



Labor: A Suggestion for Rethinking the Way of the Christian

VÍTOR WESTHELLE

Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, Matelândia, Paraná, Brazil

I. PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Ethical reasoning and Christian moral commitments have fallen into a crisis of orientation which is due both to the lack of a hegemonic theological system capable of being the gravitational center of a Christian ethical theory and to the new or increased challenges that humanity is facing in the second half of this century.

To these new or increased challenges belong the ecological crisis, the disparities in the world economic order, the emerging feminist consciousness, the militant awareness of racial discrimination, the atomic threat, mass starvation coupled with agricultural superproduction, the unforeseeable consequences of genetic manipulation, and all the other issues directly or indirectly linked with these. Christian ethics gives the impression of being overwhelmed by the multiple edges of these challenges and has been compelled into a pluralistic motel with separated quarters where these problems are isolated and a number of adjective and genitive theologies with their corresponding ethical proposals are being issued. Despite the efficacy and militancy of such proposals there is a danger of compartmentalization of truth-claims, atomization of the basic unity in Christian moral discourse, and lack of criteria that can adjudicate ethical issues cross-sectionally or justify an ethical stance outside of its own inner presuppositions.

Yet there are some attempts to provide for a more comprehensive view. In the theologies and ethics that have given special attention to problems related to classism, racism, sexism, and the relationship between political ideologies and practices, the ethical discourse has been enriched by a normative appeal to the inner *experience* of the victim group. The emphasis on the collective and social character of these experiences has represented a great advance over the subjective basis on which existential and individualistic decisions were grounded. This subjective basis has been socialized and politicized with the helping hand of the

critical theory of the Frankfurt School.¹ The question of the relationship of the human (in fact, the individual) to God² gave room to a theological ethics in which the social and political character of existence, the collective experience of the victim group, came to the forefront of theological discussions. Instead of "existence," "praxis" became the foundational category for ethico-theological constructions. Praxis was understood in its original sense as performative action of inter-subjective communication and interaction.³

With all the merits that this proposal has for a political grounding of ethico-theological discourse, it has not been able nor willing to go beyond subjectivity, even if now the subject is grasped in a collectivity, a class, or a group engaged in an open conversation in perennial search

for meaning and liberty.⁴

An opposing view has been suggested by theologians who, with ecological sensibilities, have accused political theology and praxiological ethics of falling into an “exaggerated humanism, or homocentrism.”⁵ James Gustafson, one of the most articulate militants of this counterattack, has raised his criticism by saying that in those theologies the “deity is confined in his action too exclusively to the realm of history and not sufficiently to the realm of nature.”⁶ Sin, “human fault,” should not be interpreted as being merely the individual’s self interest but also “our tendency to be turned inward...toward our communal interests.”⁷ Showing some reservations toward classic or neoclassic natural theology, Gustafson wants to develop a theocentric perspective that envisages the human inserted into nature and whose chief end is to give glory to the God of all creation.⁸ This perspective is doxological and contemplative before it is in any sense praxiological and political. It is involved in *theoria* (i.e., contemplation) before it engages in *praxis* (i.e., inter-subjective performative action). In relationship to political theology, it inverts the primacy of *praxis* over *theoria*.⁹

¹The names of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas should be mentioned among others as the most influential for theology. Adorno, in *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1964) 29-30, has accused “the highest principle of the subject,” its absolute distinctiveness and individual authenticity in Rudolf Bultmann’s theology and ethics as being “blind.” Dorothee Soelle, in her book *Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), makes an attempt to socialize, collectivize, and politicize Bultmann’s individualism.

²For a historical account of how these theological trends developed, see Alfredo Fierro, *The Militant Gospel: A Critical Introduction to Political Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977) 3-12.

³See Helmut Peukert, *Wissenschaftstheorie, Handlungstheorie, fundamentale Theologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1976) 320-23; Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 49-77.

⁴Metz, *Faith in History*, 69. In H. Peukert, *Wissenschaftstheorie*, 311-15, this meaning is the one that aims to account for the death of an individual, particularly the death of an innocent.

⁵Schubert Ogden, *Faith and Freedom: Toward a Theology of Liberation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 103. The accusation is directed particularly against liberation theology, but it can be extended to other political theologies.

⁶James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective: Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981) 73-74; cf. p. 23.

⁷*Ibid.*, 306.

⁸*Ibid.*, 113.

⁹*Theoria* is here understood in its Greek sense as contemplative observation. On the primacy of *praxis* in political theology, see J. Metz, *Faith in History*, 50-60.

Although these are not the only options for rethinking the principles of ethics in the contemporary theological scene, they are two powerful, well established, and articulated bases for the construction of a responsible ethico-theological discourse. The strength of the praxiological approach lies in its political relevance for dealing with the cluster of social ethical issues. The focus of the ethical concern is the victim identified as an oppressed, discriminated, and marginalized group. The resolution of an ethical issue goes through a social action guided toward the incorporation of the moral claims of the victim into the politico-theological conversation destabilizing the discourse and practice of the hegemonic group. The way of the Christian goes through the solidarity with the victim—even the most radical victim: the dead—evoked by the memory of the passion of Christ.¹⁰

The criticism voiced against this position is that its humanism, in fact, does not overcome

clearly the danger of anthropocentrism, since it is a given of its own presuppositions that only the good and the right of the human can be the subject-matter of an interested communicative praxis directly. The ecological cluster of issues can enter the agenda of conversation if, and only if, mediated through human interest. As far as the content of such a position is concerned, the problem emerges with the need to evaluate claims and define what a victim is, since it cannot be simultaneously assumed, without self-contradiction, that all are victims or that all victims' claims have the same ethical weight. If all are victims and their claims are equally relevant, the result of the ethical equation would be nil. If some are victims with equal claims, a criterion outside of praxis itself will be required to define who is a victim. If all or some are victims but with different claim values, a criterion to weigh them is also needed.

The "theoretical" approach with its theocentric and doxological focus has its strength in the postulation of the *relative* distinctiveness of the human within nature opening the possibility of giving priority to an ethical commitment grounded on ecological responsibility. The criticism raised against this approach is that it bypasses the question of human interest in the determination of the very knowledge of what constitutes the relationship between God and creation. Religious affection and piety are called upon to overcome the predicaments of self interest, but in themselves they are not sufficient to adjudicate an ethical issue since they are not preventive of conflictive moral values, even if there is unity in piety.

These two types of ethical propositions are not necessarily a description of positions assumed by any theologian in particular. They are ideal types (in Weber's sense) for organization of any ethical discourse. But it is the contention of this essay that they have been proposed with variations at several levels, from popular religious consciousness to the more nuanced theological articulations. At the center of each type we shall find either a praxiological or a theoretical, a political or a contemplative, nucleus. Each will have a different understanding of God's presence or revelation. In one, God's revelation takes place in and through historical and social processes; in the other, God's presence is experi-

¹⁰H. Peukert, *Wissenschaftstheorie*, 306-310; J. Metz, *Faith in History*, 229-36.

enced in cosmic powers and natural forces. In one, the human is the *subject* of God's agency; in the other, the human, and nature in general, are the *object* of God's power.

II. POIESIS AND ETHICS

A suggestive allusion to an alternative to the options that were briefly presented can be found in Aristotle's classification of the three main human arts: *theoria*, *praxis* and *poiesis*.¹¹ Since the fourteenth century the distinction between *praxis* (action, doing) and *poiesis* (production, making) has been blurred. Duns Scotus coined the Latin neologism "praxis" to cover both *actio* and *factio*.¹² The precise Greek distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis* was lost and so was Aristotle's insistence that one had to be distinguished from the other because production (*poiesis*) aims at an end other than itself, while action's (*praxis*' end is merely doing whatever is being done for the sake of doing it well.¹³ For example, the construction of a stage and the writing of a play belong to *poiesis*, while the performance, the acting, belongs to *praxis*. *Theoria*, in turn, is the category that explains the engagement of those who observe the play being performed. This example does not aim at a reconstruction of this triadic distinction.¹⁴ The

point here is to raise the distinctive importance of *poiesis*.

A. The structure of *poiesis*. As a preliminary definition we can say that *poiesis* is the human (social) production for the satisfaction of some need through a determinate result (product) envisaged ideally (*telos*), conditioned by the material reality at hand and by the technological means available. These elements distinguish *poiesis* from *theoria* since the latter consists in an attitude of noetic contemplation of a given object, be it natural, artificial, or aesthetic. The subject, the observing mind, is absorbed by the objective reality. *Poiesis* distinguishes itself also from *praxis* in its strict (Greek) sense, for the latter is understood as a performative action determined by subjective interaction without positive or objective result. When *praxis* ends, nothing is left in any positive sense; objectivity is overcome by intersubjectivity. However, in *poiesis* the determinant phenomenological feature is the interaction or interpenetration of subject and object in which the subject objectifies itself through the creation of positive satisfaction, and the object is subjectively grasped and incorporated. This process of mutual transformation in the subject-object relationship can be called metabolism.

¹¹Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V.1. See Nikolas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1967) 3-9.

¹²Cf. Nikolas Lobkowitz, "Theory and Practice," *Encyclopaedia of Marxism*, p. 163. Aquinas had already lumped the two "arts" under the concept of *vita activa*, rooted in the *necessitas praesentis vitae* (*Summa theologica* II-II, 179, 2 and 3).

¹³*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140.a1-b10.

¹⁴For this, see N. Lobkowitz, "Theory and Practice."

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B. The classification of *poiesis*. Observing the structural elements of *poiesis* (need-telos/reality-means) it is possible to sketch two types of *poietic* action according to the needs and the reality at hand.

The first type is the *poiesis* for the direct satisfaction of needs. This type can be divided into two subtypes. One accounts for the production of goods for the satisfaction of physical needs like food, clothing, and shelter. The raw material is natural or artificial. The other subtype accounts for the production of goods for the satisfaction of "spiritual" needs like a book, a song, a painting, or a poem. Here *poiesis* works over symbolic material.¹⁵ The very word "poetry" betokens the association with the original and more encompassing Greek word.

The second type of *poiesis* is the one that aims at the production of means that indirectly satisfy needs. This type can be divided as well into two other subtypes. The first of them accounts for the production of technological means or tools, from knives to computers, to be employed in the production process for the satisfaction of physical needs. The second subtype accounts for the production of means to be employed in the process of satisfying "spiritual" needs. Examples would be textbooks, dictionaries, and word processors.

The first general type has logical primacy over the second and will be our main concern. More specifically, we shall deal primarily with physical production, assuming that "spiritual" production will unfold a parallel argument once the differences regarding the sort of need and the kind of material used are preserved.

C. Labor and work. It should be already clear that all these types of *poiesis* can be

designated as labor or as work. The term “labor” will be given preference over “work” for the following reason. Work can be defined as a concrete and particular labor that creates goods which are determined by their utility and by their participation in the market in which they operate as exchange goods. Labor designates the general process that creates value as such; it refers to the process of production from the standpoint of the subject-object interaction. Work designates the productive endeavor from the standpoint of the particular result or utility of the enterprise.¹⁶

On the basis of this distinction, the proposition of a foundational ethics of labor can be distinguished quite sharply from the so-called “Protestant work ethic.” The chief feature of such ethics is that it issues in the specific gain, in a visible and particular sign, in the quantitative result of a work which is interpreted as a concrete blessing.¹⁷ Not rarely has such a view claimed the priestly account of the creation story (Gen 1:1-2:4) in its support, for there the human is to “multiply,” to “subdue” the earth, and have “dominion” over every living

¹⁵An insightful study of this “spiritual” mode of production was developed by Hugo Assmann, *Theologia desde la praxis de la liberacion* (Salamanca: Sigueme, 1976) 171-202.

¹⁶See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, 1976) 61-62, where Engels makes to this effect an editorial comment pointing out the nuance of the English language which does not have a correspondence in German.

¹⁷Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (2 vols.; Munich and Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch, 1969) 1.329.

thing. Max Weber, in his study on Protestant ethics, has raised this issue and provoked a great debate about the accuracy and factuality of his interpretation.¹⁸ If a consensus has not been reached, it seems at least correct to say that the *work* mentality geared toward profit, concerned with greed (Weber: *Gewinnsucht*), will result in an anthropocentric ethics that will exploit nature¹⁹ and create economic strife. Such an ethical conception will improve on the three basic factors that determine our present-day ecological crisis: “(a) technological advance; (b) population increase; and (c) conventional (but wrong) ideas about the nature of man and his relation to the environment,” i.e., hubris.²⁰ These factors combined lead to pollution, famine, and war.

An ethics based on labor will not merely be a correction of the work ethic, but it will be radically different. The three main features of such an ethical principle can be already pointed out for further development. First, it grounds itself in ecological responsibility without falling into a romantic rejection of science and technology. Second, it grows out of the awareness of the human insertion within nature without surrendering the distinctiveness of the human. Third, it implies the understanding of the social character of human action without raising it to an anthropocentric exclusivism.

III. THE METABOLISM OF LABOR

The understanding of labor as the ground for ethical reflection has its roots in the Marxist tradition, as far as modern history is concerned. It is important to recover the Marxist understanding of labor for theology even if, or because, it has been almost forgotten in Marxism itself.²¹

For Marx and Engels the distinctiveness of human beings is predicated on two

characteristics: labor and social interaction. It is not circumstantial that labor is described by the organic metaphor of a metabolism involving human purposiveness and matter in motion.²² The fundamental characteristic of labor is not the subduing of nature by an alien purpose, but the metabolic process through which nature fulfills its own most advanced need: the reproduction of life. This metabolism is defined as an immediate relationship, i.e., a non-technological

¹⁸Part of this debate is found in the second volume of M. Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik*.

¹⁹See the influential article by Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967) 1203-1207.

²⁰Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972) 488.

²¹In Marxism most of the internal debate has focused on the antinomy between a scientific-technocratic and a humanistic view. An exception to this is the old Georg Lukacs, particularly his book *Labour*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press, 1980). Marx, however, is indebted to Hegel from whom he learned that labor is the "self-confirming essence of man." But he criticizes him because "the only labor Hegel knows is *abstract, mental labor*." *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. L. D. Easton and K. H. Guddat (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, 1967) 322.

²²K. Marx, *Kapital*, 1.57, 192; 3.723, 728, *passim*. This notion is suggested by G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (20 vols.; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971) 7.360. Concerning the central position that the concept of labor occupies in the philosophy of Hegel, see Georg Lukacs, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976) 338-63.

relation, until two things take place: the development of tools and the structuring of social relations. This organization of social relations demands a dynamic division of labor, relocation of primitive social functions, or the creation of new social functions in order for human society to enhance the possibility of survival. For this reorganization of social functions a system of communication must be developed. Only with the presence of such a language system are science and technology made possible. If labor is in its origin defined as the purposeful satisfaction of needs immanent to the higher processes of natural evolution, the development of a communicative system for the technological enhancement of the labor process is a function of these needs. As Ernst Bloch put it axiomatically, "need is the mother of thought."

With the constant restructuring of the social division of labor and the increasing efficacy in the satisfaction of fundamental needs, Marx observed that human beings become less and less dependent on these fundamental needs. Yet concurrently new needs develop, which led him to the postulation that history is the development of needs: "The production of new needs is the first historical act."²³ In other words, human society becomes decreasingly dependent on elemental needs and more dependent on needs developed by civilization.

It is at this point that the romantic criticism is raised against Marxism, namely, that the affirmation of technological development underscores an ideological justification of the ruthless exploitation of nature. The error of this accusation lies in its lack of awareness that the foundation of technology continues to be the process of labor which grounds itself in the metabolism between human purposiveness and nature (human nature notwithstanding). To affirm that the technological process and its alliance with the scientific endeavor is in itself the cause of the ruthless exploitation of nature becomes a self-defeating proposition. In fact, the exploitation of nature, the work mentality in ethics, undermines the metabolism of the labor process and is manifested in the alienation that Marx saw existing between humans and nature. Marx's understanding of labor as a metabolism grounds an ecological conviction that remains the

condition of possibility for the labor process itself and enhances the homeostatic relationship between humans and their environment. Hence the young Marx could postulate that “completed naturalism is humanism, as completed humanism is naturalism. It is the *genuine* resolution of the antagonism between man and nature and between man and man.”²⁴

For Marx, the division of labor demands the creation of a state apparatus which becomes the coercive factor controlling exchange and the distribution of the products of labor. But with the growing division of labor, with the satisfaction of basic needs, and with the increasing complexity of the process of exchange, societies begin to engage in the administration of the accumulated products of labor. It is this accumulation that has made possible the emergence of a class or group that expropriates the result of the process of labor and retains for itself a surplus of this process before distribution takes place. This class, in

²³Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1970) 21.

²⁴*Writings of the Young Marx*, 304.

fact, is engaged in the administration of *work* since for it only the result of the labor process is important and the exchange-value of the goods produced count, not their use-value. This is what destroys the metabolism of labor and demands work to be done for an alien purpose: the accumulation of capital.

It is not necessary here to discuss the formation of capital on the basis of money as the universal equivalent in the exchange process in order to understand why Marx could say that “this original accumulation plays in political economy the same role as the original sin in theology.”²⁵ This accumulation not only allows for the formation of a class that is detached from the metabolism of labor but also distorts the metabolic nature of the labor process. This distortion manifests itself in the fact that labor becomes less a means for living fully and responsibly within the ecosystem and becomes a work for the accumulation of capital.

IV. THE ETHICS OF KNOWLEDGE

With this understanding of labor the foundation for the criticism of anthropocentrism is also given, and science and technology do not need to be blamed in themselves for the ecological crisis. Labor is the condition of possibility for all scientific endeavor and the ground of what Jacques Monod called the “ethics of knowledge.”²⁶ The only authentic scientific endeavor and technological advancement will have to be in the last analysis committed to the metabolism of labor, for it is on this basis that ultimately knowledge itself is grounded and nature (human and non-human alike) is itself respected. If this is denied, science and technology become senseless and self-destructive.

By saying that science is ultimately accountable to the metabolism of labor, it is not being said that it is immediately related to it. In fact, science gains its relative autonomy from labor with the development of civilization which liberates humans from their immediate needs. Hence the more societies develop technologically, the more freedom the scientific pursuit gains. But the limits of this freedom are going to be determined by the immediacy of the needs of the human community. Hence the fundamental question that an ethics of labor asks of science and technology is for the ground on which the intellectual inquiry is ultimately based. And the

response can no longer be one that sets humans in opposition to the environment or one that appeals to some humanistic good. The response must be framed by the antagonism between the metabolism of labor and the work mentality that underscores the self-interest of capital. Labor emerges *within* nature and is its own self realization.

The assumption of a value-free science and of a “theoretical” or contemplative knowledge that presumes to have escaped from the predicaments of human interest is the result of a misunderstanding about the foundations of the theoretical enterprise. To refuse to ask the question of social interest is to accept uncritically the interest invested in the capital that subsidizes theoretical

²⁵K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, 1.741.

²⁶Jacques Monod, *Le hasard et la nécessité* (Paris: Editions du seuil, 1970) 191.

research. It was to this “ignorance of the wise” that Oppenheimer responded when he said, “Scientists have known sin.” This dramatic affirmation made in 1948 in reference to the creation and use of the atomic bomb—and curiously akin to Marx’s remark about “original sin”—should not distract us from the fact that there is an economy of scientific research to which little attention has been given in ethics. Julian Huxley, concerned with the problem of hunger and specifically the lack of protein in the diet by two-thirds of the world population, asked some decades ago why “there has been five or six times as much research in physics as in the biological sciences” all over the world.²⁷ The statistics may have changed, but the fundamental question regarding the economy of scientific research remains.

Authentic pursuit of knowledge is indeed de-anthropocentric, but it is not misanthropic. If there is a purpose to this universe, it is neither centered in human beings nor alien to them, but it is recognized only on the basis of the creative relationship between humans and the rest of nature. This is what constitutes the metabolism of labor or what the Greeks called *poiesis*. The energy that this metabolism releases allows for the theoretical cognition of the universe and for the dogmatic organization of theological knowledge.²⁸

V. THE APPEAL TO THE TRADITION

Such a view of labor and its emphatic location in the foundations of ethics is not antagonistic to the Jewish-Christian tradition. Christian theologians have recently raised their voices against arguments that make their own tradition, and particularly the creation faith, responsible for the present ecological crisis.²⁹ However, the question of human labor as the crucial point of encounter between humankind and the rest of nature has not yet received the attention that it deserves. The discussion remains largely at the level of *theoria*, a contemplative view of the place of the human in the cosmos and before the face of God. But if the question of labor is not reinterpreted from a Christian perspective, the effects of debased labor, alienated and alienating work (like the irresponsible use of

²⁷Cited by Josué Castro, *The Geography of Hunger* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1952) 300.

²⁸It is important to note that this notion of metabolism implies also that with the transformation of external nature the human nature also realizes itself. As N. Lobkowicz, “Theory and Practice,” 139, correctly pointed out, this is a new insight: that before Hegel and Marx “no one ever claimed that man can transform himself by transforming the material world.” In a more “scientific” vein, this insight seems to find corroboration in the recently

postulated “anthropic principle” which A. R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 68, thus summarizes: “We now observe that our looking out on to the great vistas of space and our peering back into aeons of unimaginably distant time...have curiously turned full circle and we find ourselves reflecting on our own presence in the universe and our cognitive role as observers of it. Far from man’s presence in the universe being a curious and inexplicable surd, we find we are remarkably and intimately related to it on the basis of...contemporary scientific evidence which is ‘indicative of a far greater degree of man’s total involvement with the universe’ than ever before envisaged.” It should only be noted that this involvement takes place in labor before it engages in observation.

²⁹See note 19 above; cf. *Cry of the Environment: Rebuilding the Christian Creation Tradition*, ed. Philip N. Joranson and Ken Butigan (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1984).

technology), overproduction and famine, accumulation of capital and exploitation of nature will continue to demand from Christian ethics a sharp resolution.

A. Labor and Creation. For the reconsideration of labor in the Old Testament, research has laid emphasis on the J account of creation, particularly the explicit commission to work (Gen 2:15). It is worth noting that the emphasis on this commission, instead of appealing to the P account that talks about dominating and subduing nature, cannot be seen apart from the economic conditioning circumstances that distinguish the J account, which is older and associated with agricultural life, from the P account, emerging in the context of a sacerdotal class preoccupied chiefly with the religious institution. Claus Westermann, building on the J account, goes so far as to say that labor has to be considered “an essential part of man’s state not only in the creation narrative but in the whole of the Old Testament. A life without work could not be a complete life.”³⁰ Yet it is possible to appeal to the Christian tradition in order to make a stronger case for the centrality of labor in defining the human place in creation and before the face of the Creator.

St. Basil in his extemporaneous homilies about the creation account of P describes God’s creative activity in analogy to human *poiesis*, explicitly accepting Aristotle’s distinction between *poiesis*, *praxis* and *theoria*.³¹ Although P’s use of the verb *bara*’ would seem to render preposterous such an analogical move—since the verb describes the act of creation in which God is the exclusive subject—it might not be such a bad move. Westermann has insisted that it is

of utmost significance that this word *bara*’ occurs in the Old Testament only with God as its subject...and it has been said that the biblical theology of Creation is contained in the notion behind *bara*’. This is an exaggeration; and the exaggeration becomes obvious when we see that the priestly writing also uses the simple word ‘make’ in the same sense....The priestly writing...resumes more ancient and primitive layers of tradition which spoke simply of ‘making’ or ‘forming.’³²

For the analogy to work, God’s creation does not need to be devoid of its uniqueness which in the Christian tradition has been equated with *creatio ex nihilo*. Analogy does not equate, it compares.

Although Basil’s concern in suggesting the analogy was more didactical than ethical in purpose,³³ it is an important insight also for ethics since it is labor that grounds the human interaction with creation. If God’s creation is given to us not as a narrative of a static state of

affairs belonging to times past, but it is given to us as a myth about the origin and purpose *within* which humankind finds itself in the present, then it is also important to emphasize with Luther that creation is *creatio continua*.³⁴ As a continuing creation it is impossible to dissociate

³⁰Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 81; cf. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1973) 190-97.

³¹*Hexaemeron*, 1.7.

³²C. Westermann, *Creation*, 114.

³³Basil wanted to make his homilies comprehensible for his audience of workers and artisans; *Hexaemeron*, 3.1.

³⁴See Luther's explanation of the First Article of the Creed in the *Large Catechism*.

God from the cosmic and natural processes and ultimately from human participation and metabolic relationship with this whole. In this sense, the metabolism of labor establishes the organic connection in the human with the environment and also becomes the *punctum saliens* that marks the human interaction with and participation in the midst of the continuing creation.³⁵ With such organic connection the bio-genetic link or continuity between humans and the rest of nature is not denied.³⁶ Labor marks only the point in which genetic inheritance and psycho-social conditionings merge together.

B. Elements for a Christology of Labor. Should all these references to the analogical relationship between creation and labor mean that the ground for rethinking ethics leaves aside christology and soteriology? Not so if Christ is comprehended as the labor of God both in his pre-existence (John 1:3) and in his historical actuality as the one who not only happened to be a carpenter (*tehton*, Mark 6:3) but one whose deeds were done in conjunction with the will of God (John 5:19), according to the will (*thelema*) of God (John 4:34). This will sets itself over against a need—the consequence of sin—reproducing the structural elements of labor. This will produces a result (salvation, liberation, life, etc.) in the metabolic relationship with the material at hand (*kosmos*) that furnishes the conditioning circumstances. It is the error of docetism to deny these conditioning circumstances, as it is of the Ebionites not to recognize that the will of God eternally present in the divine labor transcends (as any labor) the material reality that conditions it. The formula of Chalcedon sought with its awkward theory of two natures to recognize this dynamic process (*communicatio idiomatum*) that we have called metabolism and that could by way of analogy be interpreted along the lines of Basil's suggestion, recognizing in it the fundamental structure of labor. Such a model of Christ as the “metabolos” enhances its signification when compared and opposed to the “diabolos,” the one who throws apart, who divides (*dia-bole*).

This labor of God in Christ is nowhere as much emphasized in the New Testament as in the miracle stories where the verb *poiein* is frequently used.³⁷ The miracle stories are portrayed as acts of divine creation, as redeeming labor of God through Jesus in which the fundamental structure of labor is also strictly preserved (need-telos/reality-means). The connection of the miraculous deed with faith can be maintained as an argument for the careful separation between a utilitarian or meritorious work and the general value of labor which transcends the particular result of the deed performed.

This distinction between work and labor can also be enriched and further elaborated by

appealing to Paul's condemnation of the works of the law (*erga*

³⁵Given the intricacies of the history of interpretation and exegesis of Gen 1:27 (see Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, vol. 1, *Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980) 204-214) it would require an extensive essay to examine the connection between the notion of *imago dei* and the following commission to work in Gen 1:28.

³⁶Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1978).

³⁷Mark 3:8; 5:20 and par.; 6:5 and par.; 7:37; 10:51 and par.; Matt 9:28; 21:15; Luke 4:23; 9:43; John 2:11, 23; 3:2; 4:45, 46, 54; 5:11, 15, 16; 6:2, 6, 14, 30; 7:3, 23, 31; 9:26, 33; 11:37, 45, 46, 47; 12:18, 37; 20:30.

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nomou)³⁸ and the justification of the true laborers of the law, the "poets" of the law (*poietai nomou*, Rom 2:13). What is condemned is not labor as such but alienated work (*erga tes sarkos*, Gal 5:19), the work of slavery to a foreign *telos* which serves as the measure for judging the merit of the result accomplished (cf. Rom 2:23).³⁹ This distinction is important because it simultaneously rejects indifference toward the evil result of labor (Rom 3:8), even on account of faith, and affirms authentic labor as being constitutive of justification. There can be indifference and tolerance toward matters of formal legalism, but there cannot be tolerance or indifference on matters that affect the values of the Kingdom.⁴⁰ The critical question that Paul raises belongs to the very structure of labor. It is the question of the *telos* of labor which when enslaved by another law (*heteron nomon*, Rom 7:23) performs the transformation of good labor into the enslaving work of law.

The *telos* of labor has to be considered apart from the means adopted (technology) for the satisfaction of a need given the concrete conditionings of reality.⁴¹ The consideration of the goal posited, the *telos*, apart from the technological means adopted will allow us to determine whether the deed to be accomplished will enhance the metabolic relation of labor or hinder it. The criterion to determine what hinders and enhances labor can only be drawn from the social character of the labor process. The result of concrete labor will create utility. However, this utility can be a use-value with open social destination, or it can be used as an exchange good with the purpose of multiplying capital. A house that is built can enter the market to provide shelter and furnish the means of survival of the builder, or it can serve to multiply capital. It is the goal posited for the construction that provides the source of discernment. Obviously, this example implies also that the very purpose of building a house will be conditioned or determined by the market system that is external to the labor process. But this is precisely the point that Paul stresses when he talks about the *telos* being debased by a *heteron nomon*, a law external to the metabolism of labor. The role of ethics is to enquire about this distinction and to make this discernment when it is ideologically blurred. A neighborhood renewal program can be an ideological euphemism for the removal of lower class dwellers in order to increase the rent.

Luther had a stroke of genius when he posited the category of vocation (*Beruf*) as constitutive of the human cooperation with God.⁴² But this cooperation belongs to the ethical sphere of this world. "Vocation belongs to this world,

³⁸Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 10.

³⁹See Juan Luis Segundo, *El Hombre de Hoy ante Jesus de Nazaret* (2 vols.; Madrid: Cristiandad, 1982) 2:367-70.

⁴⁰Cf. Rom 17:17; see my article, "Paul's Reconstruction of Theology: Romans 9-14 in Context," *Word &*

World 4 (1984) 307-319.

⁴¹G. Lukacs, *Labour*, 10-13. This goal (or *telos*) posited is not to be confused with intention. The *telos* is the ideally envisaged social result of the labor process that directs the metabolism through which nature works upon itself; it is the cunning of labor. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1969) 198-99.

⁴²*WA* 18:754.

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not to heaven; it is directed toward one's neighbor, not toward God."⁴³ And the criterion for Luther is the use of practical reason for the achievement of equity.⁴⁴ The public discussion and conversation about the goals posited for the labor process defines the social destination of labor and preserves its metabolic function.

VI. SUMMARY

This essay has argued that the present situation in Christian ethical reflection is marked by the compartmentalization of ethical issues, causing an atomization and multiplication of ethical mandates which, not rarely, militate against each other. However, two comprehensive approaches can be recognized and typically described as "theoretical" and "praxiological." Each has its strength in ecological and political responsibilities, respectively. Each of these two responsibilities implies a cluster of derived issues which can be classified as the most relevant for ethics today. But, in different ways, each of these approaches lacks a forceful response to the challenges that the other presents.

The category of labor as a metabolism in which humans and the rest of nature participate was suggested as a meeting ground to allow a more comprehensive reflection on ethical issues, being at the same time accountable to the ecological and the political cluster of problems.⁴⁵ The structure of labor is presented as implying the following components: need, *telos*, conditioning reality, and technological means. Phenomenologically, its focus is found in the subject-object interaction or interpenetration, which allows it to be distinguished from the category of "work." The ground for ethical reflection is sketched with the help of the Marxist notion of labor, and biblical plus traditional material is called upon to defend its Christian reinterpretation.

It is recognized that the elaboration of the category of labor as the ground for moral behavior and ethical reflection still needs a full-fledged conceptualization in order to draw its implications for everyday life. But the long silence about its significance is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient, condition for its dismissal.

⁴³Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957) 10; idem, "Der Begriff des Berufs: Grundlage und Probleme," *Lutherische Rundschau* 18 (1968) 113.

⁴⁴For the elaboration of this criterion in Luther, see my essay on "Luther and Liberation" forthcoming in the Winter, 1986, issue of *dialog*.

⁴⁵Latin American liberation theology has not been particularly known for its ecological concern. However, contrary to the praxiological approach, it has raised the problem of labor as being central to its theological concern. The use of the term "praxis" cannot be equated with the meaning it has received in North Atlantic political theology; see my article, "Pressupostos e Implicações do Conceito de Praxis em Hugo Assmann," *Estudos Teológicos* 21/1 (1981) 7-31. For the development of studies on labor see Beni dos Santos, et al., *Trabalho e Teologia* (São Paulo, 1979). So it is not surprising that Segundo has claimed that "the new task—objectively new—can be characterized by two adjectives which have not yet been put together as they should: *ecological* and *political*" (*El Hombre de Hoy*, 2.806).