



## Singing a New Song: On Old Testament and Latin American Psalmody

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### I. THE HISTORY OF A NEW SONG

Music, be it vocal or instrumental, always has played an important role in all kinds of religious rituals throughout all known cultures. Sound and melody, rhythm and movement are integral to many forms of worship. The reasons for this ornamentation and mystification of the divine services lie hidden far back in pre-history. Among them certainly count notions of power and magic, of participation in superhuman spheres and articulations of innermost longings. The silent speech of heavens and times (Ps 19:2-5; note: verse numbering is according to Hebrew tradition; RSV etc., differs), the shouts of divine beings providing strength for the Lord of hosts (Ps 29:1, 9; Isa 6:3), the acclamation of nations, rivers and mountains (Pss 96; 98), all may be thought of as musical events. Being itself, we are led to suppose by religious experience, is of a musical fibre. Therefore, it is all very natural to approach God in songs and rhythms.<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish-Christian tradition has developed along with other elements of liturgy like blessings, scripture-readings, and sacramental acts, a special kind of sung prayer or hymn. It does have counterparts in many other cultic traditions, to be sure, but the width and depth and diversification of this stream of communal prayer is astonishing. Already in the last century some industrious scholars collected more than a hundred thousand Christian hymns and spiritual songs.<sup>2</sup> The number today must be multiplied by a considerable factor, especially if Jewish songs of all ages and the liturgical poetry of the new continents are to be included, as they certainly should be. Already in New Testament times the vivacity of that old psalmic tradition made itself felt in ever new songs. There are

<sup>1</sup>Cf. C. Maurice Bowra, *Primitive Song* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1962); Leland C. Wyman, *The Mountainway of the Navajo* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1975); and Friedrich Heiler, *Das Gebet* (1918; reprint ed., München: Reinhardt, 1969).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. E. Emil Koch, *Geschichte des Kirchenleids und Kirchengesangs*, 3rd. ed., 8 vols. (Stuttgart: Chr. Belser, 1866-76); Philipp Wackernagel, *Das deutsche Kirchenlied von der ältesten Zeit bis zu Anfang des 17. Jahrhunderts*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1864-1877); August J. Rambach, *Anthologie christlicher Gesänge*, 6 vols. (Hamburg, 1817-1833); and Guido M. Dreves and Clemens Blume, *Analecta hymnica medii aevi*, 55 vols. (Leipzig: 1886-1922).

numerous citations of new Christian hymns in the New Testament writings themselves (cf. Luke 1:46-55, 68-79; 2:29-32; Phil 2:5-11; 1 Tim 3:16; Rev 5:12; 6:10, 7:10, 12; 11:17-18; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 19:1-8). Also, New Testament authors intensively and pointedly speak about the singing of hymns, attributing to it great importance in regard to personal edification and congregational fortification (cf. 1 Cor 14:15; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; Jas 5:13; Rev 5:9; 14:3; 15:3). The diversity

and newness of early Christian vocal music is witnessed to by the classification of “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” which certainly indicates different functions and forms of this poetry in congregational liturgies.

The Christians had inherited the custom of psalm-singing from Jewish liturgical usage. But how had it arisen in that parental creed? From the earliest times (cf. Exod 15:21; Judg 5) and in particular since the exilic period (cf. Ps 137; Lam 1-5) Israel had been approaching Yahweh in a great variety of religious ceremonies, not only by sacrifices and offerings, but also in hymns and lamentations. The amplitude of forms and expressions is due also to local and regional differences and temporal changes. Individuals as well as neighborhoods and communities would voice their concerns over against Yahweh. Sometimes, under determined (for us hardly verifiable) conditions this way of vocal, liturgical articulation took precedence over all the other forms of worship (cf. Ps 51:17-18). Sometimes it was abused and therefore severely contested (cf. Amos 5:23; 6:5). At any rate, psalm-singing very early had become a hall-mark of Israelite faith. It had, to be sure, more ancient roots in pre-Israelite religious life. It came out of the rites of passage and healing ceremonies of family and tribal religion, out of hymns and chants used in Canaanite festivals, out of nomadic songs used for pilgrimages and wanderings. All these influences grew together and were joined with the liturgical customs of Yahweh worship.<sup>3</sup> The national, Yahwistic creed had gradually been installed in the sanctuaries throughout the promised land. Only very much later it became centralized at the Jerusalem temple, and with this new development there appeared new hymns (cf. Pss 46; 48; 76; 132).

From the distant beginnings we have to trace the march of the new singing in praise and lament to our present day. Here and there in the course of the history of Jewish-Christian worship we recognize peaks of psalmic poetry and hymn-singing. If critical investigation is correct, the time of the Chronicler (fourth/third centuries B.C.) already was such a high time. The authors tell us emphatically about levitical singing in Jerusalem. While they project the beginning of this liturgical habit back to the period of David (1 Chr 16; 25), in reality it is their own situation which they are portraying. It is their own congregational, synagogal worship which they want to legitimate.

More popular and closer to the small church-group and the house-community of old was the singing of the primitive Christians (cf. Mark 14:26; 1 Cor 14:15; Eph 5:19; Jas 5:13; Rev 5:9; 14:3). Although there was some discussion in the early church about the permissibility of music in worship—adamant purists tried to limit liturgy to word and sacrament—hymn-singing broke

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Frank M. Cross and N. Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (Missoula: Scholars, 1975).

through. Not restricted to Old Testament psalms, this hymnody adopted the rich eastern and western traditions and reached impressive heights, e.g. in the work of Ephraim, the Syrian church poet, or Ambrose, bishop of Milano, in the third and fourth centuries A.D. respectively. Some of their hymns are still used today (cf. “O Jesus, Lord of heavenly grace,” by Ambrose) with unbroken spiritual force.

Medieval Jewish spiritual poetry was strong and constantly invaded liturgies, challenging the official, scripture-oriented psalm-singing.<sup>4</sup> Purviewing more rapidly the history until our own days, we see many more periods of singing and spreading the gospel by musical means: the Reformation century with its jubilant discovery of the new/old message of grace and

reconciliation; Methodist renewal of the church; awakenings and revivals in Europe, the United States, Africa and Asia. Last, not least, there is the astonishing rebirth of psalm-singing in the churches of Latin-America and other so-called (with hideous arrogance!) “Third World” countries. A new song has arisen in these parts of the world, under incredible pain and in deepest misery, against oppression and despair, in Christian hope and certainty of the Kingdom of Heaven.

To recognize better the core of Jewish-Christian hymnody, to see what this “New Song” is, we want to study some aspects of Old Testament singing and compare to them the new song in Latin America where this author has lived and taught for some years.

## II. ASPECTS OF THE NEW SONG

What has Old Testament hymn-singing been about? How did the “New Song” arise and what does it imply? We should be aware of the fact that Old Testament psalmody used rather fixed poetic, stylistic, liturgical, and theological patterns. These patterns were dependent on tradition and ceremonial purposes and on those social and religious groups who were sponsoring the rites. Modern psalm research has proved beyond reasonable doubt that Old Testament psalmody in no case was a private, poetic affair of closed-in individuals. There is nothing like our seemingly “private” poetry in ancient times. Nor is there very much of it in modern times. If an atomized industrial and urban society today adores at times idiosyncratic, autistic art this does not mean that art is less public than in antiquity. Among the Hebrews, in any case, we do not know of one single individual writer or poet. Not even Jeremiah or Baruch belong in this category. All Old Testament literature is community oriented, destined to be used in groups and congregations.

The psalms were used in some ceremonial setting or other which of course underwent considerable change through the centuries: social shifts and rifts occurred as the transitions were made from nomadism to agrarian ways of life, from clan and tribal society to monarchy, and on to the loss of statehood and an

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<sup>4</sup>Cf. Ismar Eibogen, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (1931; reprint ed., Hildesheim: Olms, 1967); and Johann Maier, “Zur Verwendung der Psalmen in der synagogalen Liturgie,” in *Liturgie und Dichtung*, eds. H. Becker and R. Kaczynski (St. Ottilien: Eos, 1983) 55-90.

existence in dispersion and dependence. Clearly a bedouin tribesman has different needs and expectations, different beliefs and superstitions from those of a peasant in his seasonal routine. A citizen and royal functionary worships in another way than a craftsman in the province under foreign dominion. Is this, then, the point for the “New Song” to arise, as response to new social situations (cf. the Zion-hymns mentioned above)? Should we consider the “New Song” in Israel as a kind of protest-hymn like the ones which came up in our churches, sung by young people, civil-rights-, anti-war-, and peace-movements, and which settled down in a large quantity of pamphlets apart from official hymnbooks?

This is by no means true for the Old Testament “New Song.” Changes of social structures by and large took a long time to occur and be recognized, if ever. Even abrupt turmoil like the downfall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and its consequences were lamented in very traditional forms (cf. Lam). The structural upheaval hardly plays a role in these laments, perhaps even passes

unnoticed. The expression “sing a new song” in the Old Testament (Pss 33:3; 40:4; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa 42:10) must have a meaning which differs from our own expectation. We should be aware that “new” in our languages and cultures may mean a substitution for things past, but to the effect that a steady progress may be enjoyed and consummated by the things implementing the “new” situation. The jargon of advertising is an example. The word “new” promises more of the old with better means and lesser pain, work and investments.

Not so in the Old Testament psalms. It is not the newness of the prayer which is aimed at, nor the continuous usufruct of the old. We marvel: the “New Song” consists of old words. But the situation, the reality, has radically changed in comparison to what existed before. There may have occurred a salvation experience of a distressed individual or an endangered community. Psalms 40:4 and 144:9 seem to presuppose this wonderful upheaval of oppressive reality. The psalmist sings praises because he is saved. He has passed through despair and death (cf. Ps. 107 and its descriptions of deadly realities, or Pss 22; 38; 69 etc.). In typical thanksgiving situations the adorant looks back into the abyss. These situations mark a miraculous renewal of life, a reversal of the death-reality, a victory over evil. On a larger and seasonal scale this same overthrow of bad powers is being celebrated in festal hymns like Psalms 96:1 and 98:1. Small wonder that the same word may also be used in order to articulate eschatological hopes for a new world to come (cf. Isa 42:10; 65:17-25). Not continuation and growth, but salvation and new beginning, return and renewal are the reference points for the psalmists from the beginning. The words of the songs may be old. But reality, which carries the great intervention of God, is brand new. Therefore, the judgment of R. North<sup>5</sup> puts things upside down: “The totality of existing reality, as already in existence, continues to be, only in a revitalized form...it is a kind of creation which, however, accentuates more the dynamic motion of ongoing existence than its substitution by something new.” It seems to me that the modern predicament of being drugged by newness without pain has been read into the Old Testament texts.

<sup>5</sup>*Theologisches Wörterbuch Zum Alten Testament*, 2:775.

The criteria for the Old Testament “New Song,” consequently, are these:

1. It was intoned against death and evil in order to support and make possible full human life.
2. It was voiced in communities small and great, but never in the privacy of chamber or office.
3. It anticipates boldly, against all evidence, the coming of God’s liberation, the new and just world.

### III. LATIN AMERICAN REVIVAL

In Latin America there has been going on for some decades now a revival of religious singing. A truly new song has come up. Thousands of spiritual poems have been composed especially in the base-communities. Sometimes the authors are unknown, the songs are folk-songs, the language may be idiomatic or slangish. But spiritual compositions may be found through all layers of society and all linguistic levels. Even renowned poets and singers, commanding a vast audience, like Pablo Neruda and Victor Jara in Chile, Mercedes Souza in Argentina, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Chico Buarque de Holanda, and Maria Bethania in Brazil and many others know to include the spiritual dimension in their work. These intellectuals certainly are no opportunists; they simply respect the religious foundations of all life.

The background for this new singing, and paradoxically the fertile soil for it, is an economic and political decay of astounding proportions. Agrarian and mineral exploitation of the continent has, of course, been going on practically since discovery, conquest and colonization. But with the exception of short price-booms for certain export-goods, like rubber, copper, cotton, wheat, soya, meat, etc., the more recent efforts of industrialization have resulted in a rapid accumulation of wealth in the hands of a very thin layer of upper-class people and a deadly impoverishment of large segments of the population. Infant mortality ranges between 200 and 500 per thousand. Illiteracy is up to 30 and 60 percent. Starvation and disease plague the millions without land in the countryside and the *favelados* (slum dwellers) around the great cities. Unemployment, substandard housing, lack of educational facilities, faulty health care join the list of calamities and make a full, vicious circle of inhuman living conditions. It is virtually impossible to escape from it. The majority of the people, that is 70-80 percent, lives, no, it rather dies, on 20-30 percent of the national income. A worker has to toil for 10 to 20 hours in order to gain the money which buys him one kilogram of meat. He has to work for a full month to buy one pair of decent shoes. The children who survive very often are weakened physically and intellectually to such an extent that they never can develop fully their human capacities. Profiteering of a few at the cost of the majority goes hand in hand with a ruthless destruction of nature by uncontrolled use of chemicals and unscrupulous extraction of all natural resources.

Another background is equally or more important, however. Since 1968, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church have been analyzing the economic and social situation of their continent and trying to formulate responses to it. On the basis of their analyses the

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bishops have flatly denounced the existing reality and the system which led into this situation as unchristian and dehumanizing. This stand of the official church was the signal for a free proliferation of base-communities and the green light for the new Latin American song. The Vatican, by the way, seems to fear increased alienation in Latin America. Therefore Rome tries to contain liberation theology and intimidate “leftist” priests. Nevertheless, the popular movement within the church is still strong, especially in Brazil. And there are thousands of new church hymns growing in that hopeless environment of poor congregations. Their beauty and force very often is breathtaking. Following the criteria of Old Testament psalm-singing given above we should note the following:

1. The forces of evil are constantly being identified and denounced in these new hymns of Latin American Christians. There is no other way to proceed. Dogmatic affirmations about that “evil within a person” or the “all pervading sin” (cf. Ps 14; Rom 3:9-20) fail to do justice to the calling of Christ in that concrete situation. Mere dogmatic truths never will do, because the gospel is a living truth. Injustice has to be named. Taking the enemy descriptions of Old Testament laments as a point of departure Ernesto Cardenal writes:

My God, my God, why did you abandon me?  
I am a caricature of a man, despised by everyone.  
They make fun of me in their papers,  
their armored cars close in on me.

They point their machine-guns at me,  
and I am surrounded by wire, by electric fences.  
Every day I have to attend to their roll-call,  
they burned a number into my skin.  
They took photos of me between the barbed wire,  
all my bones may be counted as in a radiography.  
They took my personal documents,  
they pushed me naked into the gas-chamber,  
and divided my clothes among themselves....<sup>6</sup>

This is indeed a stark and comprehensive description of that devilish reality which can be witnessed in Latin America and other parts of the world. Most importantly, in this poem it is the military, dictatorial abuse of power which is being denounced, in accordance with the mythical and archetypal enemy descriptions of Psalm 22. This deadly and oppressive reality must be unmasked, combatted and overcome in the name of Christ!

The identification of the causes of misery has nothing to do with sowing hatred or envying the upper classes for their possessions and privileges. The songs and liturgies are amazingly sober in Latin America. They even portray the economic pressures which induce the landowner to dismiss his farm-workers and turn to more profitable cattle breeding or to switch to large-scale, mechanized plantation methods. The peasants understand this development to a certain extent, but they experience subhuman treatment and they lose their little subsistence in spite of the protection which the law wants to provide (a farmer has a title to the land which he has cultivated for more than ten years, a right not

<sup>6</sup>Ernesto Cardenal, *Salmos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Carlos Lohle, 1969).

respected by great landowners). Typical are the spiritual songs of the farmhands of Goiás, one of the central states of Brazil.<sup>7</sup> They tell the stories of threat, humiliation, force, expulsion which are the daily bread of the lower class people there. The hymns sometimes show a deep knowledge of economic machinations which come from the cities. Mining companies, banks, traders promote their interests by invading Indian reservations and national parks, buying large areas legally or illegally and expelling defenseless natives or squatters. Again it is the experience of sheer and brutal force, the total contempt for the most fundamental human rights which is most shocking. The underprivileged know that this kind of predatory economy is sacrificing millions of human lives, destroying all the environment and in the end will be suicidal even for the rich. Therefore, the poor in their hymns sing against death and destruction, feeling responsible for the whole of creation.

I am baptized,  
therefore I do have the duty  
to put myself to service  
following our Lord.  
He set the example  
of justice and truth,

of union and friendship,  
of freedom and love.<sup>8</sup>

These are words of farm-hands in the wider Amazonas region.

The other side of the coin is the unimaginable suffering of the people. Quite in line with Old Testament descriptions of misery, reflections upon the situation of the exploited recur in many hymns beside the identification of the evil-mongers.

Hear us, our God,  
you are the strength of the weak and lowly.  
Hear our clamor which is burning our intestines.  
We are the miserable of the earth,  
that's the way they call us.  
It is hard to live only by your two hands,  
when a gang of exploiters is after you.  
We live in shacks of dirt and boards.  
When it rains our children weep.  
Cold weather bites into our bones.  
We have three chairs to sleep on,  
our household is a tiny compartment.  
Our children grow up naked without and within.  
They are the ones who steal food on the market place.  
Everyone condemns us and looks at us with disgust,  
and we have to swallow our black hatred in order not to explode.  
We eat rice and beans if we can.  
We all eat from one plate until the dish is finished.

<sup>7</sup>*Cantos dos lavradores de Goiás* (Goiânia: Centro de Reflexão e Documentação, 1979).

<sup>8</sup>*Cantos*, 10.

We work two hours away from home,  
we have to rise at four in the morning.  
They keep us like starved dogs;  
our big-bellied bosses do not consider us humans.  
We already start to think like them,  
we come to the point to lose all hope....<sup>9</sup>

In spite of the harsh tones which may offend us, these songs are real Christian hymns and by no means chants of an ideological class-struggle, as the new Vatican instruction against liberation theology might suggest. No, here is that militant love of Christ at work which we find through the Bible: in psalms, prophets and the gospels themselves (cf. Amos 1-6; Isa 5; Jer 22; Matt 23; 25; Luke 18:18-27 etc.). Paulo Freire explains very well how conscientization and liberation of the poor for the sake of Christ also implies the conscientization and liberation of the rich.<sup>10</sup> And Dom Helder Camara, impressive in his simplicity, humanity, and understanding, in one of his

nocturne meditations puts it this way:

You, God, are the father of which kind of poor?  
Without any doubt  
of the helpless,  
the oppressed,  
of those without rights and voice.  
But please, do not forget  
the other kinds of poverty:  
those deprived of love,  
deprived of their dreams,  
deprived of faith and hope,  
deprived of peace.  
In your boundless mercy  
also take care  
of the poorest of poor,  
the poor rich ones.  
They embrace the shadows of power,  
they live all along  
under the illusion  
to live intensively:  
But they do not live at all.<sup>11</sup>

Theologically speaking, the New Song in Latin America is in line with Old Testament and New Testament psalmody. It is its declared goal to overcome the inhuman, devilish forces of the dark, to begin a new life, to realize the good creation of God. The new hymns sing against death, they proclaim the victory of life. This kind of identification of evil and announcement of the new age can be done legitimately, however, only from the depth of suffering, of utter deprivation (cf.

<sup>9</sup>*Os salmos da vida*, mimeographed sheets without names and dates (Casias do Sul, 1980) 4.

<sup>10</sup>Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia do oprimido* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra., 1975).

<sup>11</sup>Helder Câmara, *Mach aus mir einen Regenbogen* (Zürich: Pendo, 1981) 85.

Pss 69:2-3; 88:5-7; 130:1).<sup>12</sup> The same words of psalms and hymns used in a position of power would become cynical instruments of exploitation.

2. The new songs of Latin America are never individualistic or private in our sense of the words. They are fully integrated into the life of the community, no matter whether or not the author is known, well-known, or anonymous. Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga, who has been living and working with the natives and poor in Mato Grosso, Brazil, for many years, once told me of the origin of a little hymn which is widely sung all over Brazil. The author's name usually is missing on the mimeographed sheets which serve as hymnals. The small farmers of some village in Mato Grosso were clearing a piece of forest in a joint effort to provide living space for some families. And the bishop was helping them physically and spiritually. Dom Pedro after a while was asked



to prepare the coffee for the group. While he was doing this there occurred to him this song which has become a real church hymn:

We are a people of human beings,  
God's people are we.  
What we want is land on earth,  
land in heaven we've got already.  
We want to work in the fields,  
love we want to plant.  
Peasant, the land is ours,  
united, as we are, in the Lord.<sup>13</sup>

The “we” in the hymn is conspicuous. The movement of rural and urban base-communities discovered, as one aspect of the liberating gospel, that there may be and must be fraternal love between the exploited, instead of distrust, envy and strife. Solidarity among the poor was experienced as the first gift of God. Many Old Testament psalms show the same strong social cohesion as absolutely vital to a person. The psalmists complain, for instance, about the breaking of social ties in misery or sickness (cf. Pss 35; 40; 55; 88). They yearn for rehabilitation and re-integration.<sup>14</sup> Complaint really had the function of reconciling the sufferer with God and thereby re-establishing the broken social ties. Another example is the delimitation of the orthodox community after the exile, the warding off of “godless,” “crooked,” and “foreigners” (cf. Pss 10; 12; 37; 49; 73; 94; Neh 13). The same holds true for Latin American hymns. They do cultivate—although not glorify!—the righteousness and love within the base-group, recognizing very well also human frailty, faults and sins in one's own group. And they discover, theologically speaking, the divine value of poverty and lowliness. Power and glory are not the most significant attributes of God, but humility, sympathy, patience. In accordance with the overwhelming witness of the whole Bible, the Lord is at the side of the despised, persecuted, and helpless, suffering with them: “You are the God of the poor” is the title of a hymn from Nicaragua. Its second stanza runs:

<sup>12</sup>Erhard S. Gerstenberger, “Enemies and Evildoers in the Psalms,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology*, 4/5 (1982-83) 61-77.

<sup>13</sup>Nós lavradores unidos, senhor (São Paulo: Loyola, 1980) 42.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger and Wolfgang Schrage, *Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).

You go hand in hand with my people,  
you fight for them, in country and city.  
You line up in the worker's camp,  
to get your salary paid.  
You are eating there on the lawn with Eusebio,  
with Pancho and Juan Jose.  
You scratch your pan  
when there is too little honey in your food.

And the first and fourth stanzas summarize:

You are the God of the poor,  
you are simple and human.  
You are sweating on the road,  
you are the God with the sun-burnt face.  
Therefore I talk to you  
just like my people used to talk:  
You are the laboring God,  
you are Christ, the worker.<sup>15</sup>

The new consciousness of one's own dignity, due to God's descent into this world which signalizes a loving and not a condescending participation in human affairs, comes out in many songs. It is part also of the eucharistic prayer of the catholic church at San Cristobal de las Casas in Mexico. Together with praise of God and memory of all the suffering in the world, the congregation mentions the lowly ones, thus portraying their own community:

We do not forget your beloved ones,  
the farm-hands with their thousand sorrows,  
the peasants without land and harvest,  
the worker without a job,  
the carpenter without wood,  
the woman robbed of her dignity,  
the woman defiled and abandoned,  
all those who are persecuted  
for the sake of righteousness and fraternity.<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, the sense of being wronged by existing power structures also results in assertions of one's own rights and demands. The "Songs of the farm-workers of Goiás" not only contain moving stories about the sufferings ("The cost of living," complaining about inadequate wages; "Mirror of reality," telling examples of expulsion from one's own land<sup>17</sup>) but also offer confidence in final justice and restitution. The assertion is that the claims of the people are right before God and men, and that they therefore constitute a force which must win victory without violence. In that sense, for example, G. Gutierrez also speaks of the "Force of the poor." The hymnic admonition says:

<sup>15</sup>Antonio Reiser and Paul G. Schoenborn, *Sehnsucht nach dem Fest der freien Menschen* (Wuppertal: Jgenddienst, 1982) 36.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>17</sup>*Cantos dos lavradores*, 11, 13.

Open your eyes, my friend:  
We will walk together!  
Only through the force of our union

we will be liberated.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, we immediately suspect that these affirmations are mere “trust in flesh” and theological heresy. We should remember, however, that all the hymns here cited are deeply embedded in Christian communities who are well aware of their relation to God, and who are offering their cooperation at the lowest level of impotence. In the same vein many an Old Testament hymn ventures to speak about human participation in the liberating acts of God (cf. e.g. Judg 5; Ps 18). The same is true for the civil rights song “We shall overcome.” The other danger we fear is political rebellion camouflaged as spiritual protest. In particular, northern Christians smell the Marxist menace in every movement which might threaten the industrialized states’ privileges and wealth. (The Westerners usually do not realize that the Easterners are plagued by the same fear, and that the world is in reality not divided in East and West but in Northern and Southern hemispheres). Well, there is hardly any truly Marxist ideology in Latin America. The sensibility against socialist domination is as great as against capitalist exploitation. And the challenge to the rich comes from the gospel of Christ, not from a Marxist philosophy.

3. The most pervasive and illuminating feature of new Latin American hymn-singing is the exuberant hope for the new world to come, which already has been touched upon here and there. The New Song in fact heralds the new reality of justice and love. In singing together, people—minority groups, impotent masses, exploited and suffering individuals—anticipate the new life which still is absent in their respective realities and environments. This also has been the experience in peace- and civil-rights-movements. The element of hope against all outward evidence is the most impressive fact in Latin American singing. Here is the prayer of a Christian condemned to death under the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, on the eve of execution:

Tomorrow, my son, everything will be different.  
Oppression will vanish through the back door  
which will be closed forever  
by the hands of new persons.  
Small farmers will laugh on their sites,  
they will be tiny, but they will be their own.  
The worker’s daughters no longer need to prostitute themselves,  
nor the daughters of the farmer.  
They will work in dignity  
and earn their food and clothes.  
Weeping will cease in the house of the poor.  
You will laugh with joy,  
and your laughter will be carried away  
by roads and streams and lanes.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>19</sup>Reiser, *Sehnsucht*, 176.

Or compare that vision contained in the “Psalm of liberated man,” another example of the popular collection of “Psalms for life”:

I want to be a messenger of hope,  
the light shining in my eyes,  
passionate unrest in my weak hands,  
disquieting strength of God in my words.  
I want to be a sower of freedom,  
among the people, my brothers,  
in order to build his kingdom on this earth, so good and so much ours.  
I want to proclaim peace,  
with feet not profaned by gold.  
I will not walk on paths of injustice,  
I will not tolerate the oppression of the other poor....  
I will not sell my heart for lies,  
I will not keep silent when truth is called for....<sup>20</sup>

The hope to be found in Latin American hymns is the hope of the Christian church which Christ himself has sparked through his coming, living, suffering, dying and through his resurrection. Jesus himself lived in an anticipating hope of the kingdom to come (cf. Matt 9:15; Luke 23:43; John 6:35; 8:36; 11:25). And the Latin American Christians see the Reign of God sprout like a tiny seed in their own midst.

#### IV. THE NEW SONG HAS POWER

These very few examples of Latin American singing should demonstrate that the biblical tradition of the New Song against death and in favor of life is being continued triumphantly on that poverty-shaken continent. The new hymns, in fact, *are* the force of God. They are instruments and material of the new time. To show this I may list a few incidents, involving New Songs and the reaction against them from the side of the powers of death.

After the slaying of Father João Bosco Penido Bournier on October 11, 1976, at Ribeirão Bonito, Mato Grosso by a police sergeant, the congregation celebrated mass and sang its hymns in sadness and defiance.<sup>21</sup> The colonists expelled from their land at Alagamar, Paraiba, or at Rondo Alta, Rio Grande do Sul, and other places resisted the pressures to make them disappear into the slums. Their only weapons were protests, petitions, prayer, worship and singing. And they won at least partial victories. Father Reginaldo Veloso was sentenced to two years of prison in 1981. He had composed a new hymn with the first line running: "Vito, Vito, vitoria..." commemorating the expulsion by the government of the Italian priest Vitor Miracapillo, who had been living in too effective solidarity with the poor of his congregation. In spite of all these reactions—and they cannot be expected to be otherwise—Latin American Chris-

<sup>20</sup>*Os salmos.*

<sup>21</sup>Pedro Casaldaliga, *Creio na Justiça e na Esperança* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1978) 135ff.

tians are sure that police power in the long run will lose out against the New Song of Christ. Antonio Haddad put it this way in a mass composed in 1976:

Vem Senhor, vem Senhor,

vem libertar o teu povo.  
Apesar da fome aguda e da sorte que não muda,  
sem casa para morar e sem onde se empregar  
este povo ainda,  
espera a tua vinda.

(Come, O Lord, come, O Lord / come and free your people. / In spite of sharp hunger and  
a fate which does not change, / without house to live in and without job to take care of / this  
people still / waits for you to come.)