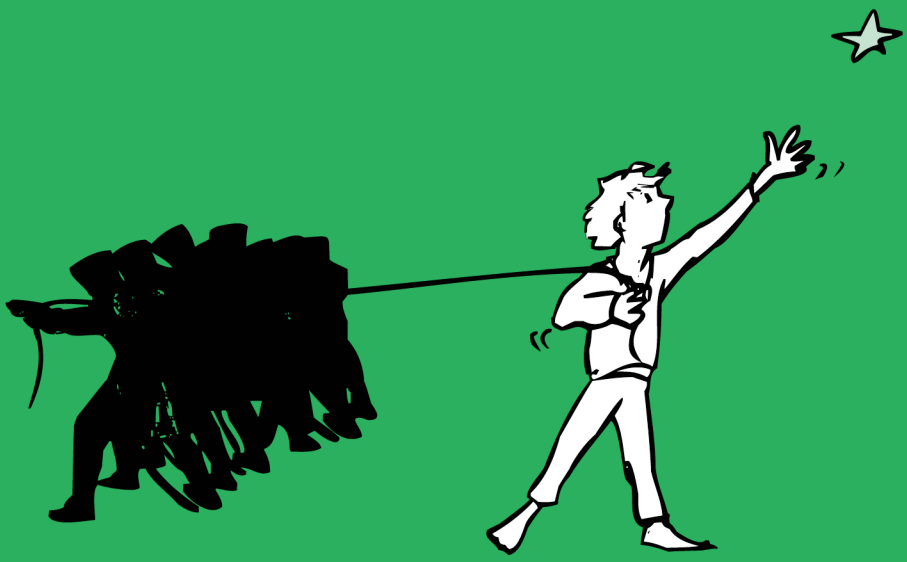
CJ booklets

EVANGELICAL DYSTOPIAS



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José Laguna

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1. WOE UNTO YOU...! EVANGELICAL DYSTOPIAS

Utopias point toward an idyllic, universally desirable future. At the other extreme, the neologism dystopia[1] announces an apocalyptic horizon from which it is best to flee.

Utopia and dystopia are relative concepts; they indicate divergent perspectives with regard to a specific social phenomenon. The utopian efforts of certain NGOs to obtain generic medicines in developing countries yields dystopian results for the pharmaceutical companies who defend their intellectual property rights in order to recoup their investment in research. In the last century the utopian struggle of Chico Mendes to preserve the Amazon tropical forest was clearly a dystopian obstacle for the predatory interests of the Brazilian ranchers who killed him.

Traditionally the gospel message has aligned itself uncritically on the side of utopia. As presented in the agreeable contours of a paradisiacal society, the Good News has been commonly seen as a utopian ideal that appeals to all. However, we need only reflect on the tragic fate of Jesus and that of the Christian martyrs of all ages to conclude unequivocally that the horizon of God's kingdom is basically dystopian. In the course of history the guardians of the status quo have always frowned on any attempt to build a just, fraternal, egalitarian society.

1.1. Jesus, prophet of dystopia

Jesus was condemned and executed for being dystopian; his words and actions were perceived by his contemporaries as a real threat to the prevailing social, political, and religious system. The sacred pillars of the Jewish nation were endangered by his announcement of a kingdom of God in which publicans and prostitutes would precede the priests and the elders of the people (cf. Mt 21, 23-32); a kingdom in which the poor, the crippled, and the lame would occupy the places of honor that had been spurned by the first invitees, the Jewish people (cf. Lk 14,15-24); a kingdom in which adoration of God in spirit and in truth would supplant worship in the Temple of Jerusalem (cf. John 4,19-24).

Jesus was not a political activist with a revolutionary plan of social reform. His message and his action were in strict continuity with the prophetic tradition of Israel. His religious experience brought about the revelation of a dystopian God who was passionately concerned about the fate of the humble. His privileged relation with the Abba of the people led him to proclaim the coming of a Kingdom in which the sanctity of God was linked to the fate of the impoverished:

> «Jesus experiences a different God, one who is the Abba of the people. He cares about the life of the poor (Mt 6,9-13) because the reality of God's fatherhood in history is at stake in that life. God has decided to reign now in order to change the situation of the outcasts.»[2]

1.2. The decision of Caiaphas

Despite the tragic import of his conclusion, the high priest Caiaphas was quite lucid in his analysis of the possible consequences of the message of Jesus: «Do you not realize that it is more to your advantage to have one man die for the people than for the whole nation to perish?» (Jn 11,50). Jesus was considered a subversive prophet because he affirmed the primacy of the person over divine law, he entered into contaminating solidarity with the "impure", he criticized pharisaical religiosity, and he extended the promises of the covenant to include gentiles. The socio-religious utopia of Jesus seriously undermined the Jewish worldview based on the exclusivity of the Promise and on the exclusion of all those who might sully the presumed sanctity of the Chosen People.

1.3. Dystopian "Woes"

The evangelist Luke was quite aware of the conflict latent in the proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom of God. That is why he did not hesitate to add a "woe" after each of the beatitudes in the sermon on the plain:

> «Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich! Blessed are you who hunger now, but woe to you who are filled! Blessed are you who weep now, but woe to you who laugh!» (Lk 6,20-26)

These are the same dystopias that add tension to the "bucolic" *Magnificat*

of Mary (Lk 1,46-55). The utopia of a merciful God who lifts up the humble and fills the hungry with good things is quickly threatened by the dystopian clouds announcing stormy weather for the powerful and the rich: «He has brought down the mighty from their thrones… and has sent the rich away empty.

Why are these promises to the outcasts coupled with threats to the privileged? Is it that the improvement of the situation of the poor and the hungry is incompatible with maintaining the social and economic status of the better off? Is not the gospel gratuitously presenting a cause-and-effect relationship that results in conflict?

2. DYSTOPIAN MATRIX: THE LAST WILL BE FIRST

«The last will be first and the first last» (cf. Mt 20,16). This strange prophecy is the matrix which nourishes the dystopian character of the Good News of Jesus.

The proclamation of the Kingdom of God moves in two directions. On the one hand, it promises a better life for the poor and the suffering, and on the other, it "threatens" the privileged situation of the prosperous. This double directedness does not mean simply an exchange of roles: the poor occupying the place of the rich and vice versa. Nor is it reducible to an act of charity by which those who have more wealth are pressured to help those who are more needy. Rather, the poor and the wealthy are called to move together toward a totally original space in which the destiny of all will be changed.

The gospel dystopia does not seek to reestablish a point of equilibrium in a unbalanced system. It is not a question of placing more wealth on the plate of the impoverished in order to balance the scale which in the past has always

swung to the side of those who have more. It does not propose that the disadvantaged come to enjoy the privileges of the rich world, thus identifying the Kingdom of God with the welfare state. What the antithesis of the first and the last proposes is that the needle of the scale be adjusted so that the resulting measurement favors those who are last. Such a proposal would effect a Copernican revolution for it would displace the center of gravity of the social system along with its associated cultural, economic, political, and relational planets. As a result, the whole constellation would then orbit around the needs and the priorities of the disadvantaged.

That the last are first and the first last means allowing the impoverished to mark out the pace of our progress. Those of us who are first must run to the pace of the halt, the lame, and the blind so that we will all arrive at the final goal together. We must reduce our speed and renounce the sprint for which we have been trained in our fast-paced society. We must relativize the achievements that have become the unquestionable dogmas of our model of development. Ultimately, we must be ready to renounce a large amount of the wealth that we defend tooth and nail as our inalienable right.

The Kingdom of God is not reducible to small reforms and adjustments; it goes way beyond these, seeking to recreate the social order. In the words of Ignacio Ellacuría, it propose to "turn history back":

> «There is much that remains to be done. It is only by hopeful, utopian thinking (or we would say dystopian) that one can believe and have the spirit to attempt, with all the poor and oppressed people of the world, to turn history back, to subvert it, and to thrust it in another direction.»[3]

2.1. Beyond morality. Structural injustice

The evangelical utopias/dystopias are located beyond the moral sphere. They do not seek to reward the virtuous poor and punish the covetous rich. They denounce a situation even before any action takes place: the simple existence of wealth in a context of generalized poverty is a scandalous situation that needs to be changed. As Jon Sobrino writes:

> «Even if by hypothesis the coexistence of rich and poor were not due to injustice, the mere fact of their coexistence expresses a monumental debacle and a fundamental failure of the human family.»[4]

According to data of the Human Development Report of the United Nations, a child born in Norway has a life expectancy of 81.1 years while a child born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo can expect to live only 48.4 years. This is the "originating original sin" that needs to be redeemed.[5]

New Testament exegetes are in agreement that in the beatitudes of Luke and Matthew the Hebrew and Greek terms for poor, hungry and sorrowful refer to structural situations, not temporary misfortunes. The poor (*ptochoi*) are those who must beg in order to live, those whose lives depend on others. The Greek term usually translated hungry (*peinontes*) more accurately means

"starving"; it describes hunger that is severe and long-lasting. The mourning of the beatitudes is not that associated with a passing grief but is the profound suffering that results from permanent marginalization. In the face of these situations of structural impoverishment, the rich, the satisfied, and the carefree are those who possess great material wealth. They are the privileged, the well off, and the complacent who pay no heed to the suffering of others.[6] These contrasting structural situations of poverty and wealth, hunger and satiety, suffering and self-satisfaction are destined to be reversed –either by utopia or by dystopia, according to those affected.

2.2. Beyond rights

The evangelical dystopias also surpass the ethical-juridical horizon of human rights. Because they take into account the material conditions which make it impossible for the most vulnerable to enjoy human rights, the dystopias invalidate the idealist rhetoric with which the comfortable North is already asserting "fifth generation" rights while three-quarters of the world's populations has still not achieved either the civil or the social rights of the first generations.

How can we dedicate so much energy to making access to the internet a human right when 25,000 children die every day because their basic right to food is not respected? The priorities of the most disadvantaged must prevail over rights that are theoretically correct but need to be subordinated for a time.

When King David sent Uriah the Hittite home for a rest after the battle, Uriah slept at the gate of the palace and explained his action in these terms:

> «The ark and Israel and Judah reside in temporary shelters, and my lord Joab and his soldiers are camping in the open field. Should I go to my house to eat and drink and have relations with my wife? As surely as you are alive, I will not do this thing!» (2 Sam 11,8-11)

Uriah had every right to go to his house for rest, but he renounced the opportunity: how could he relax and enjoy himself when the other officers were sleeping out in the open?

In her last days of life, when she was suffering from a heart ailment, Mother Teresa of Calcutta asked to be given only the treatment that was accessible to the poor to whom she dedicated her existence: «If the poor are not allowed the benefit of a particular treatment, there is no reason for me to have it. Let me die like those whom I serve, poor among the poor».

Mother Teresa had the right and the opportunity to be treated by the best cardiologists of India, but… «how could she benefit when the officers were sleeping out in the open!»

2.3. Universality on the basis of the last

The evangelical dystopias do not deny the universality of the Gospel message. Jesus announces the good news both to the poor invalids and to the publican Zacchaeus (Lk 19,1-10). His preference for the least and last does not exclude others, as is shown in his close relations

with the powerful: he eats with notable Pharisees (Lk 14,1) and with sinners (Mk 2,15ff.; Lk 15,2). Nevertheless, as Rafael Aguirre Monasterio lucidly explains, while the Kingdom of God is for everybody, the Good news is only for the poor (Lk 4,18;6,20;7,22). The rich may experience it as bad news (Lk 6,24-26; Mk 10,17-27).

> «Certainly Jesus and the Kingdom confront us all with the need for conversion, but not all interests or all situations will be affected in the same way.
>
> Time and again we find that this is not easy to understand, and we often seek out more convenient interpretations, but Jesus was already quite aware of the scandalous character of his proclamation of the Kingdom: "The poor have the good news proclaimed to them. Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me!"» (Lk 7,22f.; Mt 11,9f.)[7]

3. FIVE DYSTOPIAS WITH CAIAPHAS IN THE BACKGROUND

Evangelical subversion continues to be present in our own day even though its dystopian message is generally presented with the balm of decaffeinated utopias.

The world of the 21st century neither hopes for nor wants a change of structures. Those who are first –we who are first– do not want to occupy the last places. The logic of Caiaphas still warns us to shun the message of the Galilean as radical, naïve, and utopian. It is better for someone to die if we want to continue to maintain the pillars on which our "welfare" state is built… for a few.

In the following pages I propose five evangelical dystopias that carry within them the conflictive seed of another possible world: the proclamation of structural change at the antipodes of what we now enjoy and/or suffer. I present them provocatively, without the infinite nuances that would in the long run deactivate the fuse of the future that they carry within them. I refuse to offer a narcotizing presentation that seeks to resolve beforehand the cognitive dissonances that are provoked in this reading. As the philosopher M. Horkheimer told theologian Paul Tillich, there are situations in which it is necessary to eliminate the «subordinate clause»; there are cases in which «only exaggeration is true».

In each of these dystopias I will give evidence for the "reasonability" of the logic of Caiaphas, and readers may discover that Caiaphas is disturbingly close to their own personal objections to the utopia of the Kingdom.

4. FIRST DYSTOPIA: BARNS AND IMBECILES

A rich man whose fields yielded a huge harvest tore down his barns and built bigger ones in order to store all his produce. When he finished, he said to himself: «You have plenty of goods stored up for many years; relax, eat, drink, celebrate!» (cf. Lk 12,16-21).

Although this Lukan parable was told more than two thousand years ago, it seems to describe our present 21st century economy which has made accumulation the motor of progress. Our society of unlimited consumption builds ever larger barns in order to eat, drink, and make merry.

The evangelist puts in the mouth of God this dystopian reproach: «You fool! This very night your life will be demanded of you, but who will get what you have prepared for yourself? So it is with the one who stores up riches for himself, but is not rich toward God». In the parable two crucial questions are addressed to the rich man and by extension to the heart of our neo-liberal system: 1) Who benefits from the wealth? and 2) Where is happiness found?

4.1. Accumulated manna spoils

For the first question the Bible has an implacable answer: that which is accumulated for personal benefit spoils. According to the account of Exodus, when the Israelites were traveling through the desert toward the promised land, God fed them with manna from heaven. Moses ordered that this food

was not to be accumulated. When some people disobeyed the order and kept manna for the following day, they found that «it was full of worms and began to stink, and Moses was angry with them» (Ex 16,15-20).

We find the same pattern of theological narrative behind the story of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes: the people are hungry, and Jesus asks them to share the little they have (five loaves and two fishes). After he blesses the food, it is shared out, and everyone has enough to eat. According to the evangelists, more than five thousand men ate, without counting women and children, and there were still twelve baskets left over (Mt 14,13-21).

Whether it is manna, loaves, fishes, or grain, the message is always the same: wealth should be put at the disposition of everybody. Otherwise it spoils. A popular saying attributed to various Church Fathers captures graphically and accurately the point we are making: «Money is like manure. If you hold onto it, it stinks, but if you spread it out, good things grow».

4.2. Accumulated manna kills

Grain that is hoarded not only spoils but also produces victims when it is stored for the sake of speculation.

The grain company Cargill seized a business opportunity when Russia suffered serious losses in its grain crop in the summer of 2010. The company directors saw that Russia would probably suspend its exports of wheat and other grains, and they anticipated that this would affect supplies to countries dependent on Russian exports. They therefore began to accumulate grains in their silos in order to force prices up and gain hefty profits for themselves.[8] This is the sinister reality of a society that stores up foods in order to speculate with hunger.

4.3. The happiness of imbeciles

The second question that God addresses to the rich man has to do with his ethical and existential relation to the final end of life: happiness.

In the introduction to the parable Jesus warns his listeners:

> «Watch out and guard yourself from all types of greed, because one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.» (cf. Lk 12,15)

This warning applies not only to the biological dimension (wealth adds no years to one's life) but also the existential: wealth adds no life to one's years!

The dystopian warning of Jesus is quite fitting for the foolish rich man who has sought his happiness in perishable goods and lavished his love on barns:

> «Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide yourselves purses that do not wear out –a treasure in heaven that never decreases, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.» (Lc 12,33-34)

As Dolores Aleixandre warns, the divine reproach of the foolish rich man is not moral in nature but intellectual: «more than a scoundrel, the man ap-

pears to be simply an imbecile».[9] Following the principle of Machado which states that only a fool confuses price with value, we would add that only an imbecile confuses wealth with happiness.

The foolish man thinks that paradise can be bought with money, as Christopher Columbus wrote to the Catholic monarchs of Spain after his fourth journey to the New World:

> «Gold is an excellent product; it is from gold that riches come. The person who has gold can do everything that he pleases in this world. With gold you can even make souls enter paradise.»[10]

The image of the Marx brothers burning the train in which they are traveling while they shout "more wood" reflects well the ridiculous state of a society that compulsively expands without knowing where it is going. Our consumer society has forgotten that its natural end is not possession but happiness. Societies that have abundant material goods are not necessarily happier than those that are more austere; the elevated indices of suicide in the "developed" world would seem to verify this statement.

Personal wellbeing does not increase with material prosperity. Greater GNP (gross national product) is not necessarily accompanied by greater GNH (gross national happiness). A few years ago the mass media "discovered" the existence of Bhutan, a small country in the Himalayas that measured its development in terms of its *Gross National Happiness.* The scale for this index placed value on such items as the citizens' health, education, and psychological wellbeing, as well as on good government, community vitality, and ecological diversity. Even though its gross national product is only one-sixth that of Spain, Bhutan ranks eighth among the happiest countries of the world according to a comparative study done by the University of Leicester (United Kingdom).

Once a person's basic nutritional, housing, and emotional needs are covered, the remaining needs are relative and therefore debatable. On March 18, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy, then running for president of the United States, addressed the opulent society of the U.S. regarding the difference between GNP and GNH:

> «Our Gross National Product, now, is over $800 billion dollars a year, but … that Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armored cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts … the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the

strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.»[11]

4.4. Civilization of poverty

Instead of basing happiness on wealth, accumulation, and speculation, the evangelical dystopia proposes that we jump off the train of the "civilization of wealth". We need to change our direction and move toward what Ellacuría called the "civilization of poverty", where the driving force is not accumulation but shared solidarity:

> «[The civilization of poverty] rejects the accumulation of capital as the motor of history and the possession-enjoyment of wealth as the principle of humanization; instead, it takes the universal satisfaction of basic needs as the principle of development, and it makes growth of shared solidarity the basis of humanization.»[12]

We must dismount from the exponential growth on which we are madly galloping because it is not just, it is not sustainable, and it *does not make people happy.* What we need instead is to follow the paths of diminution; we need to produce less and consume less. However, we are not proposing a generalized impoverishment; rather, we are affirming with dystopian wisdom that we can live better with less.

4.5. Caiaphas and the integrating market

The neoliberal Caiaphas would smile wryly as he listened to such alternatives: wealth placed at the service of the common good, changing the model of progress based on accumulation, the dystopian proposal to decrease GNP instead of increasing it.

For the ultraliberals the evangelical dystopia is a downhill slide leading to impoverishment. They believe that the welfare of all can come only through the accumulation of a few. That is the logic of the integrating market:[13] the more wealth generated on the table of capital (even if a minority benefits), the more crumbs available for the "Canaanites" in the territories of Tyre and Sidon. The enrichment of a few, according to neoliberal economics, will end up benefiting everybody; the important thing is not to stop the machinery of consumerism.

The evangelical dystopia inverts the roles. Instead of having the Canaanite woman gather crumbs from the table along with the dogs, it has her presiding at the table of a great banquet: «Go out quickly to the streets and alleys of the city, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame» (Lk 14,14-21).

5. SECOND DYSTOPIA: THE YEAR OF FAVOR, SETTING HISTORY «BACK TO ZERO»

«The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.»

In the synagogue of Nazareth Jesus makes his own the utopian "program" of the prophet Isaiah (cf. Lk 4,14-19). Along with the hopeful announcement of release for prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed, the text of Isaiah contains an unsettling dystopia: the proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor.

According to Leviticus (cf. Lv 25), during the year of grace, which was to be celebrated every fifty years, history would be "set back to zero" because all Israelites would recover their rightful property and return to live with their own families. In that jubilee year all who had become slaves for failing to pay their debts would be freed, and all houses and fields sold under duress during the preceding forty-nine years would be returned to their original owners.

This jubilee year of favor would not be to the liking[14] of the proprietors and the masters who see their justly acquired wealth diminished. The jubilee year was not just a matter of amending unjust contracts or correcting illicit practices; those enslaved were in the situation they were in because they had come on hard times and sold them-

selves “freely” (cf. Lv 25,39). Those who sold their lands did so also on their own initiative; nobody seized them unjustly. But during the jubilee year all that would change: the slaves would be freed to return to their families and recover their old property, and those deeply in debt would recover the ownership of their fields.

As we anticipated at the beginning of this booklet, dystopia does not move on the terrain of morality or legality. It is not a question of executing righteous judgments that punish the evil practices of perverse landlords and masters. The ultimate rationale of the year of grace is theological: both the earth and human beings belong to God, and therefore no one can claim to exercise property rights over either of them.

5.1. Unconditional pardon, radical gratuity, original equality

In the jubilee year there is a confluence of at least three utopian-dystopian proposals: unconditional pardon of debts, gratuity as radical dependence on God, and original equality of goods and opportunities.

The evidence for the pardon of debts usually treats as secondary an extremely important aspect of the pardon that is granted, namely, its unconditional character. People recovered their property and their personal liberty even when they were unable to save the amount required for the redemption (Lv 25,25-28). As we mentioned earlier, the ultimate reason for this interest-free pardon is theological. Only God is the Lord of properties and persons:

> «The land must not be sold in perpetuity because the land belongs to me, for you are foreigners and residents with me.» (Lv 25,23)

Intimately linked to the confession of God as absolute Lord of all creation is the conviction that all the goods and abilities that one possesses are pure gift and as such are to be placed at the service of all. In epochs like our own, when the defense of intellectual property is based on the vain belief that genius should be richly rewarded, the dystopia of the biblical year of sabbath places native talent in its proper perspective as a charism gratuitously received for the service of others.

Finally, the year of grace refers back to the primordial situation of equality among all human beings, the starting point where everyone has the same possibilities. Turning history “back to zero” challenges the attempts to justify social differences on the basis of race, sex, patrimony, or natural gifts. The “lottery of nature” results in some people being born in contexts of poverty and other in contexts of wealth. No one will argue that malnourished children deserve their unhappy fate, so how can children born of wealth be said to have a right to the “deserved” wealth of their parents? Do Brahmans deserve to enjoy the privileges of their cast while untouchables have to be content with their miserable lot? The egalitarian justice that is at the heart of the year of grace seeks to reestablish the essential equality which is constitutive of human reality but which those who are socially privileged have transmuted into “naturally” established inequality.

5.2. General remission of mortgages

Imagine the following declaration:

> «A year of grace is coming in which there will be a general remission of all mortgages. All persons, even those who have not been able to repay the debt contracted with banks, will receive their property titles and will not have to pay one more euro for their houses. Housing is a human right which all of us should enjoy independently of our economic situation.»

Such would be the radical utopian announcement of a secular year of grace for all "indebted" persons of the 21st century. In the ears of bankers and renters such a statement would sound like an anarchist, dystopian harangue.

5.3. Criticisms of Caiaphas the banker

The unconditional pardon of debts, the neoliberal Caiaphas would say, will produce an unjust society that punishes the provident ants and rewards the lazy grasshoppers. Why should the owners of properties gained by hard work and effort be expected to give them up when the calendar marks the fiftieth year?

The argument of Caiaphas would continue: giving theoretical equality of opportunity to everybody would require us to renounce the differences in status that are the fruit of personal effort. Why should a surgeon who has dedicated half her life to study not be able to claim for himself better living conditions than someone else who has not dedicated as much time to training and formation?

Let us leave these criticisms of Caiaphas echoing for now –we warned you in the introduction that we intended to be provocative– and let us enter into a new dystopia that deepens the egalitarian tensions that we have just analyzed. Before doing so, though, we should comment that the year of grace was never truly celebrated in Jewish history.

6. THIRD DYSTOPIA: ELEVENTH-HOUR WORKERS

In chapter twenty of his Gospel Matthew tells the story of a labor conflict with a markedly dystopian accent. At different times of day the owner of a farm goes out to the plaza to hire workers to labor in his vineyard. At the end of the day he pays them all equally, one denarius each. The workers who started early complain about what they consider an unfair compensation. The owner of the vineyard justifies his decision by citing the original agreement and his freedom to act as he wishes. «Friend, I am not treating you unfairly. Didn't you agree with me to work for the standard wage? Take what is yours and go. I choose to give to this last man the same as I gave to you. Am I not permitted to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?» (cf. Mt 20,1-15).

The parable expands even further the egalitarian horizon that we sketched in the previous dystopia. Now what is called into question is not the unjust inequality of wealth that the year of grace was designed to correct but the "unjust" inequality that results from merit.

As in earlier instances, the same reality is experienced as utopian or dystopian depending on the perspective adopted. The last-hired workers enjoy the utopia of a good employer who pays them generously, while the workers who have labored all day suffer the dystopia of what they consider unjust remuneration.

There no need to engage in sterile casuistry investigating whether the workers hired at the eleventh hour had spent the whole day looking for work or

whether they came to the plaza "on the late side" after spending the day in bed. This is not the concern or the lesson of the parable. All of them want to work, and what is more, all of them have the same need to earn a day's wage to be able to live (a denarius was the wage for one day of labor).[15] The employer is responding to this vital need when he pays them all the basic minimum for staying alive; he does so independently of whether they have "earned" the wage he gives them. The owner of the vineyard pays each worker according to his needs and not according to his labor or his abilities.

Those who have worked all day do not question the altruism of the owner but the injustice of the unequal payment: they have worked more and so "deserve" to earn more. Possibly we can accept the reasons for rejecting the previous dystopia, in which "undeserved" benefits based on origin were rejected, but why should we reject inequality when it is based on a person's effort or on the just return for an investment? The response of the parable makes use of a dystopian argument: «Thus the last will be first, and the first last» (Mt 20,16).

6.1. Caiaphas the businessman

In times like our own where junk labor contracts and temporary employment prevail, Caiaphas the businessman would have no problem endorsing the first argument of the vineyard owner: «I am not treating you unfairly. Didn't you agree with me to work for the standard wage?». If the workers hired first signed a bad contract and the one hired later got a better deal, that is not the employer's problem; he is acting within the law. But Caiaphas would have more difficulty acceding to the logic of the employer's goodness, which discriminates in favor of the last hired. Contracts and goodness generate different obligations. The law knows about rights; goodness knows about needs. The two logics do not exclude each other, but unfortunately they do not usually coincide.

The ultraliberal Caiaphas would also warn us about the fateful consequences of the bad "business" practices of the vineyard owner. If the first hired workers are not rewarded for their greater effort, they will lower their productivity, while the last hired workers will not only take it easy but will urge other unemployed workers to take advantage of the benefits of that magnanimous employer. As a result, the vineyard will fail and go bankrupt, and everybody will end up impoverished. That is the apocalyptic vision that the neoliberal technocrats have succeeded in making unquestionable dogma in our narrow western vision. In her novel *Atlas Shrugged* Ayn Rand draws the sinister profile of the Twentieth Century Motor Company, a business that decided to pay its employees solely on the basis of their needs:

> «[…] No one could claim his salary as a legitimate earning; no one had rights or wages; a person's wage did not belong to him but to "the family", which owed nothing to him in return. The only thing he could lay claim to were his own "needs", that is, he could publicly request that

> they be alleviated, just as any poor person could. He could detail his concerns and his hardships, from pants needing mending to his wife's cold, hoping that "the family" would toss him some alms.
>
> […] We began to conceal our abilities and our knowledge; we worked slowly and tried not to do things faster or better than a fellow worker. How could we act otherwise when we knew that doing our best for "the family" did not mean that they would thank us or reward us but rather that they would punish us?»[16]

6.2. Difference in favor of the last. John Rawls

I don't want to leave the topic of egalitarian dystopias without referring to the "dystopian" proposal of John Rawls. Proposed as a purely theoretical model, Rawls's *theory of justice* is based on a hypothetical social contract in which the participants are ignorant of their present situation and do not know what their future will be like. Behind this "veil of ignorance" they are to project a social organization which will give priority to protecting the needs and the interests of the most disadvantaged: nobody would want to be unprotected if their future situation were precarious.

On the basis of this "preventive" social contract, Rawls justifies inequalities of salary and status as long as they redound to the benefit of those less fortunate.

> «Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out. The naturally advantaged are not to gain merely because they are more gifted, but only to cover the costs of training and education and for using their endowments in ways that help the less fortunate as well. No one deserves his greater natural capacity nor merits a more favorable starting place in society. But it doesn't follow that one should eliminate these distinctions. There is another way to deal with them. The basic structure can be arranged so that these contingencies work for the good of the least fortunate.»[17]

Behind the Rawlsian theory we can find some evangelical echoes of a society conceived as a great human family. In a family the more gifted members do not use their gifts to their own advantage but rather for the benefit of the weaker members.

> «The family, in its ideal conception and often in practice, is one place where the principle of maximizing the sum of advantages is rejected. Members of a family commonly do not wish to gain unless they can do so in ways that further the interests of the rest. […] Those better circumstanced are willing to have their greater advantages only under a scheme in which this works out for the benefit of the less fortunate.»[18]

7. FOURTH DYSTOPIA: UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

A father had two sons. The younger son asked for his share of the inheritance and went off and spent it in dissolute living. When he was left with nothing he felt hunger and decided to return home. When he arrived, his father, who had been going out every day to watch for him, ordered that he be clothed in the finest robe, and he had the best calf killed to celebrate a banquet in his honor. The elder son was indignant at the outrageous welcome offered his wayward brother and protested to his father: «I have served you many years without disobeying your commands, and you never gave me even a goat to celebrate a feast with my friends. But this son of your arrives after spending your inheritance with prostitutes, and you kill for him the fatted calf» (Lk 15,11-32).

If the dystopias analyzed up till now have called into question the prevailing socioeconomic order, the parable of the prodigal son (or the good father) which we just summarized calls into question the relational order.

Customary readings of the parable almost always focus on the father's goodness or on the rather questionable repentance of the younger son,[19] but they rarely attempt to evaluate the reasoning of the elder brother. In such a reading the actions of the first two are considered part of the good news, whereas the reaction of the elder son is criticized for failing to measure up to the paternal pardon. From our perspective we view the righteous indignation of the elder son as a dystopian counterpoint to the seeming foolishness of the father's unconditional response.

In the elder son's reproach we can find at least three dystopian recriminations: one psychological, another moral,

and a third legal. Regarding the first, the father fails in his duty to educate. The unconditional acceptance that allows a child to develop the foundations of a solid self-esteem during the first years of life becomes a blank check for the adolescent who views as arbitrary all limitation of his actions. The moral perspective finds fault with the moral laxity of the father; far from deserving a homecoming feast, the younger son should have been punished for squandering his fortune in dissolute living. Finally, the legal perspective would also take the side of the elder son: as the one who has always complied with the father's wishes, it is he who deserves to be rewarded with a banquet, not his brother.

As we have been insisting, however, the horizon of the Kingdom of God extends beyond psychological, moral, or legal casuistries. What Luke puts front and center is the absolute mercy of a father/God who is preferentially concerned for those who are weakest, in this case, the prodigal son. Once again we meet up with the dystopian pattern which demands that the social order (in this case relational) be rebuilt starting with those who are least and last. It is not the prodigal son who joins the feast of the elder son; paradoxically it is the elder son who is invited to participate in the celebration in honor of the prodigal son. Once again it is the last who set the norm for how we behave.

Although most editions of the Bible title this episode the parable of the "prodigal son", it would be more correct to refer to it as "the forgiving father". The dystopian tendency of the narrative highlights the disproportionate character of the father's forgiveness. The word "pardon" comes etymologically from the Latin verb *donare* (give), with the prefix *per* expressing an intensification of the action of giving. Pardon means giving in excess, offering beyond what is due. That is precisely what the father does: he celebrates the return of the son beyond what seems reasonable.

7.1. The "madness" of unconditional forgiveness

The philosopher Jacques Derrida refers to unconditional forgiveness as "madness". As opposed to conditional pardon which is based on the calculability of punishment, unconditional pardon belongs to the realm of the incalculable or the immeasurable.

As long as conditions are placed on forgiveness, a proportionate and calculable punishment is imposed on whoever or whatever is being forgiven. Conditional forgiveness is consequently in accord with law and politics, but it ends up being reduced to a therapy of reconciliation. Conditional forgiveness belong to the realm of law and politics, of pragmatic negotiations and quantifiable debts. Unconditional forgiveness, in contrast, the act of forgiving the unforgivable, cannot be reconciled with law and politics because it does not allow for pragmatic negotiation or equitable exchange; it belongs to the realm of "madness" –we would call it dystopia– which overturns the normal course of history, politics, and law:

> «If I say, as I believe, that forgiveness is madness and that it should

continue being a madness of the impossible, it is certainly not to exclude it or disqualify it. Indeed, it is perhaps the only thing that happens that can, like a revolution, surprise the normal course of history, politics, and law. Because that means that it continues to be heterogeneous to the political or juridical order as this is normally understood. One can never find, in the ordinary sense of the words, a politics or a law regarding forgiveness.»[20]

7.2. Seventy times seven

Forgiving seventy times seven the one who offends you (Mt 18,21-22), praying for those who persecute you, graciously giving your tunic to the person who seeks to take away your cloak, offering the other cheek to the person who strikes you, going two miles with the person who forces you to go one (Mt 5,38-45), pardoning those who condemn you to death (Lk 23,34)…, these are different evangelical declinations of the same disproportionate, unconditional, dystopian forgiveness that Jesus proposes as a way of life.

7.3. Justice and mercy

While acting as governor of the island of Barataria, Sancho Panza recalls a counsel of his master: «There came to my memory a precept, one of many that my master Don Quixote gave me the night before I came as governor of this island: he told me that when justice was in doubt I should lean rather toward mercy». This is not the choice that the father in the parable had to make. The God whom the figure of the forgiving father mirrors does not have to choose between justice and mercy for the two terms are integrated: it is justice pervaded with mercy. In the Hebrew tradition justice (*tzedakah*) is always associated with mercy (*hesed*) (cf. Jer 9,29; Ps 36,11).

Divine justice does not maintain a neutral distance between extremes; it takes the side of the poor. Mercy and compassion form part of God's inner being: «The Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you for the Lord is a God of justice» (cf. Is 30,18).

7.4. Caiaphas does not forgive

For Caiaphas the analysis of J. Derrida is correct: unconditional forgiveness is madness that undermines political, legal, and moral arrangements. Throwing a party and forgiving just because «this brother of yours was lost and has been born again» degenerates into an amoral society without ethical or legal norms. Caiaphas takes the part of the elder brothers of history who demand the punishment that all prodigal sons deserve.

8. FIFTH DYSTOPIA: SUFFERING OVER AND ABOVE THE LAW

«The leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd: “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day”.

But the Lord answered him and said: “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, be set free from the bondage on the sabbath day?”

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.» (Lk 13,14-17)

Meticulous observance of the sabbath, precise adherence to all the prescriptions for ritual purity, the payment of tithes, and the scrupulous practice of food regulations were activities that guaranteed people’s correct relation with the God of Israel and defined whether or not one belonged to the chosen people.

On countless occasions the Gospels present Jesus paying small heed to many of these prescriptions: he cures on the sabbath, he eats with sinners, he touches the impure… By failing to observe the law, Jesus calls into question the religious and juridical order that guaranteed Jewish identity. The ultimate reason for his noncompliance is that human suffering is over and above any law. He cures the woman on the sabbath because she had borne her sickness for eighteen years; he and his

disciples plucked grain on the sabbath because they were hungry (cf. Mk 2,23-28); he eats with tax collectors and unbelieving sinners because they are the ones invited to the banquet of the kingdom (cf. Mt 9,11-13). Jesus asks, «Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?» (cf Mk 3,1-6), and for him the answer is evident. In the face of suffering it is necessary to act, even in disregard of the law. Justice, when it takes the side of the victims, does not necessarily coincide with legality.

Once again the utopian-dystopian tension that runs through the whole gospel proclamation becomes evident. What is good news (utopia) for the hungry, the sick, and the prodigal sons is a threat (dystopia) for the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the elder brothers. It is no wonder that after these episodes the synoptic tradition records a fateful decision: «As soon as he left the synagogue, the Pharisees immediately conspired with the Herodians against Jesus, how to destroy him.» (Mc 3,6; Mt 12,14; Lc 6,11)

8.1. Conscientious objection to suffering

Jesus was not an *enfant terrible* who questioned just any legal ordinance. As a faithful Jew he strove to observe the Mosaic law in every detail: «Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill» (cf. Mt 5,17). Nevertheless, his religious experiences, linked compassionately to the suffering of victims, led him to disobey any law which failed to alleviate human pain or which aggravated it. His conscientious objection to the law was a conscientious objection to suffering.

8.2. Caiaphas and his borders

Us-them, friends-enemies, citizens-foreigners, neighbors-outsiders. Caiaphas builds walls to defend properties, privileges, and identities. Legal ordinances are usually structured on the logic of segregation.

For Jean-Jacques Rousseau the transition from the natural state to the social state is a process of degeneration (not of progress), a product of the inequalities generated by the "border" of private property:

> «The first man who, after fencing off a piece of land, thought of saying, 'This is mine,' and found people simple enough to pay him mind was the true founder of civil society.»[21]

In every time and place juridical ordinances arose to protect the privileges of the powerful, not to insure the rights of the poor. As José Luis Segovia states,

> «Civil law is in large part law centered on private property; criminal law basically defends the rights of proprietors against the dispossessed; immigration law is for defense against poor immigrants…, laws always protect the secure status and the property of those who pass them.»[22]

If, according to Caiaphas, the unconditional forgiveness we analyzed in the

previous dystopia leads to an immoral society, then failure to enforce the law in order to help the least and the last will cause society to degenerate into lawless anarchy. If we decree a general amnesty, how will we know which people are "our people", and how will we know who the enemies are from whom we must defend ourselves? Once again we find resonating here the echoes of the great human family and the common home.

9. DYSTOPIAN GOD

Jesus would suspend the courses of ICADE. His proposals would not survive the evaluation of economic and juridical tribunals. Very reasonable arguments exist to rebut each and every one of his dystopian proclamations. The implementation of his dystopian proposals in the field of economy would lead to egalitarian communism; in the field of ethics it would lead to an amoral society; in the field of politics it would lead to anarchy; and in the spiritual field it would lead to a heterodoxy incompatible with any form of institutionalized religion.

Voluntary impoverishment, radical equality, and unconditional forgiveness might be useful principles for an eccentric group of itinerant charismatics such as those that accompanied Jesus, but such principles are of little help in grounding a new social order.

There is no convincing reason for changing the course of history and making the poor the center of the social universe. Jesus has no other argument for claiming the last should be first other than his relation with a merciful *Abba* beyond all reason. God is an "unjust" employer who pays wages on the basis of need and rather than for work done; he is a "senseless" father who forgives his lost son unconditionally; he is an "irresponsible" shepherd who abandons his flock and goes in search of a lost sheep; he is a "biased" judge who takes the side of orphans and widows, etc. The

ultimate reason for turning the world upside down is faith in a dystopian God.

> «The whole Bible, starting from the story of Cain and Abel, is marked by the preferential love of God for the weak and the maltreated of human history […].
>
> The ultimate reason for commitment to the poor and the oppressed is not in the social analysis we use, in our human compassion, or in the direct experience we have of poverty. Those are all valid reasons which no doubt play an important role in our commitment, but our commitment precisely as Christians is base fundamentally on the God of our faith. It is a theocentric, prophetic option that has its roots in the gratuity of God's love and is required by that gratuity.»[23]

Along the same lines as Gustavo Gutiérrez, J. I. González Faus characterizes the dystopian God of Jesus in these terms:

> «Apart from faith one might conclude, like Herod or Pilate, that [Jesus] was a madman or a political threat or just another of those well-intentioned losers that are so common in human history. In the realm of faith, however, the question and the dilemma that Jesus leaves us is different: was he an unforgivable blasphemer or was he the very revelation of God? Consequently, if Jesus acted as he did, it is because he was revealing God, and he was revealing that God is a God of the poor, a God who escapes all efforts to codify him religiously.
>
> Actually, all revelation of God is a kind of struggle with human beings so that they accept God precisely where he wants to reveal himself: in the last and in the hidden, from the last, and among the last.»[24]

9.1. Dystopian spirituality

Relating to a dystopian God necessarily engenders dystopian spiritualities, that is, contemplative practices that ground countercultural actions and commitments with a sense of finality.

After he had cured lepers, dined with publicans, questioned the sacred law of sabbath rest, or let himself be touched by impure women –dystopian actions that troubled the Pharisees and high priests– Jesus used to retire to solitary places to pray (cf. Lk 5:16). He would go upriver to drink from the fountain of a God who would time after time send him out to the margins of Jewish society and Jewish religion.

In the solitude of the desert Jesus encountered the God of the Kingdom. There also he fought against the temptations of Caiaphas. We have been educated in the school of the teacher Caiaphas, who has obliged us to copy his creed millions of times in the notebook of our existence: power, wealth, and prestige are the pillars of a happy world. Opposed to this lesson written with blood on the soul of our culture is the path that leads to the dystopian happiness of the Kingdom –service, poverty, humility– a path that requires a social and personal conversion that is neither easy nor evident.

9.2. Indifference as the dystopian path to happiness

Ignatius Loyola proposes a spiritual path that subordinates all our crucial choices to the ultimate foundation of existence: praise, reverence, and service of the Lord.[25] Once that Absolute is affirmed, all other realities become relative so that we strive to become indifferent to wealth or poverty, health or sickness, long life or short life, honor or dishonor.

Indifference is not a natural state. We can reach it only by leaving behind deep-rooted convictions. As diligent students of Caiaphas, we associate happiness with wealth, health, long life, and honor; it is hard for us to warm up to the dystopian proposals for happiness that take along the paths of austerity, service, a life of commitment, renunciation of rights and privileges, gratuity, and unlimited forgiveness.

When commitment to God's kingdom (where the last will be first) becomes our vital principle and foundation, we must become indifferent to our usual development models and our search for security. Such commitment means dedicating ourselves eagerly to the construction of God's kingdom and his justice, knowing that it is a path on which happiness will come without our seeking it.

«That the last may be first» is the crazy dream of a dystopian God; it is the utopia to which the Galilean prophet dedicated his life; it is the promise on which depends the existence of three-quarters of humankind; it is the path to happiness that we are invited to walk; and it is the project on which Caiaphas has declared war.

NOTES

1. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the term was coined at the end of the 19th century by John Stuart Mill, who also used a synonym created by Bentham, "cacotopia".
2. Carlos Bravo, «Jesús de Nazaret» in I. Ellacuría and J. Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis: Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación I*, Madrid, Trotta, 1994. «Jesus has the experience of a different God. He is the Abba of the people. He cares about the life of the poor (Mt 6,9-13); the reality of his fatherhood is at stake there. He has decide to reign *now* and so change the situation of the marginalized», p. 558.
3. Ignacio Ellacuría, «El desafío de las mayorías pobres», *Estudios Centroamericanos*, 493-494 (1989), p. 1078.
4. Jon Sobrino, «Jesús y la justicia. Reflexiones para Occidente» in *El seguimiento de Jesús*, Madrid, Fundación Santa María, 2004, p. 206.
5. Data of the United Nations Human Development Index 2011 (http://hdr.undp.org/es/).
6. Cf. Gustavo Gutiérrez, «Pobres y opción fundamental» in Ellacuría and Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis...*, op. cit., pp. 311-312.
7. Rafael Aguirre Monasterio, *Reino, Parusía y Decepción*, Madrid, Fundación Santa María, 1984, p. 19.
8. Cf. José María Medina Rey, «Otra vez la crisis alimentaria» in *Especulación financiera y crisis alimentaria*. Campaña «Derecho a la alimentación. Urgente». AECID, 2011, p. 13.
9. Dolores Aleixandre, «Graneros y pesebres»: *ALANDAR*, no. 283, December 2011, p. 9.
10. Cited in Jean Comby, *Para leer la historia de la Iglesia. 2. Del siglo xv al siglo xx*, Estella, Verbo Divino, 1993.
11. Robert. F. Kennedy, «Remarks at the University of Kansas», 18 March 1968, at www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/RFK/RFKSpeech68Mar18UKansas.htm.
12. Ellacuría, «Utopía y profetismo» in Ellacuría and Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis...*, op. cit., pp. 393-442.
13. See José Ignacio González Faus, «El mito del mercado integrador» in *Fe en Dios y construcción de la historia*, Madrid, 1998, pp. 209-228.
14. J. Pérez Escobar, «El año de gracia que no hace gracia» (Lc 4,16-30), El año de gracia del Señor, *Reseña Bíblica*, no. 4 (Winter 1994), Asociación Bíblica Española, pp. 31-40.
15. Some studies of the parable of the Good Samaritan state that the two denarii that the Samaritan pays the innkeeper to care for the wounded man (Lk 10,35) would be enough to pay for a month's lodging, food, and medical attention.
16. Ayn Rand, *La rebelión de Atlas*, Buenos Aires, Grito Sagrado 2003. An excerpt in Spanish can be read at http://www.liberalismo.org/articulo/115/62/capacidad/necesidades/.
17. John Rawls, *Teoría de la justicia*, México, Fondo de cultura económica, 1995[2], section 17, p. 104.
18. *Ibid*., p. 107.
19. Although in verse 19 the younger son repents of the moral consequences of his actions: «Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son», what first drove him to return home was plain and simple hunger: «How many of my father's laborers have bread in abundance while I am here dying of hunger. I will return to the house of my father…».
20. Quoted from «Deconstruir el terrorismo» at (http://www.jacquesderrida.com.ar/comentarios/borradori.htm#_edn9).
21. Rousseau, «Discurso sobre el origen y la desigualdad entre los hombres».
22. José Luis Segovia Bernabé, «Justicia y derecho: perspectiva desde las víctimas de la exclusión social» in *La voz de las víctimas y*

los excluidos, Madrid, Cátedra Chaminade. Fundación Santamaría-PPC, 2002, p. 136.

23. Gustavo GUTIÉRREZ, «Pobres y opción fundamental» in ELLACURÍA and SOBRINO, *Mysterium Liberationis...*, op. cit., pp. 309-310.
24. José Ignacio GONZÁLEZ FAUS, *Fear of Jesus: a diagnosis*, Barcelona, Cristianisme i Justícia, Booklet 136.
25. Principle and foundation: «Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created. From this it follows that man is to use them as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it.
For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it; so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest; desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for us to the end for which we are created.» [EE 23]

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