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Towards a theology of human praxis: A proposal from liberation theologies in a neoliberal world

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Neoliberalism is an anti-utopian and kind of patron–client theory that threatens not only the human utopian thought, and therefore the human praxis, but also the '*conditio humana*'. Therefore, this threat also challenges the current visions of praxis in contextual theologies. From a dialogue between the traditions of praxis present in Latin American liberation theology and black liberation theology, particularly from a renewed understanding of human relationships in terms of God's grace and human spirituality-kenosis, it could be possible to overcome the ideological character of neoliberalism by offering some elements for the development of a human praxis oriented to the creation of possible worlds that reproduce the natural circuit of life and acknowledge the rising and dignity of the new subjects.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The critical analysis of the ideological character of neoliberalism implies an interdisciplinary approach that considers the contribution of Christian theology. From the inductive orientation of Latin American liberation theology and black liberation theology, this research proposes some theological elements to discuss the feasibility of a human praxis that orients the creation of possible worlds.

Keywords: Latin American liberation theology; black liberation theology; neoliberalism; human praxis; grace; *kenosis*.

Introduction

At the end of the last century, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of historical Sovietism, and the publishing of Francis Fukuyama's book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, were used as three striking images (or milestones) of the global hegemony and final triumph of neoliberalism over other economic and political theories (Beaudin 1995:241–242). However, neoliberalism is not confined to the macro level of those structural relationships; it also includes a diversity of ideological approaches that are present in the conjunction between the traditional versions of the doctrine and the current practices of existing neoliberalism (Ryan 2015:79). Its ideological character as a discursive formation and its anti-utopian consequences are a challenge for the human praxis, including Christian praxis. In this context, the challenge for liberation theologies is to propose elements for a praxis oriented to the reproduction of human life and to the dignity and non-exclusion of racially marginalized groups.

Neoliberalism as a complex and multi-layered theory

The most common and simple definition of neoliberalism focuses on the relationship between the 'free market' and the 'small state'. According to this definition, neoliberalism would imply the hegemony of market relationships and the reduction of the social state to a police state that is dedicated to the legal protection of those market relationships. Strikingly, scholars who support neoliberalism and those who oppose this project share this traditional definition of free market neoliberalism (Ryan 2015:79). However, this definition offers an inadequate picture of the empirical reality of the complex relationships between the market and the state in concrete neoliberal practices.

In fact, the state has played in practice a starring role in the development of neoliberalism. State policies have particularly been decisive for the upside-down redistribution of income and wealth from the lower classes to the upper classes. Some of these policies have been tight control over the labour supply, either through immigration control or through inequitable education systems; a 'corporate welfare' which entails government measures to support or subsidise the cost of business and cuts of services that disproportionately affect the poor (Ryan 2015:87). Thus, we could claim that the discourse of free markets and small states functions at the theoretical or ideological level and it is used to address and manipulate the public. However, a patron–client

relationship of mutual favours and benefits between private corporations and public governments functions at the legal and practical level and usually leads to the profits of a privileged segment of the population.

The understanding of the mutual-favours relationship between the market and the state in the neoliberal system as a patron–client relationship is already present in black liberation theology as a 'neoliberal patronage system' (West 2017:XVIII) or as a system based on 'the principle of hypercompetition and the commodification of all spheres of life' (Day 2016:10). Because of this kind of mutual-favours relationship, the gap between these different social groups increases and the weakest communities, including racially excluded groups, are the most affected in the current situation. This is visible in the analysis of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (n.d.) related to the consequences of COVID-19 for people living in poverty.

Neoliberalism is more than a socioeconomic theory about the free market and the small state that supports a complex set of concrete patron–client relationships. It is also a discursive formation that, in different situations and through a wide range of ideas, attempts to reveal and hide its anti-utopian thought (Gilbert 2013:8). We will consider this discursive formation character from some of the perspectives offered by Jeremy Gilbert, particularly neoliberalism as an ideology, as a hegemonic project and as an abstract machine.

According to Gilbert, two elements identify the ideological character of neoliberalism. Firstly, there is the regularity and similarity all over the world of the basic elements of neoliberal policy, and, secondly, there is the extent to which some particular phenomena seem to share and work to reproduce neoliberal thought and its social objectives (Gilbert 2013:12). For Gilbert (2013:15), the key function of neoliberalism as ideology is 'to secure consent and generate political inertia precisely by enabling the experience of precarity and individualised impotence to be received as normal and inevitable'.

The other two perspectives support this ideological character of inertia and impotence. On the one hand, as a hegemonic project, neoliberalism attempts to co-opt human will by a dual process of interpolating subjects as consumers and legitimating public policies that undermine their capacity to consume (Gilbert 2013:17–20). Therefore, it fosters a culture of 'disaffected consent', in which there is dissatisfaction with neoliberalism, but people cannot foresee any possible alternative. On the other hand, as an abstract machine, neoliberalism accentuates the individual character of the subject, while inhibiting any kind of collective character (Gilbert 2013:20–21). Consequently, human beings are involved in a certain kind of practical solipsism in which they are deprived of their social roots, while their visions of hope are reduced to a correlate of the market's vision of success (Gilbert 2013:16).

Black scholars such as Cornel West, David Theo Goldberg and Keri Day critique neoliberalism as a culture and structure of power closely linked to racism. West (2017:XV–XXV) denounces the 'imperial meltdown' associated with the neoliberal policies of recent U.S. presidential administrations, which he argues are connected with wars on predominantly Muslim nations, the mass incarceration of black people, Latino and Americans and an increasing domination of society by destructive market values. Goldberg (2009:331–339) contends that 'race' is a central technology in neoliberal state formation, which directs neoliberalism's allegedly 'free' flows of capital towards predominantly white communities and against racialised nations and groups that it brands as threatening. Day (2016:1–17) develops a black feminist and womanist critique of neoliberalism as a transnational form of governmentality that cuts welfare benefits, imposes austerity measures on postcolonial countries and has a disproportionately negative impact on poor women of colour. In sum, it is plausible to claim that neoliberalism is not only a complex kind of socioeconomic theory and multi-layered patron–client practice that leads to an upward concentration of the wealth of a society but also an anti-utopian and racist ideology that blunts human praxis and seeks to promote a common social denial of *possible worlds*. We understand the word 'possible' in a double meaning. Possible in the sense of potential and feasible, but also possible in the sense of condition for a reality, particularly the necessary condition for the reproduction of the natural circuit of life (Castrillón 2018; Hinkelammert 1984:283).

At this point, a brief definition of utopian reason and praxis is necessary to understand the concrete threat that neoliberalism poses to both of them, utopian reason and human praxis. From the very beginning of its modern use, utopia has been a complex and polysemic word that goes from perspectives of detachment of reality to perspectives of human emancipation (Logan & Adams 1990:XXI). In fact, Ricoeur (1985:265) claims that the word utopia has three levels: utopia as fancy or escape of reality, utopia as challenge to authority and utopia as exploration of the possible. However, and considering its origins as a word disruptive of the order, Ricoeur stresses the last level and claims that the final aim of utopia is to shake the present order, as directed towards a 'nowhere' that exists, even if this nowhere is never fully attained. Thus, for him, the function of utopia is to imagine new possibilities (1985:16).

In this text, and from the liberationist tradition of human emancipation, we will understand 'utopian reason' to be part of (inherent to) the human reason, inasmuch as it is the part of the human reason that let us imagine *ideal worlds* and perfect realities as conditions for the creation of *possible worlds* and possible realities (Ellacuría 1990:142). According to Hinkelammert (1984:52–53), this imagination has been present in the core of the history of humanity in images like the Greek 'golden age', the Christian 'heaven' and the perfect societies of 'free men' of the modern social thoughts. In sum, we can claim that even if the 'nowhere' is not historically

possible, its imagination is still necessary in order to discover alternatives to the current order.

In this text, we will understand 'praxis' to be a kind of action that is performed by human beings and that moves us to overcome the boundaries of the current reality in order to create a better and more human world. In dialogue with authors like Ellacuría (1990) and Hinkelammert (2013), the praxis we have in mind is oriented towards the creation of *possible worlds*, in which we can reproduce the concrete life of each other, [*conditio humana*] and re-enact relationships of tolerance, nondiscrimination and non-exclusion. Although human praxis can be realised at micro- and meso-levels, it always has a macro level orientation. This orientation is crucial because the denial of human praxis is a macro-level threat against human reconciliation and against the reproduction of life of both human beings (Hinkelammert 1984) and the social environment (Francis 2015).

In this theoretical context, we can assert that the main threat that neoliberalism poses to utopian thought, and to human praxis, is that it provokes an ideological misunderstanding of the boundaries between the world of human possibilities and the world of human impossibilities (Castrillón 2018:15–17). The difference between both worlds seems to be easy in theory: the world of human possibilities consists of those realities that are reachable now or in the future by human action, whereas the world of human impossibilities consists of ideas that are unrealisable by any human means. Mainly related to the limits of the human contingency and mortality (be immortal, to live without food, to have unlimited knowledge and so on). However, the ideological character of neoliberalism turns inside out some human possibilities. Something that could be empirically possible in theory, the primacy of the life and dignity of human being over the economic, political and cultural interests (the universal satisfaction of the basic human needs, the creation of a fraternal and peaceful world, a world of tolerance, non-discrimination and non-exclusion), becomes a fancy or chimera, something that is not possible or 'practical'. Thus, the ideological victory of neoliberalism is that we, human beings, end up renouncing the principle of human hope on behalf of 'pragmatism' and 'reality' and, as a consequence, this neoliberal threat finally encompasses the utopian thought as a whole (Hinkelammert 1984:5–10).

Nevertheless, despite the pessimistic context of anti-utopian ideology, the utopian character of human hope is still alive and, with it, the possibilities of human praxis. From the grassroots of this world in different social and religious movements, there rises a cry of hope announcing the advent of *possible worlds*. From particular perspectives, in different times, and with distinct goals, groups of counter-resistance like Occupy Movements in United States and Canada, Indigenous, Black and Peasants movements in Colombia, Peru, Bolivia and Chile, Zapatista Movement and Base Ecclesial Communities offer a common critique of the ideological character of neoliberalism (Zibechi 2021), while performing actions of resistance as a testimony against the neoliberal system

(Hernández 2018:150–151). Their micro- and meso-level actions are *signs of the times* that reveal the power of human imagination and the potentiality of human action. The experiences and testimonies of these social movements are a necessary starting point for a critical reflection about the transformative character of human praxis.

Even so, it is not yet clear in these social movements what kinds of worlds these *possible worlds* could be and how they could be attained. This situation of uncertainty shows how the anti-utopian thought of neoliberalism, which strongly demolished the modern vision of praxis as a teleological creation of *ideal worlds* (Castrillón 2018:15–17), is still affecting the imagination of human praxis as a potential means of transforming human reality.

The general situation of the hegemony of neoliberal ideology, the rise of social movements of resistance and the faint vision of macro level praxis challenge the perspectives of hope and human praxis present in Christian theologies, particularly in those traditions of Latin American liberation theology and black liberation theology that have theorised hope and praxis in concrete contexts.

This article addresses the following question: Is it possible in the present neoliberal context, and considering the challenge of the grassroots movements, to offer some theological elements from the tradition of praxis in Latin American liberation theology and black liberation theology to reappraise human praxis as a potential means of transforming the violent and exclusionary structures of neoliberalism? It is our purpose to offer an answer to this question in the second and third part of this article. In the second part, we will analyse the role of praxis in the perspectives of action of both Latin American liberation theology and black liberation theology. In the third part, we will look forward and propose some theological elements for a praxis of transformation of the human reality in this neoliberal context.

The tradition of human praxis in Latin American liberation theology and black liberation theology

The current hegemony of neoliberalism and its damaging consequences over human relationships and the reproduction of the environment is *a sign of the times* that is commonly read by a wide range of contemporary theologies like Radical Orthodoxy, Social Teaching of the Church, contextual theologies, Latin American liberation theology and black liberation theology. All of these foregoing theologies provide some elements of human action that could orient the praxis of creation of *possible worlds*: the emancipation of human will, as self-control, from the ideological character of capitalism; the church's denunciation of economic and political authoritarianism in both capitalism and socialism; the revelation of other social and cultural logics of exploitation and marginalisation; the acknowledgment of the central role of the structural dimension of human relationships and the

priority of new subjects who are victims of history. This article prioritises the last two approaches, Latin American liberation theology and black liberation theology. A particular option for liberation theologies is not related to a certain kind of 'ontological superiority' of these theologies over the other theologies in terms of attention to praxis. Nevertheless, the analysis of the strengths and also the flaws of the perspectives of praxis in these liberation theologies could be valuable for the proposal and development of some elements of human praxis in the third part of the text.

Praxis as transformation of the reality in the origin of Latin American and black liberation theologies

Liberation theologies emerged as a theological discourse of emancipation of the human being from different levels and kinds of human oppression. Latin American and black liberation theologies offered theological denunciations of a society that denied human life and dignity in different ways. At the same time, these theologies also affirmed, in the terms of Christian hope, the possible emergence of a new reality. According to Gutiérrez (1975:67–69), the integral human praxis implied an intermingled relationship of three levels: political, anthropological and theological. The fullness of liberation required a praxis that could overcome the human realities of economic dependency, human psychological and ideological oppression and human sin as loss of the communion with God. Similarly, according to Cone (2010:1–21), liberation from racial oppression required a praxis related to various political, economic, cultural, psychological and spiritual aspects of black experience.

Even if we acknowledge the fact that there is a complementary and interdependent relationship between praxis and interpretation, we could also claim that the particular contribution of the earliest stages of liberation theologies in various contexts was the affirmation of the primacy of praxis over interpretation. In fact, the struggle of Latin American people for emancipation from the international capitalist system, particularly present in Christianity of liberation and Base Ecclesial Communities (Mo Sung 2007:3), and the struggle of black people for liberation from the capitalist economic exploitation and political marginalisation in the United States, particularly present in the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement (Cone 1984:6–10), are subversive actions that challenge the *status quo*. These actions are the seed for the emergence of these liberation theologies as critical reflections on praxis. Thus, the goal was not merely to develop a hermeneutic of tradition or experience but to transform the human reality. To some extent, early liberation theologians understood the word *transformation* in relation to its Marxist meaning of changing the present state of affairs to create a new and different reality.

Socioeconomic generation and black Marxism

Because of the urgency of liberation of the poor from the scandalous situation of poverty present in Latin America at the end of the 1960s, the first level of praxis – the political one – was often prioritised over the other two levels – the anthropological and theological (to use Gutiérrez's schema). Using the tools of Dependency Theory and Marxist instruments of social analysis, the most common understanding of Latin American liberation theology, in what we could call its first generation (based on Gutiérrez's *A theology of liberation* and its further tradition), was related to the liberation of the poor from the socioeconomic capitalist structures of dependency present in Latin America, by an interpretation of that reality to the light of the Word of God, and also by a praxis of creation of a new man and a new society, mainly seen from the perspective of a new kind of Christian socialist society (Scannone 1984:273–277). The influence of Marxist tools of social analysis was also present in the first generation of black liberation theology, insofar as it was inspired by black radical movements that connected the critique of capitalist domination with the critique of white supremacy (Robinson 2000:185–240).

Despite the reasonable critiques to the narrow orientation of these socioeconomic and political Marxist streams of Latin American and black liberation theologies, they offer a double contribution for a reappraisal of the human praxis, an acknowledgement of the structural dimension of human relationships, as we said before and also, and this is very important, an acknowledgment of the utopian character of the human praxis, stressed by the revolutionary impulse of human hope.

New topics and subjects in the perspectives of praxis of both theologies

The narrowness of a theological reflection that was only focused on socioeconomic issues by using Marxist tools of analysis was broadened by the emerging presence of a wide range of new subjects and new motifs in relation to these liberation theologies. It is not possible to cover the myriad of theological themes and reflections present in these subjects and motifs. Therefore, we will be focused on some of them in order to analyse some of their contributions to a theology of human praxis.

On one hand, this new presence was recognised in Latin American liberation theology at the end of the 1980s, particularly in the famous introduction '*mirar lejos*' (Gutiérrez 1990:17–53), and it would be considered later as a second generation of this theology. The socioeconomic poor, as the preferential subject of liberation theology, was understood in a more complex and integral way from the diverse reflections of indigenous theology, Afro-Latin American theology, feminist theology, peasant theology and ecotheology, among others. Thus, the reality of poverty was complemented by the realities of intolerance, exploitation and social exclusion suffered by the subjects of these theologies (2012 Continental Congress of theology –São Leopoldo, Brazil). On the other hand, the emergence of new topics and subjects was discernible in the vicinity of black theology through the development of womanist theology, Afro-centric theology

and black religious pragmatism and cultural criticism (Anderson 1995; Paris 1995; Williams 1993).

Utopian perspective

A final perspective we would like to refer to is the theological reflections about the utopian character of human thought and the worlds of possibilities and/or impossibilities related to structural praxis. We already mentioned in the past subsections about the revival of the reflections about the structural dimension of human praxis in both Latin American and black liberation theologies. This revival shows the current theological concerns for a theology of human praxis that can offer some elements for the construction of *possible worlds*. In the case of Latin American liberation theology, a critique of utopian thought was already present in the middle of the 1980s. Considering the naivety of the modern teleological visions of human praxis as construction of *ideal worlds* in human history, this critique reappraises the role of *ideal worlds* as the images of the human impossibilities that can orient the praxis of human possibilities, the creation of *possible worlds* (Hinkelammert 1984:30–34). The black tradition has had a complicated relationship with utopian thought. On the one hand, there has been a recent rise of dystopian, fatalistic thinking, sometimes called 'Afro-pessimism', which doubts the possibility of any overcoming of structural anti-blackness in the modern west (Wilderson 2010). Furthermore, there are 'Afro-futurist' thinkers and artists who imagine the world 'otherwise' and seek to bring new black-life-affirming possibilities into being (Brown 2021).

Considering the role and contributions of this myriad of new subjects and topics to the perspectives of praxis in both Latin American and black liberation theologies, we can propose some final affirmations in this second section of the text. The first affirmation is that human reality of exploitation, discrimination and exclusion is diverse and complex. Thus, a discussion about the priority of some subjects over others is not useful. The harsh reality of this world must be addressed in all its interrelated facets and aspects. In addition to studying particular contexts and situations, it may be helpful to search for general conditions in fallen human nature that explain the deepest origins of human violence and exclusion and show how to overcome these problems at their roots. The particular and the universal must be brought together.

The second affirmation is that there is a conservation of critical thought in these traditions. They continue to critique the social order, and they offer some hints from a micro- or meso-level action that can lead us towards a theology of human praxis. However, even if there are some hints in some of them, there is not a clear road map of how the human praxis can orient, from a theological perspective, the macro level creation of *possible worlds* (Mo Sung 2007:8–11; Angarita 2008:31–33). As a consequence, it is plausible to assert that there is still ambiguity about the possibilities of human praxis that can be explained from the threefold scope of human action present in theologies of action: reformism–revolution–transformation (Dussel 1998:528–538).

The third affirmation is related to some limitations and the need of further developments in these traditions of liberation theology that could be useful for a suitable development of a theology of human praxis. On one hand, the traditional limitations of a praxis reduced to the structural change of reality. Particularly, the problems of a teleological methodology of denial, which could lead into a naive vision of creation of *ideal worlds* within human history. Additionally, the need of further developments of some theological tropes, particularly a theology of grace and a theological spirituality, that could help us to reassess the perspectives of a praxis of transformation of the human institutional and structural relationships. Considering that some developments in these theological tropes have been already present in works of authors like Gutiérrez, L. Boff and Cone.

Finally, and in terms of human possibilities, it is important to stress the long and permanent tradition of human emancipation present in the perspectives of praxis of Latin American liberation theology (Castrillón 2018:15–17) and black liberation theology (Prevot 2018). Considering this tradition, and the emergence of new anthropological and theological understandings of human relationships, it is our aim in the third section of this text to offer some theological elements for a reappraisal of the human praxis as a transformation of the neoliberal world in order to create *possible worlds*. This means as a contingent construction of the kingdom of God in human history.

Towards a theology of human praxis: a proposal from liberation theologies in a neoliberal world

The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* has been a milestone for the emerging inductive and contextual theologies of the second part of the1960s. Its invitation to read the *signs of the times* to the light of the Gospel has moved these theologies to improve their socioanalytical approaches and their structural proposals of praxis. However, the Constitution also provides a theological criterion about the human nature that is crucial to avoid biased readings and ideological orientations of the inductive tools that could justify and perpetuate dynamics of violence and social exclusion. The first words of the Constitution '*Gaudium et spes, luctus et angor*' [joy and hope, griefs and anxieties] stress the traditional teachings of the Church about the double character (grace – sin) of the human nature (Griffiths 2010:274–275).

Certainly, a critique to the ideological, and therefore sinful, character of the structural relationships (*structures of sin*) has been present in the Latin American liberationist tradition (Ellacuría & Sobrino 1990:209, 401, 532, 536). This critique has also been present in the analysis of the flaws of the Eurocentric interpretation of the Western critical thought, mainly the Marxist thought, and the revelation of the roots of the Western racism by Robinson (2000:9–28). In this context, the particular contribution of the Pastoral Constitution is to reassume the

doctrine of the fall of human being to assert that the double character of the human nature, sin – grace, is also present in all the human structures. This double character reveals the contingency and limitation of any human action and/or ideology (John Paul II 1987:11–26). Because of the human limitation and contingency, all the human structures are immersed in both, relationships of sin and relationships of grace. In terms of the human contingent praxis, it is not possible to create perfect and/or ideal socioeconomic, political or cultural structures. Nevertheless, and by the grace of God, the human praxis may orient the creation of new peaceful, non-excluding and non-racialised structural relationships.

Considering the contributions of the first and second sections of this article, and particularly the revelation of the ideological character or the neoliberal thought, we will propose some theological elements that could orient a praxis of transformation of human reality in this current neoliberal world. However, and because of the hermeneutical criterion offered by *Gaudium et Spes*, we are aware of the possibilities, and also of the limitations of these elements. We are also conscious there could be a broad group of theological tropes that could work for the elaboration of a theology of human praxis. However, and taking into account the limited scope of this article, we will be focused on some elements that entail a theological reflection about the human structural relationships from the perspective of an anti-idolatrous theology, and an understanding and orientation of the human relationships from a spiritual theology and a theology of *kenosis*.

Anti-idolatrous theology

In the scenario of the double and ambiguous character of human relationships (grace – sin), and particularly before the ideological character present in the institutional and structural relationships, a first development of a theology of human praxis could be the process of discernment of these relationships from the particular perspective of an anti-idolatrous theology. The hermeneutical orientation of this theology focuses on the discernment and distinction between idols of death and God of life (Ellacuría & Sobrino 1990; Hinkelammert 1981; Prevot 2017). Idolatry implies both the manipulation of the true God for the benefits of particular groups of people, and the displacement of God by other gods, created by human beings, whereas the discernment of God of life is related to the reproduction of the life of the needy (Richard 1990:206–213) and the vindication of the racially marginalised of the society.

However, even if in theory it seems easy and natural to opt for the God of life, it is not that easy in practice. Idolatry is the denial of human will. The idols are gods because the human being hands over his will to what he believes is a 'superior will', the will of structures and institutions (Hinkelammert 1981:158–159). Thus, structural relationships attempt to co-opt human will on behalf of a so-called transcendental goodness that will stop any evil reality; nevertheless, this is an illusion that leads to the protection of the structural interests over the concrete human life.

The anti-idolatrous theology, as discernment of human structural relationships, reveals the latent veil of violence and exclusion present in human structures and institutions. According to Hinkelammert, this theology has a particular development in the double orientation of Paul's critique of the Law in the Letter to Romans. For Hinkelammert, in Romans chapters 7 and 8, there is a difference between sins in plural, as simple transgressions of the law, and sin in singular, as the sin we commit on behalf of the law, the sin of annihilation of human life (Hinkelammert 2013:17–18). In this sense, Paul's critique of the law can work as a critical tool to elucidate the ideological legitimation of power and violence in the law, which is an important example of how human structures and institutions work. However, if the institutional relationships (the law) are the means by which human action is conducted, it is necessary to go beyond human individual agency in order to orient human praxis towards the protection of the concrete human life. This is the field of the divine grace (Ellacuría & Sobrino 1990:393–442, 495–510; Gutiérrez 1975).

Considering the idolatrous character of structural and institutional relationships, and then the influence they have over human action, we could claim that it is only by the presence of *God's grace* that it is possible for human beings to develop a praxis of transformation of the reality of exclusion and marginalisation. It is only by God's grace that we can tame our human structural and institutional relationships on behalf of the reproduction of the natural circuit of life, and the acknowledgment of the other, mainly the human minorities, as subjects (Hinkelammert 2013:314–333). In sum, it is only by God's grace that human beings can carry out what is impossible for our self-centered agency: a relationality of liberation of human beings from the tendency of the structural and institutionalised relationships to lead to conflict and violence on behalf of the protection of our personal and institutional interests.

Thus, it is only by God's grace that we can orient these relationships towards two essential biblical pillars: the love of one's neighbour (Lk 10:25–37) and the offering of our lives for the sake of the others (Jn 15:12–15). In our present world, it is possible to move from relationships of conflict and violence to relationships of love for others, but it is necessary to dismiss the ideological character of the neoliberal ideology and its attempt to destroy human praxis. This is the challenge of a theological reflection focused on human spirituality and a theology of *kenosis*.

Spiritual theology and *kenosis*

The discernment of the idolatries is not enough for a Christian praxis. This kind of praxis also implies a transcendence of the structural and institutional relationships within human history. It means to tame the individual and institutional orientation of these relationships in order to orient them to

the protection of the victims of history. This is the field of a Christian spirituality of human praxis.

The field of spirituality in Latin American liberation theology and in black liberation theology is broad and diverse (Cannon 1988; Gutiérrez 1984; Hayes 1916; Paris 1995). There could be varied and legitimate approaches to a spirituality of the human praxis. However, and in terms of the scope of this article as a critique to the individuality and self-interest present in neoliberal thought, we propose one of them, a spirituality that considers the ontological relationality of the human being, and its further development, from a theology of *kenosis*.

The divine revelation of the relational vocation of the human being is paradigmatically present in a theology of the mystery of God. From a Latin American tradition of *communio*, Gonzalo Zarazaga proposes a theology of the mystery of God that passes from an ontology of the entity to a relational ontology that highlights subjects like relation, *koinonia* and *perichoresis*. For him, these subjects show the communitarian and intrinsically communicative reality of God that is revealed in human history as a boundless love (Zarazaga 2017:50). For our purposes, one of the main contributions of this theology is to stress that the fundamental aim of a theological human praxis should be the creation of a communion with God, the others and the creation.

However, and this is a crucial hermeneutical perspective, another main contribution of a relational theology is to reveal the interdependent character of a spirituality of human praxis. This is the field of black spirituality. In the African culture, spirituality is central to all the human actions, particularly those related to social change in defence of the life of the poorest of society (Buffel 2021:5). This spirituality implies *ubuntu*. It means to consider the human being as part of the wholeness, as part of the environment and community (Kobe 2021:6). Thus, a spirituality of human praxis is not focused on the individual agency. On the contrary, it implies a dual relationship between both of them, victim and believer. It is only by the revelation of the victims of history, particularly the revelation of their experiences of sufferings, that the believer can experience an internal pain, a pain from the bowels, *Splagchnizomai* [feel compassion] (Hultgren 2000:96). It is only by this relationship of *communio* between both of them, believer and victim, that it is possible to tame the structural and institutional relationships on behalf of human life and dignity.

Thus, the human communion with God and the others that was realised in human history by Christ is a redemptive power that should move us beyond our personal interests in order to carry out a praxis in history. This means communion is not just a point of view, a kind of interpretation of reality; it implies an intimate relationship between believers that leads to a dual commitment to change the reality of violence and exclusion present in human history (Prevot 2017:1). Nevertheless, the ideal of universal communion is not an abstract or aseptic concept. Even if all human beings share

this ideal, the praxis of communion entails a destiny of suffering and martyrdom for those committed with it, because this praxis leads to the change of the present reality and, therefore, it necessarily leads to a conflict with the human structures and institutions. From a Christian perspective, this praxis as a process of being configured to Christ implies emptiness, *kenosis*, for the believer.

The Pauline term *Kenosis* (Phlp 2:7) has been translated as [emptiness] or [to make oneself nothing]. This term has been usually understood from a dialectic distinction of ontological value between human nature and divine nature in Christ (Yoder 2013:27–34). This distinction has played a valuable role in the history of a spirituality of asceticism, mainly in the anchoritic, monastic and mendicant life, as a self-denial of the believer. However, and because of the influence of a patriarchal theology that attempted to diminish the feminist and relational dimension of the human action, *kenosis* has been a contested trope (Mercedes 2011; Ruether 2002; Tonstad 2015). On the contrary, and considering the challenge of the feminist and womanist traditions, it is necessary to reassume the relational and feminist dimension of *kenosis* in a theology of human praxis.

In a current neoliberal world where individual and isolated values of fame, prestige and social networks' acknowledgment seem to be the *telos* of human action, as a new kind of appropriation of power and richness, an understanding of Christian human praxis as a relational and interdependent spirituality of *kenosis* could be a subversive testimony that proposes a contra-culture of hope. In this sense, *kenosis* is understood as a pass from an individual and self-sufficient human agency to an action based on mutuality and communion. In sum, it is a process of mutual emptiness, believer and victim, in order to put each other in the shoes of the other one, mainly in the shoes of the victim.

Conclusion

Considering an anti-idolatrous hermeneutical orientation, a spirituality of *kenosis* can offer some concrete micro-, meso- and macro-level practices to the construction of *possible worlds* in history. At the micro- and meso-levels, it offers an ascetic perspective of sustainable use of material goods as a critique to the hyper-consumption society and its consequences over the poorest of the world and over the reproduction of the environment (Francis 2015:11). It also offers the willingness to suppress one's ego on behalf of new kinds of human relationships of communion with the victims, as a testimony against the different ideologies of intolerance and social exclusion (classism, sexism, racism and so on) (Cone 1984:201). In short, this relational *kenosis* is a denial of the power and richness that it is socially used to favour relationships of exploitation.

At the macro level, this *kenosis* offers some ideological elements to pass from the current civilisation of richness based on the private accumulation of capital to a civilisation of poverty based on the common share of means for the reproduction of the concrete human life (Ellacuría 1990:169–

173). It also offers elements to pass from the individualistic perspective of construction of personal progress that leads to a social and environmental crisis to the communitarian perspective of construction of a common home (Francis 2015:13). And, from the critical perspective of transformation of capitalist structures present in black liberation theology, it offers elements for the creation of a future new order of unity, integration, social justice, antisexist and democratic in order to overcome the present racist and sexist neoliberal culture that attempts to deny the value of the human diversity and plurality (Cone 1984:202–204). In sum, this macro level praxis invites us to pass from the current civilisation of accumulation, hyper-consumption and social exclusion to a *possible* civilisation of solidarity, sustainability and non-exclusion. Thus, it is possible to claim that the development of a theology of the human praxis, from a structural and institutional orientation, can reveal the valuable testimony of those Christians throughout history who, by the commitment to their faith and moved by their Christian hope, have shaken the structures of power and richness of 'this world'. These testimonies are an anticipatory sign of the world of communion that will be bestowed by Christ at the end of the times. That is our faith and the sign of our hope.

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