

CONTEXTS AND CHALLENGES TO CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

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Theses by Ulrich Duchrow

Thesis 1

*The **context** for liberation theology in Europe is characterized by increasing evidence that money and finance are dominating all spheres of life. This includes the thinking and self-understanding of the people. At the same time the deepening of the gap between losers and winners causes socio-psychological blockades to change. The social movements have a hard time to cope with this situation, although the crisis has woken up more people.*

The dominance of money and finance is the main feature of the European context – as of course in the rest of the world. The profit in the financial markets – in Germany led by Deutsche Bank, claiming at least 25% – controls the productive corporations through the credits, forcing them to cut costs by any means. This includes the creation of unemployment, dumping wages and avoiding ecological standards. Finance also increasingly governs the scientific and technological development as well as politics and the media.

The latest example is how governments in both the USA and Europe have handled the *financial crisis* since 2008. The states have bailed out the capital owners and their institutions, the banks, funds etc. with the tax money of the working citizens, thus socializing the losses of the speculators after privatizing the profits. The private debts are now public debts. This has dramatic consequences: governments are cutting down social and cultural budgets as well as necessary investments in order to refinance the debt; the rate of unemployment is growing – in the industrialized countries from 5.8 % in 2007 to 8.8 % in 2010 according to the ILO; moreover, the over-indebted states are downgraded by the rating agencies allowing the financial markets to take more interest on public bonds and to speculate against the European currency, the Euro, which again causes the governments to take more tax money in order to save the states from bankruptcy and to stabilize the Euro. This means that finance is dictating politics. The political institutions have proved to be servants of capital, not of the people.¹ Europe is going through the same Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed on the South since the 1980s. And the game continues until the next bubble bursts, creating even larger social destruction. The picture would be even more catastrophic when you add the *ecological disaster*. The motor in all of this is the unlimited search for capital

¹ Cf. for the USA W. Greider, *The End of New Deal Liberalism*, in *The Nation*, Jan 5, 2011, and for Europe Elmar Altvater, *Die Krise des Euro. Hegemoniales Chaos und der Euro mitten drin*, in: *WOZ*, Jan. 2011.

accumulation and increase of consumption for the haves. All spheres of life are affected.

The majority of the people in European societies are reacting only when directly hit – like in Greece. They feel insecure, but they do not yet understand, that one country after the other will be knocked out by the financial markets and that their country may be the next. I see two main reasons for this behavior, one cultural and one socio-psychological. Western civilization has formed people's mind in a way to calculate each action under the criterion: What do I gain? Does it pay off? So people are themselves thinking in money terms, as money subjects. Socio-psychologically certain patterns are at work, specific in losers, winners and middle-class.² Losers internalize, what the winners tell them, that their situation is their own fault, which leads to fatalism. Middle-class people produce the illusionary consciousness that the cause of the threatening downfall cannot be the elites, but rather themselves, which leads to depression or looking for scapegoats, e.g. foreigners. Winners develop a narcissistic pathology leading to the addiction of endless winning. All of this blocs the necessary change, so that social movements have a hard time.

Summarizing we can say, that the situation is not caused by the misbehavior of some immoral individuals but by systemic structures interacting with collective cultural and psychological ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Both, the objective and subjective factors have deep historic roots that have to be understood in order to analyze what is happening now and how just alternatives can be developed.

Thesis 2

*As the crisis of western civilization is all-encompassing, the need arises to understand **the roots** of it. These can be found already in Antiquity related to the origins of the linkage of money, property and empire, including their impact on people's thinking and behavior. It is the period of the so-called **Axial Age**, leading us at the same time to the religious revolutions as response to the new political economy during that period. This in turn makes it hermeneutically possible and strategically compelling to look for interfaith solidarity for justice on the basis of the sources of our own faiths.*

Today we experience the financial markets as the dominant force of our destructive civilization. However, they are but the climax of a development starting nearly 3000 years ago. The context is the *development of larger*

² Cf. Duchrow, Ulrich/Bianchi, Reinhold/Krüger, René/Petracca, Vincenzo, 2006, Solidarisch Mensch werden. Psychische und soziale Destruktion im Neoliberalismus - Wege zu ihrer Überwindung, VSA in Kooperation mit Publik-Forum, Hamburg/Oberursel.

societies with growing division of labor and exchange of goods and services, using money connected with the legalizing of private property. Division of labor as such exists much earlier. But the question is how it is socially coordinated. A basic change happens through the *introduction of money and private property.*³ Recent research has shown that the historic roots of the new economy, based on money and private property date back to the 8th century BC. Among others the Buddhist economist *Karl-Heinz Brodbeck* in his book „Die Herrschaft des Geldes. Geschichte und Systematik“ (The Dominance of Money: History and Systematic Analysis)⁴ sees the cause for developing money (and property rights) in the growing division of labor linked to the growing of societies with large populations involved in bartering. The bartering in these societies would not be possible without a unifying measurement. This unity in the diversity of commodities is money – but not as a “thing” separate from the social process of acknowledging its value.

The calculation in the process of bartering changes the *thinking and the soul* of the people. Besides communicating by speech in words (logos) they communicate by calculating in money (ratio). In doing so the Ego of the individual gradually gains precedence over the relations in community. This is enforced by the fact that in the process of bartering in the market the money owner has more power than the producer of a commodity. Money as such offers access to the market while the product has first to meet a demand. Coping with this risk is only possible by having as much money as possible. This is the “objective” base for the greed to accumulate money without limits. The other implication of this is that money gives the right to private property beyond personal property. This leads to the search for exchange value over and above the use value. So money gives access to the market, cushions the risks in the market, measures the exchange value and gives access to property rights. Combined with the development of hierarchies and classes in larger societies with the division of labor, money and property start to determine the economic, social and political power of people within societies. Particularly the interest on credits makes indebted farmers loose their land and become debt slaves. Socio-psychologically through the money-interest-property mechanism the bond of solidarity is broken between the peasants through accumulation for the ones and loss of land and freedom for the others. With money and private property comes the individualism.

³ Cf. *Duchrow, Ulrich / Hinkelammert, Franz J.*, (2002) 2005 2. Aufl., *Leben ist mehr als Kapital. Alternativen zur globalen Diktatur des Eigentums*, Publik Forum, Oberursel.

⁴ *Brodbeck, Karl-Heinz*, 2009, *Die Herrschaft des Geldes. Geschichte und Systematik*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt. See also *Sozialgeschichtliches Wörterbuch zur Bibel*, hg. von *Crüsemann, F./Hungar, C./Janssen, C./ Kessler, R./Schottroff, L.*, 2009, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh, Art. Geld.

((Already *Aristotle* understood part of this.⁵ He analyzed that money is not by nature but introduced by humans as something basically new. It is measure and not measured by anything else. It mediates between the different needs of people. This is why people principally have the definition power over money. But the definition power over money also includes the possibility of misuse. This consists in the perversion of means and end. If money in a given community has to mediate the exchange of goods, necessary for the satisfaction of life needs, money accumulation as end in itself is not a moral problem but destroys life. The person, not recognizing his or her limits and so falling into the illusion of being able to buy endless means for life by endless accumulation of money, destroys the community and so finally himself because human beings can only survive as social beings. This is why Aristotle demands a political prohibition of taking interest and of monopolies as well as an ethical education of the citizens concerning these matters.))

There is one further dimension inherent in the described developments, not understood by Aristotle: the *male domination*. When private property and money came into use, male domination became reinforced by the fact that only men could own property giving them also the political power. E.g. in Ancient Greece and Rome the farmer ruled as head of the household (*despotes/dominus*) over land, slaves, women and children. Roman Law legalizes the absoluteness of property and patriarchy. This new economy becomes linked with empire building in Hellenistic and Roman times after Alexander the Great. It is the first time of the globalization of the money-property economy.

Since the 14th century CE *early, industrial and financial capitalism* is building on this heritage, adding new elements. Interest taking is reinforced by compound interest, wage labor complements and gradually replaces slavery (although up to now, forms of slavery exist), treasure hoarding gives way to systematically reinvesting profits for the continuous maximization of profit (this being the definition of capital in difference from money as such), finally the capitalist world market achieves priority, using the states, particularly colonialist and imperialist ones, as servants. While in the ancient world individual profit making at the cost of the community encountered religious and ethical critique and resistance (cf. the next thesis), capitalism succeeds in presenting itself as rational, good for the general interest and even consonant with human nature (possessive individualism). So dealing with capitalism we have to address modernity in all its dimensions.

⁵ Cf. Brodbeck, op. cit. 412ff.; *Duchrow, Ulrich*, (1995) 1998², *Alternatives to Global Capitalism - Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action*, International Books with Kairos Europa, Utrecht, 20ff.

Thesis 3

- *The main challenge in this situation is to develop a deep critique of modernity and – at the same time – elements of an alternative culture of life, linking analyses/strategies for changing the political economy as well as for becoming human in solidarity. Here we can build on the religions and philosophies of the Axial Age including our own Jewish-Christian tradition. On this basis the question arises: How to build alliances between social movements, faith communities and unions towards this life-enhancing culture?*

Through the increasing rule of money and private property in a “dis-embedded economy” (Karl Polanyi⁶), human relations have become ever more commercialized and individualized. In the early 17th century Thomas Hobbes formulated this *capitalist market anthropology* by defining human beings as individuals competing for ever more wealth, power, and reputation.⁷ This “possessive individualism” corresponds with the new subject-object dualism formulated by Descartes. He defined “man” as “master and owner of nature.”⁸

The whole modern approach is presented as *rational*. However, ratio is reduced to the means-end rationality.⁹ The male owner-master subject is the calculating individual, called homo oeconomicus. Efficiency and competitiveness are the benchmarks disregarding the conditions of life on earth. Hinkelammert images him as a person, putting all energy in sharpening the saw, with which he cuts the branch on which he sits. The whole system is regulated by the pursuit of individual calculated material interests disregarding the non-intentional effects on the whole of society and earth. This is how the irrationality of the rationalized, we are experiencing today, develops. Karl Marx puts it this way: “Capitalist production thus develops technology and, as its logical conclusion, the processes of social production only by simultaneously undermining the sources of all wealth – the earth and the worker.”¹⁰ So death in capitalism follows systemically from the inner economic logic of calculated material interests, politically implemented by laws (making property and contracts an absolute as well as extending and defending them with direct violence), and finally mediated through individuals being steered by the fetishism of the commodities, money and capital. So looking for alternatives of life we have to deal always with the interaction between the logic and the political-economic

⁶ Polanyi, Karl, (1944) 1978.

⁷ Cf. Duchrow/Hinkelammert, op.cit., chapter 2.

⁸ Cf. U. Duchrow/G. Liedke, 1989, pp. 65ff.

⁹ Cf. Hinkelammert, Franz, 2007, Das Subjekt und das Gesetz. Die Wiederkehr des verdrängten Subjekts, Edition ITP-Kompass, Münster, chapters 1 and 9.

¹⁰ Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, Werke Bd. 23, Das Kapital, Berlin/DDR. 1976, S. 530 (Complete Works Vol. 23, Capital).

structures on the one side and human beings, driven by this logic and subjecting themselves to the law of capital accumulation, on the other.

This we can learn from the wisdom of the *Axial Age*. The struggle against the new economy, spreading increasingly since the 8th century BC, can first be observed in Ancient Israel, the first representative of this critique being the prophet Amos. Is it just by accident that this century is being regarded as the start of the Axial Age? *My thesis is that it is exactly the new economy, based on money and property, prompting the Axial Age's religious and philosophical revolution.* This economy was not only splitting societies in rich and poor and increasing the violence beyond the traditional direct oppression of the peasants by the king and the aristocrats. Rather it changed also the hearts and the thinking of the people as we have seen. This, of course, required not only a response on the power level of the political economy but also on the anthropological, psychological and spiritual levels. Exactly this is characteristic for the cultural and religious transformations of the Axial Age in Israel, India, China and Greece. I limit myself to the biblical heritage.

However, before I turn to Ancient Israel and the Jesus movement, let me begin with a caution. It is not possible to simply take the insights of the religions and philosophies of the Axial Age and apply them as a response to the crisis of our civilization. Even religions are highly ambivalent. They can be used and perverted by political and economic powers to serve particular interests, even increasing injustice and violence. So *critique of religion* – how paradoxical this may sound – is a primary task for religion if it wants to live up to its true mission and original potentials. This can already be seen in the Bible itself, systematized by the Apostle Paul when he says: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is the weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world (i.e. the Plebeians in the Roman Empire, the Proletariat in modernity etc.), things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are...” (1 Cor 1:27ff.). So reading the religious traditions in this critical perspective from below can never fail. This is the biblical yardstick to carry out the critique of religion.

We can identify *five biblical options* in dealing with the market economy and empire as well as the calculating subject, going along with them. They are:

1. Prophetic critique of economic and political power in the perspective of creating just relations in society;
2. Legal regulation of the system as long as there is a chance to reform it;
3. Resistance in the case of totalitarian empires;
4. Living alternatively in small groups becoming a kind of leaven in society – even forming networks of solidarity between those groups throughout

the empire (cf. the collection of the Apostle Paul for the poor in Jerusalem, 2 Cor 8-9).

5. The discovery of relational love/solidarity as the alternative to the imperial Roman law that kills as well as to the distorted human way life, captured by the sin of greed.

These biblical approaches could be complemented by other responses from religions and philosophies of the Axial Age. Let me only mention *Buddhism*. Here the main starting point is the liberation from the illusion of the Ego, greedily and aggressively trying to accumulate and to defend the possessions, thus creating suffering. The way out has to be found by walking the eightfold Noble Path, including the realization of the knowledge of mutual inter-dependency of all living beings, empathy and loving kindness. Each person is called to walk this path in the context of communities (sanghas).

On the basis of our analysis of modernity and the Axial Age the *key question* is: how to develop a new understanding and practice of human life in liberated just relationships and how to organize the political economy accordingly? In this context it is of help that even in western sciences new thinking – similar to the perspectives of the Axial sages – is emerging. E.g. *brain research* found out that the human being has a natural tendency towards empathy through the so-called mirror neurons. *Relational psychology* points into the same direction of homo empathicus.¹¹ *Biology* has discovered that many animal species besides primates participate in the mirror neuron system, showing empathy.¹² Even certain schools of *economics* rediscover the commons (e.g. Elinor Ostrom), and economic happiness research revises the significance of wealth accumulation, putting the main emphasis on successful relationships as the primary source of well-being.

David Korten, choosing *life as the guiding metaphor*, has drawn the consequences of these insights for an *economic paradigm transcending capitalism and centrally planed economy*.¹³ Building on research results of biologists like Lynn Margulis he designs an economy, patterned after the *model of living organisms*. On this conceptual basis Korten proposes a strategy under the formula “*Starve the Cancer – Nurture Life*”.¹⁴ Working for a life-enhancing economy we have to withdraw energy from the dominating death-bound, cancerous system, while at the same time we develop life-oriented economic activities and institutions. How could this strategy be unfolded and concretized?

¹¹ Cf. Duchrow, Ulrich/Bianchi, Reinhold/Krüger, René/Petracca, Vincenzo, 2006; Rifkin, op. cit. p. 55f.

¹² Cf. Rifkin, op. cit. p. 82ff.

¹³ Korten, David, 2000, *The Post-Corporate World: Life after Capitalism*, Kumarian Press/Berret-Koehler, West Hartford, CT/SanFrancisco, CA, p. 103ff.

¹⁴ Ibid 262ff.

We can *withhold legitimacy and energy from the system* by various means. First we can *demystify the myths* and blatant lies by which capitalism, especially in its neo-liberal imperial form, justifies and smokescreens its premises and consequences.¹⁵ A second step to withdraw energy from the system is *defiance*, saying a clear No to the system as such and implementing the No through boycotts.

Nurturing life is made possible by a *double strategy*. 1. It can be implemented on a small scale when people at local/regional level or as members of an intentional organization choose to work in post-capitalist ways.¹⁶ The *second part of the strategy* is to regain the control of the *macro-system* by and for the people in order to re-appropriate the gifts of God, robbed by the capital owners and their political and ideological servants, for the life of all people in harmony with nature. The starting point must be the goods and services for the satisfaction of the basic needs of people: water, food, energy, housing, health, education, transport etc. It is here where people can be mobilized and build alliances between social movements, trade unions, faith communities etc. for the struggle.

Let me exemplify this by a European solidarity campaign, the Scientific Council of Attac-Germany is launching. As stated in the beginning, the financial markets are knocking down one country after the other after having socialized the private debt of the speculators and banks. When it hits the Greek people those in the other countries think: it is not me. So they keep quiet. But it has already started to hit them by SAPs and will hit them even more. So we are suggesting that when people rise up in Greece all people in Europe should rise up with strikes, boycotts and demonstrations – up to civil disobedience. The people in Europe need to rise up like in Tunisia telling the banks and the governmental servants of the banks: enough is enough.

There are two basic questions in all of this: *how to reorganize property and money* beyond the false alternative of absolute private or state property.¹⁷ Here all kinds of cultural traditions, including socialist ones, come into play. There is not just one property order, but a host of legal and institutional options. Key is that the people affected are the subjects of the ownership arrangement. There are also proposals how to reorganize the monetary and financial system – some of them already designed by Keynes in Bretton Woods 1944 (but rejected by the

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. *Jenkins, David*, 2000, *Market Whys & Human Wherefores: Thinking Again About Markets, Politics and People*, Cassell, London.

¹⁶ Cf. *Douthwaite, Richard*, 1996, *Short Circuit: Strengthening Local Economies for Security in an Unstable World*, The Lilliput Press, Dublin.

¹⁷ Cf. Duchrow/Hinkelammert, op. cit. chapter 7.

USA). The most comprehensive proposal at present (including Keynes' debt-free money and democratic banks) has been put forward by attac-Austria.

Summarizing we can say that liberation theology in the context of the dominance of money and finance, trying to exert a totalitarian rule over all spheres of life, faces the following challenges, while struggling with social movements for alternatives:

1. Driven by the suffering of people and the earth liberation theology must do a deep interdisciplinary analysis and critique of imperial capitalism as the driving force of modernity, but also understand its roots in the Axial Age. To see this linkage in the contexts enables us to hermeneutically also link the responses to the challenges in biblical times and today.
2. Unfold the religions and philosophies during the Axial Age as responses to the socio-economic, political and socio-psychological challenges. This makes it possible to provide for methodologically plausible interpretations of the biblical as well as other religious insights and spirituality.
3. On this basis concrete alliances between social movements and faith communities can engage in critical and constructive praxis and develop elements of a an alternative culture of life.