

Ignacio Ellacuría: The Love That Produces Hope



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Ignacio Ellacuría was born in the Basque Country on November 9, 1930 and died in El Salvador on November 16, 1989. He was a Jesuit priest, university president, editor, writer, social critic, civic leader. He was a philosopher and theologian, whose published writings include several books and nearly two hundred and fifty essays and editorials on a wide range of topics. He never wrote a fully articulated fundamental theology, but in seeking to ground liberation theology in the historical realism of his teacher and friend, the Spanish philosopher, Xavier Zubiri, Ellacuría made perhaps his most important and creative intellectual contribution.

Ellacuría is also a martyr, one of the eight people brutally murdered by members of the Salvadoran army at the campus of the University of Central America (UCA) in 1989 for crossing the boundaries between spirituality and politics. His martyrdom lends a sober depth to the question, what is at stake in liberation theology? In this essay I focus primarily on his theology and on his efforts to put theology at the service of a love that produces hope. To this end, I concentrate on the relationship between theological production and the social-historical location of the theologian, what Ellacuría calls the *place* of theology.² In this context I also return briefly to consider the meaning of his death.

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²The notion of *place* (in Spanish, *lugar*) figures prominently in Ellacuría's writings. He makes frequent references to the theological place, the true place of the Church, the place that proves most useful for social analysis or the critical reading of a text, the place of prophecy and utopia, etc. The same basic sense of place pervades all these examples.

I divide these reflections into three parts. First, I give an overview of Ellacuría's theological method. Secondly, I focus on his understanding of theological place and the priority he ascribes to the theological place of the poor. Thirdly, I explore the implications of his theological method and his understanding of theological place by reflecting on the place of the love that produces hope in the light of his own life and death.

Method in Theology

Ellacuría's most important reflections on theological method appear in the address he gave at an international conference of liberation theologians meeting in Mexico City in 1975.³ In this paper he seeks to ground theological method in the theory of human intelligence which Zubiri developed to counter the dominant tendencies of Kantian and post-Kantian epistemology. The key anthropological assertion is this: human intelligence is initially and fundamentally a biological activity which emerges from and remains forever linked to human sentience. By virtue of the very structure and function of this sentient intelligence, the human being is located in reality. "The formal structure and differentiating function of intelligence... aim not at comprehending being or capturing meaning, but rather at apprehending reality and confronting oneself with it."⁴ We do not assume reality or generate it conceptually; reality confronts us, imposes itself on us. For this reason, Zubiri and Ellacuría refer to the human being not as the *rational animal* but as the *reality animal*.⁵

³Ignacio Ellacuría, "Hacia una fundamentación filosófica del método teológico latinoamericano," in E. Ruiz Maldonado, ed., *Liberación y cautiverio: debates en torno al método de la teología en América Latina* (Mexico City, August 11-15, 1975), p. 609-635, translation mine; hereafter cited as "Hacia."

⁴The full sentence in Spanish reads: "La estructura formal de la inteligencia y su función diferenciadora, dentro del contexto estructural de las notas humanas y de permanente carácter biológico de la unidad humana, no es la de ser comprensión del ser o captación de sentido, sino la de aprehender la realidad y la de enfrentarse con ella," "Hacia," p. 624.

⁵"The human is animal...but he is not a pure animal, for he does not remain enclosed in a stimulatory medium, but open to a real world. For this reason he is the reality animal, since he unitarily apprehends reality in a stimulatory manner. This

Ellacuría maintains that the structure of the human confrontation with reality generates the fundamental dynamics of theological method. In a key passage taken from his Mexico City address, he summarizes those dynamics.

This act of confronting ourselves with real things in their reality has a threefold dimension: first, **realizing the weight of reality**, which implies being in the reality of things and not merely being before the idea of things or being in touch with their meaning... secondly, **shouldering the weight of reality**, an expression which points to the fundamentally ethical character of intelligence, which [allows us] to take upon ourselves what things really are and what they really demand; thirdly, **taking charge of the weight of reality**, an expression which points to the praxis-oriented character of intelligence which only fulfills its function...when it assumes as its burden doing something real.⁶

The three expressions, **realizing** [*hacerse cargo*], **shouldering** [*cargar con*] and **taking charge of** [*encargarse de*] the weight of reality, point to the noetic, ethical and praxis-oriented structure of human intelligence. In contrast to Lonergan's schema of *experience, understanding and judgment*, for example, these do not represent discrete moments in the cognitive process, but rather the triple dimension of a unitary act, that of "confronting ourselves with real things in their reality."⁷ Following Zubiri, Ellacuría rejects the separation of sensibility and intelligence, as well as the estrangement of knowledge and reality. "It is impossible

goes far beyond saying that all knowing [*conocimiento*] starts with the senses (Aristotle, St. Thomas) or begins with experience (Kant): what is at issue are not contents but, much more radically, the mode or formality by which any content...is apprehended by the human," Ignacio Ellacuría, "*Fundamentación biológica de la ética*," *ECA* (No. 368, 1979), p. 420, translation mine.

⁶"*Hacia*," p. 626.

⁷"*Hacia*," p. 624. Unlike Lonergan, Ellacuría does not ground theological method in the objectification of the cognitive processes of the thinking, theologizing subject. Neither does he simply adopt Paul Tillich's method of correlating existential questions with theological answers, although interesting comparisons could be drawn between the method he formulates on the basis of Zubiri's epistemology and the approaches of these two major thinkers. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1979) pp. 3-25; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) pp. 3-68.

to assert an intrinsic priority of knowing over reality or of reality over knowing. Knowing and reality are, in their very roots, strictly and rigorously co-determining. There exists no priority of one above the other."⁸ Likewise, he refuses to separate and prioritize knowing and praxis, faith and justice, or systematic theology and theological ethics. Consequently, he does not do theology by first conceptualizing the faith, then making an ethical commitment and, as a final step, adopting a pastoral praxis in response to these. Neither does he simply invert this schema and begin with praxis, move to an ethical stance and from there develop an understanding of the faith. Rather, he begins with the human being who apprehends and shapes historical reality through responsible historical praxis. In the human confrontation with the biological-historical problems of existence, intelligible apprehension, ethical stance, and praxis emerge together.

Using this particular epistemological framework, Ellacuría arrives at an understanding of the formal articulation of theology as a "second-order" exercise of sentient intelligence, a view that is broadly shared by other liberation theologians. Using a social-historical hermeneutic to reflect on historical praxis from the perspective of faith, he moves on to an interpretation of Jesus, the following of Jesus, the Kingdom of God, God's salvation in history, etc. Theology thus serves as "the ideological moment of ecclesial praxis."⁹ Ellacuría expands on this definition and, in so doing, highlights the interweaving of reflection and action in the very definition of theology. "The theology of liberation understands itself as a reflection from faith on the historical reality and action of the people of God, who follow the work of Jesus in announcing and fulfilling the Kingdom. It understands itself as an action by the people of God in following the work of Jesus and, as Jesus did, it tries to establish a living connection between the world of God and the human world."¹⁰

⁸"*Hacia*," p. 624.

⁹Ignacio Ellacuría, "*La teología como momento ideológico de la praxis eclesial*," *Estudios Eclesiásticos* (No. 207, 1978), pp. 457-476, translation mine.

¹⁰Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Church of the Poor, Historical Sacrament of Liberation," translated by Margaret Wilde, in I. Ellacuría & J. Sobrino, eds., *Mysterium Liberationis* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), p. 543.

Theological Place and the Place of the Poor

It is not necessary in this brief essay to examine further all three dimensions of Ellacuría's method, but I do want to draw attention to the second, the ethical aspect, the human being *shouldering responsibility* for historical reality. Human knowing operates from particular social structures, and it aims, whether consciously or unconsciously, at the reconfiguration of those same structures. In the very process of apprehending reality, human beings engender history. The human being is the history-making, reality-changing *reality animal*. This has important implications for both faith and theology, because in creating history, we come face to face with the moral dimension of reality.

In every exercise of intelligence, in every encounter with reality, the human being incarnates a fundamental choice which structures subsequent acts of intelligence and further encounters with reality. That fundamental choice emerges in an intrinsic, mutually-conditioning relationship with the particular place from which reality as a whole is encountered. Therefore, theological reflection and the social-historical location of the theologian exist in dialectical relation to one another. What I know and who I become both depend on where I put my body, understanding by "body" both the materiality of the human being and the relational dimension of human persons. This, then, is the challenge of place: Where do I locate myself within historical reality so as to best apprehend that reality? In addressing this question, Ellacuría emphasizes that one's theological place is a real, historical place. It is real, that is, it exhibits material, spatial and local qualities. While it cannot be reduced to mere physical spaciality, human love never abandons the body, never abandons the realm of the material. Even the capacity for non-spacial presence has spacial roots. Hence, the place of love is not an abstract ideal but a real place. Moreover, it is *historically* real. Places like San Diego and San Salvador are not merely geographical places. They represent *historical places*. Profound differences lie between these two, a city in southern California and the capital of El Salvador. These cities embody very different historical realities, weaving the stories of individuals, communities, classes and nations into distinct but interconnected tapestries.

When Ellacuría evaluates a particular social-historical location as a theological place, one can hear echoes of the threefold encounter with

reality which also generates his theological method. He searches for the real, historical location most capable of manifesting God's revelation and call to conversion (the ethical dimension), the place most likely to inspire a living faith in Jesus and a corresponding praxis of discipleship (the praxis-oriented dimension), and the place most apt to stimulate a lively, authentic theological understanding of the faith (the noetic, interpretative dimension.)¹¹ Moreover, historical reality not only manifests a rich diversity of local places; it also bears the scars of profound historical *divisions*. Some places are rich and others poor. Some are strong and others weak. Ellacuría argues that these divisions do not stem primarily from natural causes. Regarding the division between riches and poverty, he observes:

Poverty has to do with good and evil, with justice and injustice, with the realization of the human being and the structure of society.... Even though poverty has natural roots, as does any other individual or collective phenomenon, it is a *historical reality*, that is, something occasioned by historical factors and something that ought to be reversed by historical factors, in which freedom and the capacity of human persons and groups for projection and creation play a part.¹²

In Ellacuría's view, poverty and riches are dialectically, historically related to one another. To put it crudely, some places are poor *because* others are rich. Neither the splendor of San Diego, such as it is, nor the squalor of San Salvador is accidental. Furthermore, the latter looms as more than a gigantic and terrible tragedy. It epitomizes historical mortal sin. It results largely and directly from historical decisions and structures. It leads to death, the slow death brought on by hunger and disease, the violent, sudden death associated with repression. The oppressive and repressive poverty of San Salvador confesses this vital aspect of the truth about our divided historical reality. Insofar as theology seeks to establish a living connection between the world of God and

¹¹See Ignacio Ellacuría, "Los pobres, 'lugar teológico' en América Latina," *Conversión de la Iglesia al Reino de Dios* (Madrid: Sal Terrae, 1984), pp. 165-168.

¹²Ignacio Ellacuría, "Pobres," in C. Floristán & J. J. Tamayo, eds., *Conceptos fundamentales de pastoral* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1983), p. 789; translation mine, emphasis mine.

our divided human world, it needs this truth which comes to light in the place of the poor.

If historical praxis is a divided praxis, if in this divided historical praxis the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil become present and operative, if the ecclesial praxis cannot be neutral with respect to this division and this operative presence, if the theological task receives its truth, its verification, from its incarnation in the true ecclesial praxis, in a truly Christian ecclesial praxis, then it must be asked, in what form of ecclesial praxis should its ideological moment of theological production incarnate itself? Appealing to the Kingdom of God is not quite enough. Rather, it is necessary to determine the place in which the truth of the Kingdom of God is most accessible.¹³

Ellacuría thus maintains that, because historical poverty results from historical sin, the poor, simply by being poor, "constitute the maximum and scandalous, prophetic and apocalyptic presence of the Christian God and, consequently, the privileged place of Christian praxis and reflection."¹⁴ However, he takes this a step further. In one of his best known and provocative images, he likens oppressive poverty and violent repression to historical crucifixion. He calls the victims of these realities, both in El Salvador and throughout the Third World, *the crucified people*.¹⁵ "What is meant by 'crucified people' here is that collective body, which as the majority of humankind owes its situation of crucifixion to the way society is organized and maintained by a minority that exercises its dominion through a series of factors, which taken together and given their concrete impact within history, must be regarded as sin."¹⁶ Hence, "the crucified people" is not merely a colorful meta-

¹³"La teología como momento ideológico de la praxis eclesial," p. 473.

¹⁴"Los pobres, 'lugar teológico' en América Latina," p. 163, translation mine.

¹⁵Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," *Mysterium Liberationis* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), pp. 580-603, translated from "El pueblo crucificado, ensayo de soteriología histórica," by Phillip Berryman and Robert Barr. See also Ignacio Ellacuría, "Las Iglesias Latinoamericanas interpelan a la Iglesia de España," *Sal Terrae* (No. 826, 1982), pp. 219-230; "Quinto centenario de América Latina ¿descubrimiento o encubrimiento?" *RLT* (No. 21, 1990), pp. 271-282; Jon Sobrino, "The Crucified Peoples: Yahweh's Suffering Servant Today," *The Principle of Mercy* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1994), pp. 49-57.

¹⁶"The Crucified People," p. 590.

phor for human suffering in general, nor does it simply represent the sum total of all individual injuries and griefs. It refers explicitly to a people whose suffering is unjustly inflicted, whose suffering results, whether directly or indirectly, from historically real and deliberate choices, from choices whose effects are usually covered up or ideologically justified.

Associating the suffering of the victims of poverty and repression to the crucifixion of Jesus is a theological move that depends on the prior choice of the place from which that suffering is probed. Furthermore, this move, effected from the theological place of the poor, results in an enriched understanding of that place. In a meditation that is utterly consistent with his roots in Ignatian spirituality, Ellacuría intuitively feels that that place is deeply familiar to Christians. It is the foot of the cross. He urges us to go there, to gaze with our "eyes and hearts upon these peoples who are suffering so much, some from misery and hunger, others from oppression and repression, and then, before this people thus crucified, to make the colloquy of St. Ignatius from the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises, by asking: What have I done to crucify them? What am I doing in order to uncrucify them? What ought I to do so that this people will be raised?"¹⁷ As the victims of historical sin, the crucified people call us to an ever deeper conversion, to a discipleship of solidarity, to a renewed theological vision of faith. For this reason they represent the preeminent theological place. Moreover, this theological place, by its very nature as the place of sin and death, calls forth an austere and unequivocal love.

The Love that Produces Hope

Ellacuría died for the way that he lived. Likewise, his death appears in striking continuity with his faith and theological vision. His political commitments were connected to his spirituality of liberation. His praxis paralleled his theological method. His action on behalf of the poor was one with his theological vision of the crucified people. Moreover, Ellacuría did not simply *die*. He was *killed*. He was committed to

¹⁷Ignacio Ellacuría, "Las Iglesias latinoamericanas interpelan a la Iglesia de España," p. 230, translation mine.

the cause of the poor, and that commitment led him to confront those who oppressed the poor. He was committed to the truth and exercised effective leadership in the service of the truth. Out of his commitment, he unmasked the lies which covered up historical sin and exposed those who hid behind the lies. For all of this, he was killed.

Ellacuría's death reveals his commitment to the reality and place of the poor. It also points to the mysterious depths of the love that enters into solidarity with the poor, and the unique capacity of such love to call forth hope. This theme appears poignantly in the writings of Ellacuría's friend and fellow theologian, Jon Sobrino. In the last part of the essay he wrote just two weeks after the UCA massacre, in a passage from which the title of the present essay is taken, Sobrino ponders how the living might maintain hope in the face of such terrible deaths. He then offers his own answer.

It's not easy to know how to keep on hoping and we must all answer this question in our own way. It seems that everything is against hope, but for me at least, where I see there has been great love, I see hope being born again. This is not a rational conclusion and perhaps not even theological. It is simply true: love produces hope, and great love produces great hope.¹⁸

In the final analysis, Ellacuría views theology as an important way to serve and help realize the Kingdom of God. In this capacity, the theologian, as a person of faith really affected by the crucifixion of historical reality, seeks to appropriate the revelation of the mercy of God, and incarnate it in a praxis which reflects that mercy. Sobrino captures the theological implication of this insight: "theology becomes converted in its very task and not only in the contents which it offers, into soteriology; it becomes compassionate reason."¹⁹ This represents, in Sobrino's view, the great truth of Ellacuría's life. In an open "Letter to Ignacio Ellacuría," read on the occasion of the first anniversary of his friend's death, Sobrino writes,

¹⁸Jon Sobrino, Ignacio Ellacuría, et. al., *Companions of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), p. 56.

¹⁹Jon Sobrino, "La teología y el 'principio liberación,'" *RLT* (No. 35, 1995) p. 127, translation mine.

Dear Ellacu,

For years, I've thought about what I'd be saying at the Mass of your martyrdom. I've had the same feeling as I had about Archbishop Romero. His martyrdom was inevitable, too, and yet I never wanted to admit to myself that it would finally come. But your death was so likely that it was simply impossible for me to get the idea out of my head. And here [is what] most impressed me about you....

[Over] and above everything else, you were a person of compassion and mercy... the inmost depths of you, your guts and your heart, wrenched at the immense pain of this people. That's what never left you in peace. That's what put your special intelligence to work and channeled your creativity and service. Your life was not just service, then; it was the specific service of 'taking the crucified peoples down from the cross' — words very much your own, the kind of words that take not only intelligence to invent, but intelligence moved by mercy.²⁰

Intelligence moved by mercy, together with a faith committed to justice and a spirit dedicated to liberation, only becomes historically concrete at a great cost. The willingness to apprehend, to embrace and to transform reality invites the disciple of Jesus into the destiny of Jesus, both his crucifixion and his resurrection. As a Christian, a theologian and a martyr, Ellacuría responded to this invitation. He was animated by the call to follow Jesus. He articulated the demands of that call. He embodied that articulation in a love which death cannot kill, a love that indeed produces great hope. ↪

²⁰Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy*, pp. 187, 188. First read at Mass, November 10, 1990; originally published in *Carta a las Iglesias* (No. 223, 1990), pp. 12-13.