concentration on the social location of theology. In many ways, Scott is close to the liberation theologians, and he reminds us of the dangers of becoming ideological inherent to any form of theology. His stress on the need to develop a Trinitarian theology is also important.

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242 Scott, *Theology, Ideology and Liberation*, p.257
243 Ibid., pp.75-76
244 Ibid., p.70 “Christian theology is required to show that it is not identical with its material determinants, that its social location is an oppositional place”.
245 See, for example, Scott, *Theology, Ideology and Liberation*, pp.209-232. Scott is interested in the possibility of developing a non-ideological theology, though he is more successful in demonstrating the ways in which theology often has been ideological than in the constructive element of his work. Nevertheless, his contribution is an extremely helpful one especially in demonstrating the nature of the problem.
In her attempt to construct a post-foundationalist theology, Ivana Dolejšová has also dealt with the question of ideology, since, she argues, foundationalist approaches almost inevitably end up becoming ideological. She offers a succinct definition of ideologies as “a set of ideas with ascribed meaning; in a negative sense, ways in which meaning is given in order to support or control particular relations of authority and power”.246 Here what is important is the way in which ideology takes on itself the power to assign meaning. The purpose of ideology is not simply to give an explanation of society, but to offer the definitive interpretation of what society is and needs. It is the only meaning, and all others are false. This totalising effect of ideology is discussed in relation to conceptual idols by Bruce Ellis Benson.247 Benson is one of the commentators on Marion to whom I turn in the next chapter, and the title of his book, *Graven Ideologies*, is a clear indication of the idolatrous nature of ideologies and the ideological nature of idolatry. He notes that there are two possible dimensions of idolatry, substitution (what we have called Idolatry 1) and separation (what we have called Idolatry 2).248 Idols are what prevent us from knowing, doing and being in and with God, and therefore following them separates us from God.

But Benson goes on to point out that these idols are not necessarily material, for *eidolon* – the term John249 uses – also carries the sense of image or concept.250 Thus, idols can also be conceptual, and it is this element of idolatry that Benson considers in his book. The etymological relationship between the words “idolatry” and “ideology” reinforces the link between the two. Both draw on the Greek root *eido-*, and have to do with what is seen. “Ideology implies essential insights that are put together into a reasoned structure – what else could one add?”, he says.251 He goes on to quote Denys Turner, “for the Christian, ideology and idolatry are synonyms”.252 Although this is perhaps ultimately true, the distinction between the two is, however, useful to maintain, as the German theologian, Jürgen Manemann, argues, in his essay on idolatry in political theology. He turns to

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246 Ivana Dolejšová (Noble), *Accounts of Hope: A Problem of Method in Postmodern Apologia*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2001, p.296
248 *Ibid.*, p.17. Note that these are close to what Richard talked about in his treatment of the Old Testament. See above, 2.1.1
249 The reference is to 1 John 5:21, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols”. I use the name John as a useful reference to the author of the letter.
250 Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, p.19
251 Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, p.24
understandings of ideology precisely to explain what he means by idolatry. He describes an ideology as “a set of ideas, beliefs and attitudes, consciously or unconsciously held, which shapes misconceptions of the social and political world”. On the other hand, “idolatry has to be understood as a form of mimesis which makes itself like the environment, whereas ideologies are more kinds of false projection that make the environment like itself.”

This distinction is useful in that it prevents collapsing the two terms completely into one, as we saw in our discussion of liberation theology in the previous section. The ideology presents itself as something which explains the world, and because of its perceived explanatory power, it is deemed worthy of adherence and worship (idolatry). For Manemann, it is having the eyes of faith that enables us to unmask idols and ideologies. Thus, he suggests that liberation theologians have returned the question of idolatry to the centre of theology because, having learnt about idols from the oppressed, “[t]hey have tried to look at the world with the eyes of the other”.

2.3.3 Is Liberation Theology an Ideology?

The authors of the Mysterium Liberationis article on ideology, João Batista Libanio and Francisco Taborda, begin by referring to the critique of liberation theology as itself ideological.

The problematic of ideology is without doubt fundamental in the theology of liberation. Frequently it has been accused of being ideological and not infrequently its response consists in denouncing this same characteristic in other theologies. “Ideology”, then, belongs to the basic concepts of liberation theology.

It will be important to enquire in what sense liberation theology is held to be ideological, and to what extent the accusation is true.

I will address here only what is probably the most common accusation levelled at liberation theology, that its (over-)dependence on Marxist analysis renders it necessarily ideological. Such a critique is relatively common, one of its chief proponents having been Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, who, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was one of liberation theology’s staunchest opponents. In a background briefing to the first Vatican “Instruction on

253 Jürgen Manemann, “Interruptions. Idolatry from the Perspective of Political Theology”, in Burggraev et al., Desirable God?, pp.95-118, here 97. The use of the word ‘misconceptions’ raises the question, to which I will return, as to whether there is such a thing as a non-ideological critique of ideology.

254 Manemann, “Interruptions”, p.97

255 Ibid., p.98

Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’”, issued in 1984, Ratzinger underlines his belief that liberation theology is irredeemably tainted by its adherence to the scientific claims of Marxism. It would probably be correct to say that Ratzinger’s problem with liberation theology was (perhaps still is) that it is guilty of what we have termed Ideology 1, and is operating in the first phase of ideology. In its eagerness (justified, for Ratzinger) to do something about the situation of extreme poverty in which so many Latin Americans live, it has grasped Marxism as an interpretive tool. The essential ideological illusion is that it can use something wrong to cure another wrong.

The real question that arises is whether Ratzinger is not equally guilty of a form of Ideology 1. He grew up under one of the worst forms of totalitarian regime the world has known, Nazism, and feared the installation of new forms of totality in the events of 1968. But the simple equation of Marxism in liberation theology with the most totalitarian form of political power is not possible. Indeed, in his commentary Ratzinger acknowledges that there are many different types of liberation theology, some of which are perfectly within the traditions of the Church, while others are not. He then says that he will deal only with “those theologies which, in one way or another, have embraced the Marxist fundamental option”. It is hardly surprising that he has problems with such theologies, but the question is whether in any serious form they actually exist.

The circularity of the argument – liberation theology which has embraced Marxism at a fundamental level is fundamentally Marxist – appears crucial to the argument, as the Instruction shows. As always, a certain hermeneutic of suspicion is called for here, and one must at least ask if Ratzinger was capable of understanding the nature of Marxism in liberation theology. This is not an intellectual question, but based on Ratzinger’s commitment to a specific version of the Enlightenment project which inevitably clashed with liberation theology’s alternative interpretation of the same project.


258 Ibid., paragraph 1.


The Instruction argued that liberation theology, or at least certain versions of it,\textsuperscript{261} turned to Marxism as a “scientific” method of analysing society, and in doing so, wittingly or unwittingly, assented to the whole of Marxist philosophy, including the reality of class struggle and ultimately atheism. The key paragraph reads:

In the case of Marxism, in the particular sense given to it in this context, a preliminary critique is all the more necessary since the thought of Marx is such a global vision of reality that all data received from observation and analysis are brought together in a philosophical and ideological structure, which predetermines the significance and importance to be attached to them. The ideological principles come prior to the study of the social reality and are presupposed in it. Thus no separation of the parts of this epistemologically unique complex is possible. If one tries to take only one part, say, the analysis, one ends up having to accept the entire ideology. That is why it is not uncommon for the ideological aspects to be predominant among the things which the "theologians of liberation" borrow from Marxist authors.\textsuperscript{262}

As will be seen in Chapter 4, it would be wrong to dismiss this criticism out of hand. There are certainly presuppositions to the study of social reality in liberation theology, and these are not always without problems, as the analysis in the first chapter of understandings of the poor indicated. The chief bone of contention, however, has been whether it is possible to utilise elements of Marxist social analysis without accepting all aspects of dialectical materialism. Clearly, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith assumes that it is not. However, as this is a philosophical rather than theological judgement, it remains open to question.

Before turning to the response from liberation theologians to this statement, it is worth noting the apparent contextual problems involved here. Ratzinger, not unreasonably, reads liberation theology as a European. For him, Marxism is the greatest enemy of the Church, and the propagator of an often violent atheism. Although there were attempts in the Soviet-influenced countries of Central and Eastern Europe to instigate dialogue between Christianity and communism,\textsuperscript{263} on the whole the two found themselves in bitter, even deadly, dispute. On the other hand, Latin American liberation theology understood itself and its use of Marxism very differently. First, the background was one of National Security

\textsuperscript{261} As usual in Vatican documents, no names are mentioned, but Ratzinger’s subsequent attacks on people such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff and most recently Jon Sobrino indicate some of those he had in mind.

\textsuperscript{262} Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’, VII.6 (= Hennelly, Liberation Theology, pp.401-402)

\textsuperscript{263} See for example the Czech philosopher Milan Machovec, Ježíš pro moderního člověka, Prague, Akropolis, 2003 (= A Marxist Looks at Jesus, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), first written in the 1960s. Machovec took part in dialogues with various people, including the Czech Protestant theologian Jozef Hromadka.
Chapter Two  When The Window Closes

governments, so the threat was from right-wing governments who often used the language of economic liberalism. Secondly, unlike Europe, Latin America was and remains overwhelmingly Christian. Clodovis Boff notes that liberation theology makes a purely instrumental use of Marxism and that it uses it from the standpoint and in function of the poor. “The Marxist is submitted to the judgement of the poor and his or her cause, not the contrary”.

Clearly, the claim that Marxism is used instrumentally does not really respond to the CDF’s criticism, since the point at stake is whether it is a fitting instrument. A hammer can be used to clean glass but it may not be the most appropriate tool for the job. However, the fact that Marxism is understood as having an instrumental use is important to the extent that it suggests pragmatism rather than dogmatism. If it helps to explain and talk about the situation of the poor, it can be used, but if it does not, or does not do so in a way which is helpful theologically, it can be discarded. In other words, it is only derivatively scientific.

A more detailed response to the Vatican’s criticisms is found in an article by Enrique Dussel in *Mysterium Liberationis*. He cites the passage from the Instruction given above and comments on it, based in part on his close study of Marx. He argues that the thought of Marx – rather than its Leninist or Stalinist developments – is philosophical-economic, and that there is no proof that its core contains atheism, denial of personal freedoms, and the like, as the document claims. Dussel argues, indeed, that Marx was strongly opposed to militant atheism, though whether this was for tactical or other reasons, he does not indicate. Moreover, he claims, Marx has the human person as the central reference point for all his categories and criticisms, for it is precisely the reduction of the person to a thing through his or her alienation by capital that drives Marx’s attempts to construct an alternative. In this sense, Marx would be anti-idolatrous. For Dussel, then,

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264 See José Comblin, *The Church and the National Security State*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1979
265 See Clodovis Boff, “Crise do Socialismo”, p.374 “[liberation theology] was always very attentive to [the] fatal limits of Marxism and tried always to use it critically and (why not?) instrumentally, in the sense of putting it at the service of the oppressed and their integral liberation – the Kingdom of God”.
266 Clodovis Boff, “Epistemología y Método de la Teología de la Liberación”, in Sobrino, Ellacuría (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis* vol. 1, pp.79-113, here p.106. In the same volume, Ignacio Ellacuría makes a similar point, noting that Ratzinger and others “confuse the part with the whole, the subordinate with the principal”, “Historicidad de la Salvación Cristiana”, p.362 See also, Clodovis Boff, “O Uso do ‘Marxismo’ em Teologia”, *Comunicações do ISER* 3/8 (1984), pp.11-18
268 Ibid., pp.133-134. The next two sentences refer to p.134
269 Denys Turner, “Religion: Illusions and liberation”, in Terrell Carver (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp.320-337, here pp.322-323, is quite clear that Marx himself was a classic nineteenth century atheist, absolutely denying any form of transcendent reality, so the implication is that Marx’s refusal of militant atheism as an integral part of socialism was more motivated by tactical considerations.
the fact that the history of Marx’s own thought and Marxism contains deep contradictions means that the general level of the criticism in the Instruction makes it meaningless.\textsuperscript{270} So, for example, he says that since Marx himself does not write about dialectical materialism, liberation theology does not have to take it on board.\textsuperscript{271}

Again, one might feel that this is a somewhat specious argument which may succeed against the letter of the Instruction, but perhaps offers little defence against the spirit. After all, not all liberation theologians have devoted as much time to the extremely careful and detailed study of Marx as Dussel undoubtedly has, and their use of the sources may often be somewhat more eclectic. On the other hand, Dussel does show that the lack of precision in the accusations made by the CDF, and the limited acquaintance with Marx, reduces the strength of their argument. This is because at heart the argument is that something which promotes and requires atheism cannot be used as a basis for Christian theology. This seems to be an acceptable position, but the question that remains is, first, whether the instrumental adoption of Marxism amounts to this, and moreover, whether Marx actually argued for the necessity of atheism in his philosophical and economic writings. Dussel responds negatively to both points.

Although the use of Marxism has become less prominent in liberation theology in the last decade or so, there is a continued residue of Marxist language. Luigi Bordin, writing in 1999, suggested that there are three aspects of Marx, who, for him remains a thinker of alterity, that deserve to be rescued: the messianic-prophetic aspect, the idea of alienation and the problem of the end of capitalism.\textsuperscript{272} But, as one of the more careful students of the question has noted:

> the term Marxism was and is used in liberation theology to denominate in a generic way a type of sociology with a dialectic tendency which privileges the economic level in the interpretation of the historico-social reality and which understands real human history as being a history where conflict and tension have been central elements.\textsuperscript{273}

If the writers I am working with in this thesis are indeed guilty as charged by the CDF, one would have to admit that liberation theology also suffers from its own ideological bias. Even if they are not, the hermeneutic of suspicion leaves the possibility of such a bias as an open question. Here the

\textsuperscript{270} Dussel, “Teología de la Liberación y Marxismo”, pp.134-135
\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., p.135, and see p.124 “None of the liberation theologians accepts Engels’ materialism in Dialectics of Nature”.
\textsuperscript{273} Paulo Fernando Carneiro de Andrade, Fé e Eficácia: O Uso da Sociologia na Teologia da Libertação, São Paulo, Loyola, 1991, p.194. Between pp.169-200 he discusses the question “Can a theology use Marxism?”
critique of the Slovenian intellectual Slavoj Žižek is relevant.\textsuperscript{274} There is no non-ideological space from which to critique ideology. Although this would not be Žižek’s position, we could say that liberation theology can only critique ideology and idolatry from the position of the Transcendent, a place to which it never has direct access. It is perhaps in this direction that Clodovis Boff once argued that

Undoubtedly, the ideologisation of Faith, that is, its political instrumentalisation, is inevitable and even indeed necessary. It should always be affirmed, however, that the meaning of Faith is not \textit{entirely} consumed by and in political activity. It [Faith] transcends it [political activity], it as well as every other dimension.\textsuperscript{275}

Admittedly, Boff speaks here of Faith rather than theology, but as we shall see later\textsuperscript{276} for him Faith is at the heart of all theological activity. The problem is not, then, whether theology is ideological, but whether theologians are sufficiently attentive to their ideological leanings, and whether they are capable of letting themselves be taken beyond the limits of the ideology. The real question for liberation theology, then, is to what extent it is engaged in Ideology 1, in the promulgation of an error which it believes to be true. In a sense, this is a key question for my entire work, for I want to see how liberation theology has sought to develop mechanisms to prevent this happening. So, for now, I leave the question open.

\section*{2.4 The God of Life\textsuperscript{277}}

The fundamental theological response of liberation theology to the perceived ubiquity of idolatry has been to emphasise the fact that God is the source and giver of life. As we saw above in our discussion of idolatry, it is common for Latin American liberation theologians to link idolatry and death. The relationship is perhaps to be understood in terms of a search for a language to explain the overwhelming reality of death, metaphorically,

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\textsuperscript{274} Žižek’s many writings on ideology make it clear that most forms of ideology critique depend on an assumption of a place from which to denounce ideology which is itself ideology-free, but that this in fact creates a new ideology. Working as he does with the Lacanian categories of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real (primarily the latter two), he understands ideology as the necessary Symbolic explanation of the ultimately inexplicable Real. Thus, ideology critique is only possible from within the Real, which, however, is a place we cannot actually inhabit. For an excellent summary of Žižek’s treatment of ideology on which I draw here, see Tony Myers, \textit{Slavoj Žižek}, (Routledge Critical Thinkers), London, Routledge, 2003, pp.63-77. Among other works, see Slavoj Žižek, \textit{The Sublime Object of Ideology}, London, Verso, 1989, and for Žižek on Christianity, \textit{The Fragile Absolute or Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting For}, London, Verso, 2000
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\textsuperscript{276} In Chapter 4
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\textsuperscript{277} This of course is the title of a book by Gustavo Gutiérrez. However, as I explain, I will concentrate mainly on the work of José Maria Castillo in what follows. Although there are different emphases and phrasing, I do not think there is any substantial disagreement between the two.
\end{flushright}
but also and frequently, literally.\textsuperscript{278} The systemic causes for the prevalence of death are gathered up in the Biblical expression “idolatry”. These idols are seen as demanding sacrifice. Given this, one question which I need to keep present as we consider the response to death, is exactly what is meant by “life”.\textsuperscript{279} Is “life” itself ideological, or, if not, what enables it to remain transcendent? Definitions are in a sense impossible, for they will limit its transcendence, but on the other hand, if life means nothing, why is it worth having?

Because the treatment of this subject is both vast and, at the same time, relatively coherent, I will restrict myself to one main example in what follows, drawing on a book by the Spanish theologian José Maria Castillo.\textsuperscript{280} Castillo addresses the relationship between the poor and theology.\textsuperscript{281} He asks what it means to construct a theology from the perspective of the poor, and says that such a theology demands a response to three determinative questions. These concern the nature of life, liberty and utopia, because for the poor the most basic question is about the presence or absence of life, and for life to be truly life they ask where freedom is, and if they want to live in freedom, they ask what hope there is of a better future, utopia.\textsuperscript{282}

For Castillo, life is at the centre of Christianity; he admits that normally love is put at the centre, and he does not want to deny this, but argues that “love, before anything else, is life” and that the “deepest and most fundamental aspect of life is relation in love”.\textsuperscript{283} Note here that life is seen in terms of relationship, human interaction, as we termed it earlier. In this sense, given the idolising of human interaction by the market, we might see a possible response to our initial question about whether life is ideological. To the extent that it is a relation in love, and love remains a transcendent term, life is not ideological. However, to the extent that “relation in love” is

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{278} For a powerful and moving treatment of this, dealing with questions of infant mortality and maternal reactions to it, see Nancy Scheper-Hughes, \textit{Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil}, London, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993
  \item \textsuperscript{279} I refer here back to the comments of Jung Mo Sung, quoted above in note 34 of this chapter where he writes that in liberation theology “often the concept ‘life’ became much too abstract, losing much of the ‘dialecticity’ in which life is involved…”
  \item \textsuperscript{280} Castillo has worked and taught in various places in Spain, and until May 2007 was a Jesuit. He left the Order at the age of 78, owing to the pressure of conservative elements within the Catholic Church. He has long been a proponent and supporter of liberation theology, and has been subject to various investigations and disciplinary proceedings by the CDF.
  \item \textsuperscript{281} José Maria Castillo, \textit{Los Pobres y la Teología. Que queda de la teología de la liberación?}, Bilbao, Desclée de Brouwer, 1999
  \item \textsuperscript{282} \textit{Ibid.}, p.176
  \item \textsuperscript{283} \textit{Ibid.}, p.182, p.183. Italics in original.
\end{itemize}
categorised,\textsuperscript{284} it ceases to be transcendent, and will then become idolatrous, initially in the sense of Idolatry 1.

Castillo points out that for most of history, theology has tended to talk about life in terms of future, post-mortem life. He does not use the terminology himself, but what we have seen of ideology above may lead us to suggest that such theology is essentially ideological.\textsuperscript{285} As a response to this kind of theology, he turns first to the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God brings life.\textsuperscript{286} It is true that the Kingdom is eschatological, but just as the Kingdom is not fully present now, neither is it fully absent. In other words, what Jesus announces in his proclamation of the Kingdom is not simply something to look forward to after death, but something which, in however an embryonic form, is already present.\textsuperscript{287} Thus, to speak of life for Castillo is first and foremost to speak of this life, of life here and now.\textsuperscript{288} The God of life is experienced and known in the life-giving practice of his children, as the First Letter of John makes clear.\textsuperscript{289}

\subsection*{2.4.1 Religion expressing life}

We can call the life-giving practice orthopraxis.\textsuperscript{290} Ideologies promote the “hetero-praxis” of idolatry, which is why the different facets of orthopraxis are so important. The first concerns the relationship between religion and life. Castillo shows that the early church, the church of the New Testament, offers a radical reinterpretation of religion, or, since the term is scarcely used in the actual writings of the New Testament, of the cultic or the sacred. Thus, speaking of the three major cultic terms used in the New Testament, latreia, leitourgia and thusia, and citing the texts where they appear in the New Testament, he notes that

in these texts the cult of the Christians does not refer at all to ritual, in the realm of the sacred, but to Christian existence in its totality. With a base in the fundamental text of Romans 12:1, for the first time in the history of the Church, all activity of

\textsuperscript{284} One might point to advertisements of “happy couples”, to the whole business around weddings, or even to paid dating agencies as examples of this ideologisation of the relation of love. In Marxist terms, it is about the commodification of love.

\textsuperscript{285} See, for example, the criticism which Clodovis Boff offers of theology which refuses to engage with life, \textit{Teologia e Prática}, p.96 (ET, p.40). This is to be thought of as Ideology 2, for it justifies the present through recourse to the future, though the present is not justifiable when it brings death.

\textsuperscript{286} Castillo, \textit{Los pobres y la teología}, pp.186-187. Cf., Jon Sobrino, \textit{Jesus the Liberator}, p.132: “‘Life’ can therefore point to what is fulfilling and utopic in the Kingdom of God, to what is shot through with historical and theologal transcendence”.

\textsuperscript{287} See Castillo, \textit{Los pobres y la teología}, p.187

\textsuperscript{288} \textit{Ibid.}, p.194

\textsuperscript{289} Castillo refers especially to 1John 3:1 and 1John 3:10, that we are called children of God, but that whoever does not practice justice or love their brother or sister is not a child of God.

\textsuperscript{290} For a reflection on this in terms of the preferential option for the poor, and the link between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, see Roberto S. Goizueta, “Knowing the God of the Poor: The Preferential Option for the Poor”, in Rieger (ed.), \textit{Opting for the Margins}, pp.143-156
Christians is considered as the cult which they have to do towards God, in the daily life of this world.\(^\text{291}\)

It can also be noted that even in texts such as Acts 2:43-45, describing the (perhaps ideal and idyllic) life of the first Christian community, alongside practices such as prayers and breaking the bread (if that is to be understood in eucharistic terms), there is the sharing of all things in common. In other words, it is not just the way cultic words are used, but also that cultic practices are never separated out from other aspects of Christian life.

However, Castillo is also aware that all too often both in history and today the experience has not been that life precedes religion, but that religion is put above life. What he means by this needs to be spelt out, for it has serious theological implications. Essentially, if life precedes religion, then our response to God’s self-giving in Christ through the Spirit is made in freedom. As human beings, we accept (or reject) our Creator. If religion precedes life, then what it is to be human is determined by adherence to a particular form of religious practice. This means that, in extreme cases, if you do not follow my way, you are not human, and I can kill you.\(^\text{292}\) For Castillo, this is also linked to (mis-) understandings of sacrifice. In the New Testament, sacrifice is Jesus’ offering and gift of his own life, that there might be life. It is not a question of doing things to appease and placate an angry God.\(^\text{293}\) Life responds to God, religion does not demand life. At the most profound level of the sacrifice of Jesus there is not death but life.\(^\text{294}\) The place of encounter with God is, then, in life, and more precisely in this life.\(^\text{295}\) One of the reasons the New Testament does not speak of religion is its links with idolatry. Life itself, as gift of God, is an act of praise and worship, and thus rejects all forms /dimensions of idolatry.

### 2.4.2 Living Faith

Orthopraxis is related to orthodoxy. But when faith becomes categorised into doctrine and content, it can become idolatrous, for it ignores the transcendence of which it speaks. Thus it is that Castillo considers the relationship between life and faith. The history of Christian thought, in his opinion, has been marked by an increasing tendency to emphasise the *fides quae creditur*, understood more and more as ideas to be intellectually

\(^\text{291}\) Castillo, *Los pobres y la teología*, p.197

\(^\text{292}\) Such historical events as the practices of *auto-da-fe*, where people were burnt allegedly in order to save their immortal souls spring to mind. Unfortunately, the examples of this sort of practice have been and continue to be legion.

\(^\text{293}\) Cf. the Anselmian doctrine of the atonement, and the different interpretations of *hilasterion* in Romans 3:25

\(^\text{294}\) Castillo, *Los pobres y la teología*, pp.201-205. See also Jon Sobrino, *La fe en Jesucristo*, pp.131-132, which speaks precisely of the resurrection as the triumph of God over the idols. The idols are those who demand sacrifices.

\(^\text{295}\) Castillo, *Los pobres y la teología*, p.204
assented to, over against the *fides qua creditur*, the response of the individual (always necessarily in community) to God’s self-giving in Jesus through the Spirit.\(^{296}\) For Castillo, this intellectualisation of faith has meant its removal from the lives of ordinary people, because faith has become about understanding complex theological arguments in books. He argues that this reading of faith, as assent to doctrine, is far removed from what the New Testament has to say about the subject. We could say that the over-conceptualisation of faith makes it a prime candidate for becoming an ideology.

This point is reinforced if we follow Castillo’s consideration of the people of faith in the New Testament, especially in the synoptic gospels. Here those who believe are nearly always the marginalised, those who do not belong to the centre of power, whilst the powerful are portrayed as without faith. Even the disciples are described as having only limited faith.\(^{297}\) Castillo notes that in the synoptics “to believe in Jesus is to *trust* in him”,\(^{298}\) something which is echoed by Jon Sobrino’s definition of faith as “absolute trust and complete openness to God”.\(^{299}\) To trust in Jesus, however, is also, according to Mark 1:15, to believe in the gospel, and, argues Castillo, to believe in the gospel is to accept life as Jesus lived it, to intend to live as Jesus lived.\(^{300}\) Faith, then, is precisely not about doctrines and ideas, but about life, about the way in which life conforms to Jesus. For this reason, the later ending of Mark (16:9-20) records the signs of faith as signs which are about defending and safeguarding life.\(^{301}\) Castillo suggests that, since not all will be able to do these miraculous things, what is really important is what all can do, which is “to work, to struggle, for a life of more dignity, more solidarity, one which is more human: to overcome the forces of evil which oppress so many people”.\(^{302}\) This may seem a rather unsatisfactory and limited interpretation of the Marcan addition, and perhaps what is rather needed is a redefinition of miracle which would include such a life.

Castillo’s reading of the use of words connected with faith and belief in John similarly stresses the importance of life lived here and now. Again

\(^{296}\) Cf., *ibid.*, p.242. This is one of the criticisms which can be levelled against Clodovis Boff, as we will see below in Chapter 4.

\(^{297}\) Castillo, *Los pobres y la teología*, pp.210-216

\(^{298}\) *Ibid.*, p.216

\(^{299}\) Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, p.154. This is the opening of the section entitled “The Faith of Jesus”. This section was criticised by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in their Notification concerning Sobrino’s works. See a response to this criticism in Eduardo de la Serna, “Análisis de la *Notificatio* desde una mirada bíblica” in José Maria Vigil (ed.), *Bajar de la cruz los pobres: Cristología de la liberación*, Digital edition, Published by the International Theological Commission of EATWOT, Version 2.01, 2007, pp.83-92, here p.90

\(^{300}\) Castillo, *Los pobres y la teología*, pp.217-218

\(^{301}\) See Mark 16:17-18. The signs are casting out demons, speaking languages, picking up snakes and drinking poison without harm, and curing the sick.

this is seen as having to do with a way of life, one which, however, will inevitably lead to conflicts. Faith is “adherence to a person, a concrete man who lived in a particular way and, as a consequence, provoked a conflict which led him to the most undignified and humiliating form of death then known”\textsuperscript{303} This conflict happened because Jesus sided with life, as the signs he does in the Fourth Gospel show.\textsuperscript{304} The life of which John speaks\textsuperscript{305} is, Castillo insists, primarily “this” life, here and now. He expresses it thus:

…this life, as Jesus understands it, has such depth and such fullness, that it contains already in itself a dimension which transcends, that is to say, that goes beyond even death and, in this sense, it can be said that it is a life without limits, \textit{definitive}, which is the same as saying ‘eternal’.\textsuperscript{306}

From all this,\textsuperscript{307} it will perhaps be clear that Castillo places faith and life at the centre of Christianity, because for him faith is primarily a way of living, an attitude and a practice. The attention to doctrine, to ideas and concepts has led, in his opinion, to division and separation, but rarely to life.\textsuperscript{308} At its most basic, faith “is \textit{the way of life presented to us by the Gospel}”.\textsuperscript{309} To believe in Jesus is to choose to follow a particular path,\textsuperscript{310} to live in a particular manner, which includes an awareness of the necessary link between faith and justice and of the need to be aware of the threats to the environment. It will also produce conflict.\textsuperscript{311} This also has a profound affect on how theology is understood. For Castillo in the first place theology is not about \textit{intellectus fidei}, but the way in which believers reflect on life.\textsuperscript{312} However, it is not simply enough to reflect on life, but one has also to choose the place from which this reflection is carried out: “\textit{from the situation of those who have to bear this life in the most threatened, unworthy, limited way}”.\textsuperscript{313} In other words, God is not the God of life as an abstract concept, but of life for and from the poor. Underlying this discussion is again the question of idolatry and

\textsuperscript{303} Ibid., p.225
\textsuperscript{304} See \textit{ibid.}, p.233, and in general on the signs and their significance, pp.225-235. The signs in John include the healing of the man at the pool of Bethzatha (John 5:1-18), the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1-41) and the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-44)
\textsuperscript{305} Cf. John 6:63, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” or John 10:10, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly”.
\textsuperscript{306} Castillo, \textit{Los pobres y la teología}, p.226
\textsuperscript{307} Castillo goes on to discuss Paul and the Letter to James, but essentially he repeats what he has said about the gospels, so I will not address this section here.
\textsuperscript{308} Castillo, \textit{Los pobres y la teología}, p.243
\textsuperscript{309} \textit{Ibid.}, p.246
\textsuperscript{310} Or, as Acts 9:2 puts it, “belonging to the Way”
\textsuperscript{311} Castillo, \textit{Los pobres y la teología}, pp.246-248
\textsuperscript{313} Castillo, \textit{Los pobres y la teología}, p.250. Italics in the original.
ideology. Life, as the transcendence of human existence before and in God, is what prevents faith becoming ideological, and its object idolatrous. Faith as gift cannot be wholly possessed if it is to remain gift. It must remain open to its giver, and to the prior gift of life which makes it possible. However, to claim faith as the way of life found in the gospel is always prone to abuse, for someone has to interpret that way of life. In other words, the danger of ideology (Ideology 1), of assuming a part as the whole, is not overcome.

### 2.4.3 Salvation as life-affirming in the here and now

It is worth remembering that liberation theology has from the beginning had a marked soteriological stress. In *A Theology of Liberation* – whose subtitle includes the very word “salvation” – Gustavo Gutiérrez complains that “[o]ne of the great deficiencies of contemporary theology is the absence of a profound and lucid reflection on the theme of salvation”. What liberation theology does, he continues, is to rescue “the idea that salvation is an intrahistorical reality”. From what we have already seen of Castillo’s concerns, it will come as no surprise that it is this ‘intrahistorical reality’ that he stresses in his discussion of the relationship between life here and now and salvation. Just as life has often been understood in Christianity as referring to eternal (i.e., post-mortem) life, so, he contends, salvation has, to the great detriment of Christians through the centuries, also been understood as “eternal”. His criticism is similar to Marx’s: the promise of eternal salvation has enabled people to support sufferings and injustice in the present life.

The stress on the immanence of salvation is worth dwelling on. At first glance, it might seem an example of Idolatry 1, of reducing the Transcendent to the material. But this is not Castillo’s point, nor is it mine. It is rather an argument against another form of Idolatry 1, but here it is the material, the human, which is denied its materiality and reduced to the transcendent. This is equally destructive, however, for life is a gift of God

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314 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, p.83
315 Ibid., p.86. Among many other works, reference can be made to the book by Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1984. In his book *Teología e Prática*, to which I turn in more detail in Chapter 4, Clodovis Boff uses the theme of salvation to illustrate his methodology, especially what he has to say about the hermeneutic mediation; see Boff, *Teología e Prática*, pp.175-195 (ET, pp.91-104)
316 Castillo, *Los pobres y la teología*, pp.257-258
317 See ibid., p.258 He mentions the “opium of the people”, as a short-hand for the Marxist critique of religion. On this critique, see Denys Turner, “Religion: Illusions and liberation”, in Terrell Carver (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp.320-337, and especially pp.334-337, where he suggests that Marx criticises religion, and in particular Christianity, as ideological, precisely because it places the historical and the transcendent in mutually exclusive opposition. See also on this Peter Scott, *Theology, Ideology and Liberation*. Both Turner and, as we shall see, Castillo, want to question this division as an adequate understanding of Christianity.
which, faith in the resurrection assures us, has no end. And life is something which is located spatially and temporally, at least as we experience it. To split the material from the transcendent is to deny the power of God at work in creation, because God is limited to the transcendent. 318

This is why salvation in the New Testament is hardly ever used with the adjective “eternal”. 319 Thus, as Castillo understands it, “when the New Testament applies to Christ the title ‘Saviour’ (soter), it is speaking of a salvation which, without any shadow of doubt, is at work in this life and refers to this life”. 320 This is underlined by the fact that, although it is true that Christ saves humanity from our sins, this is directly affirmed only four times in the New Testament, and really goes to show that “salvation affects humanity in its totality”. 321

Further evidence of the immanence of salvation, its primary reference to what Castillo calls “this life”, is found in the close relation between salvation and faith. The constant message of the New Testament texts is that the one who has faith is saved, “where there is faith, there is salvation”. 322 Since, as we have seen, faith is about life in and with Christ, in the concrete circumstances of daily existence, salvation too must be rooted in life as it is experienced, especially by the oppressed. So, he says,

When we Christians talk of salvation, we are referring (whether we think we are or not) to the action, and therefore the intervention of Christ in history, through faith; that is to say, through the lives of all those who struggle to defend life, to enable life and to give worth to life. 323

Castillo does not want to deny the transcendent nature of salvation, but he does want to insist that notions of transcendence which affirm a radical separation between the historical and the transcendent are mistaken, or, as I said above, ultimately ideological. Essentially he emphasises here what Gutiérrez referred to as the “intrahistorical reality” of salvation. This does not mean that history is salvation, that the world will be brought to completion and fruition through the historical process. Despite what some of its critics may have feared, liberation theology does not want to collapse everything into pragmatic immanentism. 324

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318 I will discuss this further below in my treatment in Chapter 3 of the Second Council of Nicaea.
319 Castillo, Los pobres y la teología, p.260. The one text where this phrase occurs is Hebrews 5:9. In addition he notes 2Tim 4:18, Heb 9:28 and 1Pet 1:5 as texts where roughly synonymous ideas are expressed, but argues that these are the only four where salvation refers exclusively to the other life.
320 Castillo, Los pobres y la teología, p.261
321 Ibid., p.261. The four references are Mt 1:21, Lk 1:77, 1Tim 1:15 and James 5:20.
322 Castillo, Los pobres y la teología, p.264 Italics in original.
323 Ibid., p.267
324 This is not to say that the danger has not been present. Indeed, it was precisely the fear or suspicion of this which led Clodovis Boff to develop his theology of mediations in Teologia e Pratica: see p.24 of the book (ET, p.xxiii) and his theological reminiscences in Clodovis Boff, “Cómo veo la teología
Rather, what is being claimed here is that the transcendent is better understood not as goal, or at least not only as goal, but also as starting point, as impulse, as meaning in and for and beyond history. In other words, it is through the encounter in faith with Christ at work in our lives, and especially in the lives of the poor and all who struggle for the fullness of life that we come to understand what salvation is, to understand that we are saved, and that this salvation so radically affects the entirety of our existence that to accept it is to enter on a journey which has no end. In this sense, it is profoundly anti-idolatrous and anti-ideological. Salvation is not an end, a totality we can lay claim to. It does not justify our excluding anyone, it does not allow judgement to be passed on others.\(^{325}\) Salvation is indeed wholeness, but it is wholeness in the fullness of God who has no end.

In this relatively brief presentation, we have seen how Castillo argues that life, especially in its relation to religion, faith and salvation, understood in their practical and present forms, is central to a theology from the perspective of the poor. What he sees himself as doing is producing a theology which is not ideological, at least not ideological to the degree that it supports those who oppress the marginalised. In part he does this by stressing the here and now nature of talk about life in the New Testament. Classical theology displayed an increasing tendency to de-historicise realities named by concepts such as faith, life, salvation. Although there may be other reasons for this, in practice it became a tool for ideological readings of Christianity, which allowed it to serve as a promise of hope and reward for unjust sufferings in this life. The stress on the here and now, on the other hand, does not lose the transcendent, but rejects any attempt to separate it from the material. There are not two worlds, a detached one where God resides and the day to day world of most human beings.

The question must remain, however, as to whether in fact the transfer of hope and reward to this life really succeeds in radically transforming the situation. It is not straightforwardly clear that this is any less ideological, as the warnings of the dangers of “immediatism” suggested. Admittedly now the call is not to be passive and to await life after death to enjoy what was inaccessible here on earth – justice, peace, fulfilment, plenitude. But this pacifying passivity is replaced by an activism which does not have to be, but in practice often is, violent.\(^{326}\) It is instructive to see how many times Castillo uses the word “struggle”. I do not want to suggest that he is

\(^{325}\) Cf., the parable of the wheat and the tares, Mt 13:24-30, and the parable of the fish in the net, Mt 13:47-50

\(^{326}\) One could recall the theologies of revolution which were present in the 1960s, and people such as Camillo Torres. These were not without their influence on early liberation theology. Gutiérrez and Torres were friends and fellow students in Louvain.
somehow promoting violent revolution as the only way to live Christianity, for that would be a travesty. Nevertheless, the fact that living as a disciple of Jesus is likely to lead to conflict does not mean that the obverse is true. Being in conflict does not in itself prove that one is living a Christian life. To put it another way, the God of life cannot be used to kill, not even the idols of death.

At this point, and before going on to re-consider some of the socio-anthropological data examined in Chapter 1, it may be helpful to return to the question of sacramentality which was also discussed briefly in Chapter 1.327 There it was seen that the poor are seen, at least on occasion, as a sacrament or icon of God or Christ. In relation to the discussion of Castillo, however, the question also arises as to the relation between sacrament, salvation and the symbolic nature of sacrament which helps to maintain what Eberhard Jüngel has called the “Ineinander von An- und Abwesenheit Gottes”.328 Given that this simultaneous presence and absence of God which the sacraments symbolise has in several of its forms329 drawn on the same resources as the philosophers I consider in the next chapter, it is perhaps worth briefly considering this question.

To help me in this, I turn to the Dutch ecumenical and contextual theologian, Martien Brinkman. His concern is to rescue talk of sacraments from a focus solely on validity and to ask what relevance they have for people today, especially given concerns for an all-embracing justice which includes therefore responsibility to our fellow-humans as well as to the rest of God’s creation.330 Nevertheless, and significantly for what I have been arguing in the past two chapters, Brinkman is also well aware of the ambiguity inherent in any symbol: as he puts it, “ambiguity is part of the ontological fibre of the symbol itself”.331 In other words, to the extent that the poor are a sacrament of salvation, as Sobrino would have it,332 they, both collectively and individually, are so ambivalently. At the very least, they always point to both the presence and absence of God, but more than that, “the sure sacrament always carries with it the ambivalent symbol and

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327 See Chapter 1.1.3
330 See, for example, Brinkman, Sacraments of Freedom, p.88 “It will be evident, however, that a theologically correct discussion of the validity of the sacraments has not yet said anything about their relevance”.
331 Brinkman, Sacraments of Freedom, p.69
332 Cf., Sobrino, No Salvation outside the Poor.
in this way it is always linked to the ambivalence of creation”. The poor can only be icons of Christ if it is recognised that they are not Christ. They are at the same time, like all humanity, radically marked by the presence of sin, and even more radically marked by the fact of having been chosen since the beginning to be children of God.

The ambivalence of the symbol does not however negate the salvific impact of the poor as sacrament. Brinkman points out that any discussion of sacraments must focus on four aspects, the soteriological, ecclesiological, eschatological and symbolic, all of which are “intrinsically linked. They are not to be confused with one another, but neither can they be separated from one another”. However, for my purposes, it is the eschatological and symbolic aspects which are most central.

In this section I have been discussing the attempts by liberation theology to restore the historical reality of salvation, but have also noted that there is a danger of pushing the pendulum too far so that any post-mortem life and salvation is rendered almost redundant. Here, as Brinkman notes, modern sacramental theology can help.

Terms like sacrament and symbol, as many contemporary authors endorse, designate the church as simultaneously the place of presence and of distance, of disclosure and disguise. Symbolic representation lies between commemoration (anamnesis) of the past (the saving work of Christ) and the future (His coming in glory). In this way the Christian symbols signify an absence, and only in this way do they evoke a presence.

The task for liberation theology, then, is to ensure that in the encounter with the poor they are allowed to retain their symbolic – iconic – power. As will be seen in much more detail in the following chapter, the icon reveals by pointing beyond its own limits. Yet it is only as existing, as particular, as localised, that it can do so. For, the “salvation held before us in the sacrament is always presented to us by way of the created symbol, that is to say, by way of earthly things”.

It is not, however, only earthly things, but people too, most specifically the poor who can, for liberation theology, act as symbol-sacrament of God’s salvific design for all of his creation. Moreover, “Christian presence and action in a society in need of change, especially in the interest of the poor, emerges as a sacramental question”. In this sense, at least, any genuine theology, and certainly any genuine theology of liberation will be sacramental, pointing to the presence / absence of God in the world. By

333 Brinkman, Sacraments of Freedom, p.66
334 Cf. Ephesians 1:3-6
335 Brinkman, Sacraments of Freedom, p.73
336 Ibid., pp.79-80
337 See Chapter 3.5.4
338 Brinkman, Sacraments of Freedom, p.93
339 Ibid., pp.85-86
recognising the iconic potential of the poor to symbolise sacramentally the salvific will of God, liberation theology has recovered and actualised a key strand of the Biblical revelation. However, the discussion of sacraments is always linked in practice to questions of power and control, and thus it remains open as to whether liberation theology has in fact always managed to avoid idolising the poor by making them signs only of presence, so that there is nothing beyond them.\footnote{This will be covered also in much more detail in Chapter 3.5.3}

It seems to me that it is this ambiguity inherent in liberation theology – between the recognition of the iconic potential of the poor to reveal God as Saviour and the danger of therefore idolising the poor by making them too present – that helps to explain the socio-anthropological data which I examined in Chapter 1.\footnote{See above, Chapter 1.2.1} I return especially to the two works by John Burdick which I discussed there.\footnote{John Burdick, \textit{Looking for God in Brazil} and \textit{Legacies of Liberation}} In the first book, \textit{Looking for God in Brazil}, he points to the failure of the Base Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), inspired by and inspirational for liberation theology, to address the real needs of the people of the neighbourhood he was studying. It would be possible to argue that this rather proves the point that Castillo is making, since Burdick contends that it is the fact that the CEBs offer a programme of continuity that makes them unattractive. In other words, it is the stress on daily life as the place where the gospel must be lived out that seems to render them less helpful to people, but that may well be because people have been ideologically formed to accept that change is not a genuine social possibility, but only at best psychological.\footnote{This is not meant as a critique of neo-Pentecostal churches which can often have a very positive impact on people’s lives, including at the material level. See on this, for example, Cecilia Mariz, \textit{Coping with poverty: Pentecostals and Christian base communities in Brazil}, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1994.}

However, as Manuel Vasquez submits in critiquing Burdick, it was through the economic crisis in Brazil and the subsequent “struggle for personal and household survival that the popular church’s modernist project of intra-historical transcendence and hope for transformation via human institutions… lost plausibility for the poor”.\footnote{Manuel A. Vasquez, \textit{The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity}, p.223} In terms I have been using in this chapter, it could be said that the poor rejected the ideological nature of the liberation approach, even if it is ideology in the third phase. The promise of a “life before death” proved as hollow – idolatrous – as any other ideology, because it did not, and perhaps could not, realise the utopian vision it held out.

On the other hand, as Burdick’s second book, \textit{Legacies of Liberation}, made clear, there are aspects of liberation theology that have shown themselves capable of informing transformational activities. This in itself does not
make them non-ideological, but it suggests that at its best liberation theology has been able to inculcate a spirit which is not only hetero-critical but also self-critical. To the extent to which that self-criticism is a genuine openness to change, and to re-thinking its position, it at least acts as a safeguard against the worst excesses of ideology. It may be that Žižek’s claim that there is no non-ideological position is true. However, that does not mean that all thought is pointless, nor that all positions are equally ideological. The openness to criticism will keep alive the possibility of change and transformation.

Conclusion
I began this chapter with the assertion that liberation theology has seen in the use of the concept of idolatry a helpful way of critiquing the various systems – economic, political, social – which oppress the poor. I have sought to demonstrate this by recourse to a number of key texts dealing with idols in liberation theology. This has made clear the fundamental reading of idolatry in its two forms / dimensions. It is seen as all that reduces the power of the Transcendent to the purely material (Idolatry 1) and what presents the non-ultimate as the ultimate, and which as a consequence demands to be treated as an end (more pertinently, as a desirable end) rather than a means (Idolatry 2). In this sense, the non-idolatrous (which is not necessarily identical to the iconic) is all that recognises and promotes itself as intermediary and potentially redundant.\(^{345}\)

The contention of liberation theology is that the poor have been the victims of ideology and idolatry. Instead of a God who sides with the poor, modern global society has been presented with a view of itself that suggests the inevitability and necessity of the market. It may be true, for this vision, that the market demands victims, but those who are its victims are deserving of this fate anyway, either because of their own indolence\(^{346}\) or for the greater good of all. The only possibility of freedom and of salvation is to be found in strict adherence to the demands and dictates of the market.

Idolatry-critique has, for this reason, tended to focus on the economic sphere, without denying close links between the economic and the social. In general, the treatment of the economy has tended to be more “idoloclastic”, pointing to the ambiguities and inherent contradictions in the market system, especially to its tendency to create and demand victims. As Daniel Bell has noted, attempts to provide alternatives have been less

\(^{345}\) This seems to me to be at the heart of St. Ignatius’ understanding in the Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises, where all of creation is to be seen as a means to help us achieve the end for which we have been created, to be at one with God. See SpEx 23

\(^{346}\) “It is quite true that without a stronger work ethic than now prevails in Latin America, and without a change in the anticommmercial climate of Latin American governments, aristocracies and churchmen, the future does look bleak”, Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York, The Free Press, 1993, p.232
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successful, partly because liberation theology is caught within the very system it wants to condemn.\footnote{Daniel Bell, \textit{Liberation Theology After the End of History: The refusal to cease suffering}, London / New York, Routledge, 2001, p.42. See also pp.70ff. As the title of Vasquez’s book, \textit{The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity}, indicates, liberation theology with its heavy indebtedness to modernity has struggled to cope with the crisis which modernity has faced in the past three or four decades. Remember, too, Jung Mo Sung’s critique of Gutiérrez as being stuck within utopic reason.}

Any alternatives have often been couched in terms of utopia, even if this is an at times ambiguous concept. There is no clear-cut understanding of what is meant by utopia as the disagreement between Libanio and Jung Mo Sung showed. However, it does seem to include some form of radical, but at least in part actualisable transformation in society. Utopia is not, in other words, an exclusively negative term referring to a place which can and will never exist in any form, but is always partly, as Libanio remarked, an eu-topos, a desired reality. If utopia is seen as entirely intra-historical, in order to prevent it becoming a form of ideology it needs to be tempered by eschatological hope that makes it impossible to reduce it to any particular manifestation.

The dangers inherent in utopianism have, however, not been lost on liberation theologians, who have noted the tendency to construct idols present within theology too. One way of describing the act of construction is to talk of ideologies, which form views of society which in some fashion are ‘worshipped’. I took from Clodovis Boff the concepts of Ideology 1 and Ideology 2, which I linked to Idolatry 1 and Idolatry 2. I also noted the three phases of ideology, the intuitive, the common sense, and the revolutionary. Ideologies are regarded as ways of viewing the world which claim to be definitive and all-inclusive, but are in fact rendered actually impotent because of the contradictions inherent to them. In this sense ideologies, or their defenders and proclaimers, act as conceptual gatekeepers,\footnote{Originally introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1947 and later used to talk about controlling the flow of news, the idea of the gatekeeper refers to those who are in a position to include or exclude information. See David White, (1964). “The ‘Gatekeeper’: A Case Study in the Selection of News”, in Lewis A. Dexter / David M. White (eds.), \textit{People, Society and Mass Communications}, London, Collier MacMillan, 1964, pp.160-172.} circumscribing and structuring the flow of possible readings of society and its structures and systems, or, we could perhaps say, suggesting what it is that is worthy of worship.

Even granted the truth of the liberation critique of the market and other ideologies and idolatries linked to it,\footnote{It seems on the face of it that the situation may be somewhat more complex than some of the theologians allow for. Simply to accuse anyone who suggests this of being under the sway of the dominant ideology, for all that it saves time, may not be wholly convincing as a form of argumentation. At least, as Bell has suggested, it would seem hard to claim that one ideology – overarching worldview or grand narrative – can be countered successfully by employing another.} there are, it seems to me, still problems to be resolved. In as much as liberation theology really wants to...
claim to be a new way of doing theology, it must always be open to recognising the danger of creating an ideology. As the gospel of Matthew reminds us, simply because we can see a splinter in our brother’s eye, that does not mean that we do not have a plank in our own, and the ability to spot ideology elsewhere is no guarantee that it is absent in one’s own approach. This at least suggests the need for circumspection and constant self-criticism on the part of liberation theology. It should be noted that in general this has happened. This has led critics to accuse liberation theology of forever changing its tune, without realising that it is precisely because of self-reflection and reflection on the wider context that liberation theology has remained true to its founding insights whilst being willing to change and adapt where necessary.

Nevertheless, when taken in conjunction with the previous chapter, I want to suggest one possible area where this need for introspection and critical correction may be especially necessary. I already alluded to this in the conclusion to the previous chapter and I return to it now. In their appeal to the poor, liberation theologians are often quick to make statements about who these poor are, and what they need. Part of the problem here is the arguably necessary abstraction present in all writing and speaking. For liberation theologians on the whole the poor are not actually a concept, but specific names and faces, people they have shared with, be it around the Lord’s table in celebrations of the Eucharist, or simply around the table in an often very rudimentary house. Nevertheless, unless the telephone directory is a work of theology, one cannot name and describe every José and Maria in detail, and all the particular faces and names come together as the globalising “poor”. And therein lies the problem.

For, as soon as the poor become a global concept, they are turned into an organising category, to which people either belong or not. But organising categories are not innocent and they are rarely, if ever, free from ideological content and purpose. Thus the poor become, or at least run the risk of becoming, an ideological concept, one which can be used to include or exclude. But as we have seen, ideological frameworks also show us what it is that we are to worship, and to the extent that the poor are used as an ideological tool, they are held up as something to be worshipped. So, if we are not careful, liberation theology can lead to what one might term

\[ \text{350 Claimed already by Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, p.12} \]
\[ \text{351 Matthew 7:3-5} \]
\[ \text{352 See, for example, the essays in Susin (ed.), Sarca ardente, by José Duque, Sérgio Torres, Gustavo Gutiérrez, João Batista Libanio and Clodovis Boff.} \]
\[ \text{353 As one example, see Derek Lynch, “The Retreat of Liberation Theology”, originally published in The Homiletic & Pastoral Review, February 1994, pp.12-21, available online at http://catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0709.html (accessed 20/03/07).} \]
\[ \text{354 The Derridean différance is something like what I have in mind here. See comments on this in Dolejšová, Accounts of Hope, pp.35-37} \]
“ptocholatry”, the idolising of the poor. I do not want to argue that this actually happens, and it seems to me that liberation theologians are by and large aware of the problem. But, if it is not the case, why is it not? Moreover, as Stephen Long has noted,

Of course, sacralising the poor is first and foremost unfair to them. It would place too great a burden on them and prompt an inappropriate identification with the poor by which those of us who are not poor use them for our own salvation. This would raise several problems. The poor cannot save us: only Christ achieves this.\(^{355}\)

In this sense, the reliance on the poor as the privileged *locus theologicus* is potentially damaging to the poor and to the theologian. Jon Sobrino has written of the need and the danger of the theologian trying to place herself or himself in the place of, or write from the perspective of, the victim.\(^{356}\) For that reason, I am loathe to say what concretely the effect is of this on the poor. In practice, from some of the literature we saw in the last chapter as well as from personal observation, I would suggest that it can lead in the worst cases to bitterness, the destruction of hope, anger, hatred, in short, everything that is not life. For the theologian it can be equally destructive, as he or she seeks to reconcile deeply held beliefs with the reality around. The turn to the poor, as icons of God, has frequently inspired theologians.\(^{357}\) But when that inspiration has blinded the vision of God behind it, the theologians also suffer burn-out, loss of faith and hope and charity, and rather than helping lead the poor to freedom they can become those who imprison the poor even more within unrealisable hopes and expectations.\(^{358}\)

But even if so far the danger of idolising the poor has been wholly avoided – which is debatable – it does not seem to me that there is sufficient methodological clarity as to how that will continue to be the case, or has been the case. Part of what I am arguing here is to do with a serious problem at the heart of any contextual theology. I would agree with Gustavo Gutiérrez that “strictly speaking to say that a theology is contextual ends up being tautological; in one way or another all theology is contextual”.\(^{359}\) But the question remains as to who determines and defines


\(^{356}\) Jon Sobrino, *La fe en Jesucristo*, pp.19-20. This is perhaps one of the most honest and moving attempts I have come across to address the question of how, to use Sobrino’s words, those of us who have can dare to speak for those who do not have anything.

\(^{357}\) The passage from Sobrino referred to in the previous footnote continues “The poor and the victims of this world are, by the values they hold – often – and by what they are – always – sacraments of God and the presence of Jesus Christ amongst us. They offer light and utopia, the call and challenge to conversion, welcome and pardon”.

\(^{358}\) The point about utopic reason which Hinkelammert makes, as we saw above.

the context. Ideology, we have seen, is precisely about making the particular universal, and idolatry is the worship of the limited and immanent as the transcendent. If all theology is contextual, all theology is at grave risk of reducing its context to a universal and of forcing all to be part of that world. Although I restrict myself in this work to the question of liberation theology, the problem seems much broader, and more serious.

A further question concerns the relationship of liberation theology – and its methodology – to modernity. As I have examined liberation theology's treatment of the poor and of idolatry, it has become clear that it is heavily reliant on the arguments of modernity. Indeed, the very stress on liberation is a key component of modernity, for all that it is, so the theologians we have examined argue, biblical. Although I would not want to abandon modernity completely, there are also problems inherent in this dependency on modernity. There is an emphasis on autonomy which is at odds with the desire for community which liberation theology expresses. It would be hard to argue plausibly that the mass of people in Latin America have ever really adopted the viewpoint of modernity, which may be yet another reason for the comparative difficulties liberation theology has experienced in having its message heard. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the importance of ontology, of being as foundational, has led to the “ownership” of being becoming a major theme. In order to underline the right of the poor to be, to possess their own being (not to be non-persons, as Gutiérrez has said), has liberation theology in fact not made itself the “owner” of the existence of the poor?

In the fourth chapter, I will turn to the method of liberation theology to see just what it can offer in terms of a methodological approach to avoid these problems of idolatry and ownership. How is the context allowed to challenge the theology and the theologian in a permanent way? In order to look at this question, however, a better language for describing the problem is called for. Moreover, there is a need for an approach which some may wish to call post-modern, but which I would prefer to think of in terms of presenting a challenge to the pre-suppositions of modernity. For this reason, I want to move away in the next chapter from the direct investigation of liberation theology and, after examining the Iconoclast controversy, consider some ideas taken from contemporary French philosophy to see if they can assist me.