

4. The Nature of the Domination System

The good news is that God not only liberates us from the Powers, but liberates the Powers as well. The gospel is not a dualistic myth of good and evil forces vying for ascendancy, as in the myth of redemptive violence. It is a sublimely subtle drama about the intertwining of good and evil in all of historical reality. The Powers are not simply evil. They are a bulwark against anarchy, and a patron, repository, and inspirer of art. They inculcate values that encourage interdependency, mutual care, and social cohesiveness. They encourage submission of personal desires to the general good of everyone. Their evil is not intrinsic, but rather the result of idolatry. Therefore they can be redeemed. The New Testament presents this insight as a drama in three simultaneous acts:

[The Powers are good,
the Powers are fallen,
the Powers will be redeemed.]

The Powers Are Good

In the hymn of the cosmic Christ in Col. 1:16-17, the Powers are described as having been created in, through, and for Christ. "For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together."¹

The Colossians hymn is the brash assertion, against the grain of human offering, that the Principalities and Powers that visit the world with so much

evil are not autonomous, not independent, not eternal, not utterly depraved. The social structures of reality are creations of God. Because they are creatures, they are mortal, limited, responsible to God, and made to serve the humanizing purposes of God in the world.

In the verses that precede the hymn of Colossians these Powers are referred to collectively as "the dominion of darkness" from which believers have been delivered (Col. 1:13). Ernst Käsemann has argued that this hymn was sung at the liturgy of baptism, and that it marks a change of spheres of influence, from the sphere of darkness (Col. 1:12-14 being added to give the hymn a "liturgical introduction") to the sphere of light. Believers are delivered from the Domination System and freed from the enslaving power of the old aeon. "In baptism the Christian changes from one jurisdiction to another. Henceforth he belongs not to the cosmos, but to the Cosmocrator."²

Following the hymn, likewise, Paul reminds his readers that they were "once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds" (1:21). The context therefore makes clear, whereas the hymn itself does so only by allusion (v. 20), that these Powers are or have become hostile to the purposes of God in their creation.³ Nevertheless, the hymn itself celebrates their creation in, through, and for Christ. They are not demonized as utterly evil; they are the good creations of a good God, and God, in the Genesis story of creation, creates no demons. But their rationale for existence is to serve the human needs and values revealed as ultimate by the identification of Jesus with Wisdom and Christ.

These Powers are the necessary social structures of human life, and it is not a matter of indifference to God that they exist.⁴ God *made* them. And all this is asserted—chanted, intoned, sung—into the teeth of the everyday experience of institutional and structural evil.

Without institutionalization, ideas never materialize into action. Institutions are indispensable for human existence, and they have a right to be concerned about their own survival. But they must keep this concern penultimate, not ultimate. For this reason, von Rad reminds us, the account of creation in Genesis does not end in chapter 2, with the creation of the world, but in chapter 10, with the creation of the nations. The meaning is clear: humanity is not possible apart from its social institutions.⁵ Subsystems, like people, continually need to weigh their needs against the needs of the system as a whole. "Order is not sufficient," wrote Whitehead. "What is required, is something much more complex. It is order entering upon novelty; so that the massiveness of order does not degenerate into mere repetition; and so that the novelty is always reflected upon a background of system."⁶

Even in their apostasy and dereliction from their created vocation, the Powers are incapable of separating themselves from the principle of coherence. When

subsystems idolatrously violate the harmony of the whole by elevating their own purposes to ultimacy, they are still no more able to achieve autonomy than a cancer can live apart from its host. Like a cancer, again, they are able to do evil only by means of processes imbedded in them as a result of their good creation.

We must be careful here. To assert that God created the Powers does not imply that God endorses any particular Power at any given time. God did not create capitalism or socialism, but there must be some kind of economic system. The simultaneity of creation, fall, and redemption means that God at one and the same time upholds a given political or economic system, since some such system is required to support human life; condemns that system insofar as it is destructive of full human actualization; and presses for its transformation into a more humane order. Conservatives stress the first, revolutionaries the second, reformers the third. The Christian is expected to hold together all three.

This is the point, and perhaps only this, of Rom. 13:1-7 ("Be subject to the governing authorities").⁷ It does not legitimate blind obedience to an oppressive system. It says, rather, that governments are indispensable for the preservation of social order and protection against criminals and invaders. They are supposed to be a terror not to good conduct, but to bad (vv. 3-4). Oppressive regimes, however, are just the reverse: they reward bad conduct and are a terror to those who do good.⁸

To say that the Powers are created in, through, and for the cosmic Christ, then, does not imply endorsement of any particular economic or political system. What the hymn sings is recognition that it is God's plan for us to live in interrelationship with each other, and to this end God has determined that there will be subsystems whose sole purpose is to serve the human needs of the One who exemplifies and encompasses humanity.

An institution may place its own good above the general welfare. A corporation may cut corners on costs by producing defective products that endanger lives. Union leadership may become more preoccupied with extending its personal advantages than fighting for better working conditions for the rank and file. The point of the Colossians hymn is not that anything goes, but that no matter how greedy or idolatrous an institution becomes, it cannot escape the encompassing care and judgment of the One in and through and for whom it was created. In that One "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17—lit., "receive their systemic place"—*synistēmi*, the source of our word "system"). The Powers are inextricably locked into God's system, whose human face is revealed in Christ. They are answerable to God. And that means that every subsystem in the world is, in principle, redeemable.

We may pollute our water supply and the air we breathe with no regard for the future; but we are systemically inseparable from the ecosystem, and the judgment of the system rebounds on us in escalating carcinogenic illnesses. A nation can behave as if it did not belong to the world-system of nations, as did Nazi Germany, and can attempt to subordinate the system to itself; but its very attempt to do so mobilizes the wrath of the nations against it and brings about its own collapse. No subsystem that aspires to the status of God's system itself can long remain viable. The myth of Satan's rebellion and expulsion from heaven symbolically depicts the fate of any creature that lusts after ultimate power and authority.

The bound-togetherness celebrated by this hymn thus serves as the foundation of the ethic of nonviolence and the love of enemies. Nothing is outside the redemptive care and transforming love of God. The Powers are not intrinsically evil; they are only fallen. What sinks can be made to rise again. We are freed, then, from the temptation to satanize the perpetrators of evil. We can love our nation or church or school, not blindly, but critically, recalling it to its own highest self-professed ideals and identities. We can challenge these institutions to live up to the vocation that is theirs by virtue of their sheer createdness. We can oppose their actions while honoring their necessity.

For example, a factory is polluting the water and air of our city, and we want it cleaned up. We can engage in that struggle knowing that its employees need jobs, and that their families also are at risk from the pollution, just as ours are. We can talk without hatred to the hard-nosed representatives of the plant, because we know that they, and we, and this factory, are encompassed by the love of God, and exist to serve the One in and through and for whom we were all created. We do not have to struggle to bring this plant into the orbit of God's system. It is already there. We have only to remind its managers that it exists to serve values beyond itself (though this "reminding" may require a protracted boycott or strike).

Adam Smith himself acknowledged this when he wrote that the ultimate goal of a business is not to make a profit. Profit is just the means. The goal is the general welfare.⁹ It is part of the church's task to remind corporations and businesses that profit is not the "bottom line," that as "creatures" of God they have as their divine vocation the achievement of human benefaction (Eph. 3:10). They do not exist for themselves. They were bought with a price (Col. 1:20). They belong to the God who ordains sufficiency for all.

The Powers Are Fallen

Talk of the Fall is not popular in a period when certain New Age and Eastern gurus are proclaiming our divinity; when secularism, by virtue of denying the

spiritual realm, is incapable of conceiving of radical evil; when in legitimate reaction to the morbid Christian overemphasis on sin and guilt, many are emphasizing the goodness of creation and the open-endedness of our potentials (an emphasis I endorse).¹⁰

Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Fall is essential for understanding both ourselves and the Powers. And, curiously enough, it is part of the good news, a source of immense relief, and a sentinel against seduction. I submit (1) that the doctrine of the Fall provides an account of evil that acknowledges its brute reality while preserving the sovereignty and goodness of God and the creation; (2) that it is not just a temporal myth and thus did not simply happen "once upon a time," but is also a structural aspect of all personal and social existence; (3) that the doctrine of the Fall frees us from delusions about the perfectibility of ourselves and our institutions; and (4) that it reminds us that we cannot be saved from the Powers by anything within the Power System, but only by something that transcends it.

In the first place, the doctrine of the Fall affirms the radicality of evil. Frankly, most of us, myself included, simply do not *want* to believe in radical evil. The implications are too terrible. It violates the reasonable, middle-class paradigm to learn that children are kidnapped for prostitution rings, satan cults, and pornographic "snuff" movies (where actual murders are filmed).¹¹ And like most people when their paradigm is challenged, we question the data rather than our presuppositions. (I am thinking of those who deny that the Holocaust ever happened.) Thus when a friend of ours went to his colleagues in the peace community for support in dealing with a victim of satanic abuse, they responded by regarding him as deranged. Evil of such magnitude could not exist—this from people opposing the most insane evil of all, nuclear weapons!

Evil is within us (in Jungian terms, the personal "shadow") and among us (as collective "shadow"), but much of that can be raised to consciousness and transformed. We are speaking now of a deeper evil—a layer of sludge beneath the murky waters that can be characterized only as a hellish hatred of the light, of truth, of kindness and compassion, a brute lust for annihilation. It is the sedimentation of thousands of years of human choices for evil (not *wrong* choices merely, but actual choices *for* evil) that has precipitated Satan as the spirituality of evil. Call it what you will, it is real. The doctrine of the Fall is merely a mute pointer to that sludge, lest we deny its reality and foolishly attempt to erect a society on this base.¹²

Second, talk about a Fall is mythical language.¹³ It is true that the myth is presented sequentially, as if it can be segmented into three chronological phases: once the Powers were good, then they fell, and in the future (tomorrow, next

year, at the end of time) they will be redeemed. But the biblical myth is both temporal and timeless. A given Power can and, at one time or another, probably does manifest all three aspects simultaneously: it performs a necessary function and is created in, through, and for Christ; it is fallen; and it may experience moments when it becomes transparent to the purposes for which it was created. It is possible, right in the midst of the old reality, for both people and Powers to live in relative emancipation from the power of death.¹⁴

Past, present, and future are temporal realities, yet they are also gathered into the eternal now of today. The Creation, Fall, and Final Judgment are now, as the flat perspective of history opens out into the depth of eternity. The final subjugation of the Powers under Christ's feet will happen (1 Cor. 15:24-25), but it is already, in anticipation, experienced now (Eph. 1:19-23), in the new reality of resurrection existence. "Now is the judgment of the Domination System (*kosmos*), now shall the ruler of that System (*kosmos*) be cast out" (John 12:31*). The "heavenly" becomes efficacious now; we have already been raised up with Christ and made to sit "with him in the heavenly places" (Eph. 2:6). The final restoration of all things in harmonious unity is tasted now, fragmentarily, deliciously—and gone. The reign of God is not "built," but sampled. We have a foretaste, an appetizer, an aperitif, a down payment (Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). We "have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:5). There may be no measurable progress (yes, some things do get better over time, but others get worse). There are just these blinding (or feeble) flashes of the beyond in our midst; just these moments of lucidity, when a subsystem offers itself to the whole; just these acts of sacrificial love, costly reminders of the cross at the heart of reality.

It is precisely this simultaneity of Creation, Fall, and Redemption, freed from literalistic temporalizing, that delivers us from naïveté regarding our personal or social powers for transformation. It liberates us from the illusion that at least some institutions are "good" and viable and within human direction, or can be rendered so by discipline or reform or revolution or displacement.¹⁵ The Powers are at one and the same time ordained by God and in the power of Satan. They can, to some degree, be humanized, but they are still fallen. They can be open to transcendence, but they will still do evil. They may be benign, but within a Domination System of general malignancy. As Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked, no society ever achieved peace without incorporating a degree of injustice into its harmony,¹⁶ and that will prove to be as true in the immediate future as in all previous periods.

The Powers are good, fallen, and redeemable all at once; and they were good, they fell, and they will be redeemed in God's domination-free order that is

coming. This tension between the timeless and the temporal enables us to eye each successive sincerity, each new utopian solution or structural arrangement, with dispassionate realism. It can prevent our being swept away by new visions of transformation that as yet have no history of failures (as they surely will). It leads us to expect each new intervention for good to bring in its wake unintended consequences, some of them evil. We can join in struggles for social justice without being suckered by slogans promising what cannot be delivered and without crumbling under the inevitable setbacks and reverses. We can work for a society which will not make people good, but in which it will be easier for them to be good.

Third, the doctrine of the Fall frees us from delusions about the perfectibility of ourselves and our institutions, and from the diabolical belief that we are responsible for everything that happens. The very success of a reform effort helps to produce its decline, since the improved situation reduces the public outrage necessary to sustain opinion and activity on behalf of change. Social progress is thus self-limiting; every movement forward is usually followed by at least some movement back. Furthermore, we are usually able to understand only the system that is crumbling, not the one emerging. This means that our perception of reality generally arrives too late to save a society, but just in time to explain its demise.

Dreams of perfection are fatal to social change movements. As Michael Lerner points out, despite their vision of a better society, such movements are made up of idealists who are far from perfect. They are attempting to change a society that has already profoundly conditioned them to believe themselves unworthy of love, and the system to be incapable of change. Consequently, they tend to act in ways that engender despair, causing them to choose tactics that alienate the very people they need to affect. Driven by their ideals, they denigrate their own accomplishments as inadequate, as if they should have been able to do more. Or they change the goal just as they are close to realizing it so that they never get to celebrate victories along the way. They burn themselves out trying to live in utopian fashion with all their old socialization intact. They believe they should be able to overcome their racist and sexist attitudes by a mere act of will. Then, when they experience the persistence of these attitudes, they turn on each other with demands for movement purity. Rather than recognizing that we are all racist or sexist or undemocratic as a result of our social upbringing, and developing ways to assist people gently in the needed transformation, the movement declares that anyone with these attitudes is a traitor or a deviant. When they can no longer stand their own hypocrisy or that of others, many drop out to enter psychotherapy, meditate, or earn money. The Powers once

again, acting from concealment, entice courageous and dedicated people to blame their own personal inadequacies for what are in fact systemically induced delusions. Here the traditional religions can come to our aid, Lerner insists, since they, almost alone in our society, are able to mount a consistent counter-cultural critique of domination.¹⁷

The nonperfectibility of the world does not make us passive. We still act by the best lights we have. It only makes us modest, so that we can be expectant toward God. And modesty is an enormous relief. It is the infallible sign that one has been awakened from dreams of perfection. The Powers can be redeemed, but not made flawless. And when we no longer have to believe that we must make everything happen ourselves, we are well-positioned to live in anticipation of miracles.

Finally, the doctrine of the Fall reminds us that we cannot be saved from the Powers by anything within the Power System, but only by something that transcends it. The notion of the Fall is good news. No doubt the doctrine of the Fall has been perverted to justify the worst kinds of oppression, on the grounds that our inherent sinfulness must be kept under check by government, and that any order is better than the risk of chaos that every attempt at change harbors.¹⁸ If the gospel is understood to teach that people are basically rotten, one is unlikely to look to it for resources to reconcile them or to create more equitable social structures. Worst of all, the doctrine of the Fall has occasionally been debased to the bizarre idea of total depravity: the notion that there is nothing good in us, that we are incapable of any good whatever.¹⁹

All that is perversity. The gladsome doctrine of the Fall does not say that people and the social order are utterly sinful or basically wicked or incapable of good. It teaches quite the opposite: people and the Powers are not evil by nature; evil is, on the contrary, unnatural, a disorder, a perversion. We, and the Powers, are the good creations of a good God. By contrast, there is in Scripture no account of the creation of the demons. Unlike the Powers, the demonic is not a constituent part of the universe. Its emergence is always an event in time, the consequence of wrong choices. An institution becomes demonic when it abandons its divine vocation for the pursuit of its own idolatrous goals. But what has become perverted in time can be redeemed in time.

Evil is not our essence. God intended us for better things. "Falleness" does not touch our essence, but it characterizes our existence. No one can escape it. "Good" and "bad" people alike are fallen. The tax collectors and harlots are fallen, but so are the scribes and Pharisees and Jesus' disciples. Saints are fallen, together with sinners. The church is fallen along with the empire. "Fallen" simply means that we all live under the conditions of the Domination System.

The Fall does not revoke the gift of life, or the vocation to live humanly in the midst of a fallen creation. The Fall does not mean that everything we do is evil, vain, or hopeless, but merely that it is all ambiguous, tainted with egocentricity, subject to deflection from its divine goal, or capable of being co-opted toward other ends. All that distinguishes Christians is the confidence that we have been reconciled with God in the very midst of a fallen world.

Paradoxically, those in the grip of the cultural trance woven over us by the Domination System are usually unaware of the full depth of their soul-sickness. It is only after we experience liberation from primary socialization to the world-system that we realize how terribly we have violated our authentic personhood—and how violated we have been. For we are not just sinners, but the sinned against. We not only have defected from higher values, but we have been trained, schooled, cajoled, and bullied into defecting from them by the combined onslaught of much that goes to make up our world. In part, our sin is that we acquiesced in this socialization.

Like addicts who cannot tell how distorted their perceptions have become until they get off drugs, we too cannot recognize the depth of our alienation from life until we are well on the way toward healing. Like addicts, we are not completely "redeemed," with all our former cravings gone and the damage we have done to ourselves and others all undone. We continue to live redemptively as fallen people in a fallen world, as God's good creations. Like addicts, again, we cannot redeem ourselves from a system whose malignancy we scarcely recognize and whose blandishments we have come to crave. We need revelation, to see our state, and liberation, to be freed from it. We, too, like other addicts, must turn over our lives to a higher power, not just another of the Powers but the God who transcends the Powers.²⁰ For no Power, in the act of freeing us from another Power, can deliver us from itself.

The simultaneity persists: we and the Powers are good, fallen, and redeemed, all at the same time. We do not escape into utopia. The doctrine of the Fall keeps our feet anchored firmly in the harsh reality of the one and only real world, known in both its inner and outer aspects, even as God continues to work in us transformations we were not even aware, in our estranged state, that were needed or were possible.

The Powers Will Be Redeemed

A devout Roman Catholic charismatic in Chile attempted to persuade me that Christians have no business trying to change structures, that we are simply called to change individuals, and that as a consequence of changed individuals, the structures will automatically change. Jesus himself, she asserted, did not try to

reform the structures of first-century society. He was not a revolutionary, nor did he propose alternative institutions. Political science is a field of great complexity requiring specialist knowledge. Christians have no business telling politicians what to do or how to do it. The church's task is to nurture persons who feel called to politics and are steeped in Christian values.²¹

The Irreducibility of the Personal to the Social

Comments like these contain an element of truth. There is sometimes a leavening process in institutions as individuals change. People can make a difference in the way an office or factory or nation is run. Gorbachev has had an immense impact on the history of our time. One person's integrity can have a marked effect in checking a dozen employees' dishonesty. We must never deny the incredible power of a few dedicated people. Almost every major reform can be traced back to a single person or a small group of people who were outraged by wrong. It is true that Christians often have no grasp of the complexity of issues, even when they have made their best efforts to be informed, and that many "Christian" solutions have given rise to new and sometimes even greater evils. One thinks of the Latin American "Christian Democratic" parties, which so often have been neither. The church can have a salutary effect on society by nurturing people with special callings in the secular world, and must forswear the grandiosity of thinking that it has a solution for every problem.

Nor may the individual ever be treated as of lesser value than the social system. Changed people, reconciled with God and in process of transformation, are at the very core of the gospel message. The harmony of the whole is not worth the involuntary sacrifice of a single life. The problem of society lies far too deep to be settled through mere systemic changes, as Václav Havel insisted when his was one of the few voices of dissent in Czechoslovakia before the collapse of communism there. He deplored the willingness of those who, for the sake of fundamental social change, were always ready to sacrifice things less fundamental—like human beings. "A better system will not automatically ensure a better life. In fact the opposite is true: only by creating a better life can a better system be developed."²² The main rationale for changing structures is precisely in order to liberate people from whatever deprives them of the opportunity to realize as fully as possible their own God-given potential. Our freedom under God means that, in the final analysis, each person is responsible for choosing life, regardless of the structure.

Grant this much to my Chilean friend: we must not reduce the personal to the social. No structural change will, of necessity, produce good or transformed people. I have considerable sympathy with conservative groups in the mainline

American denominations who fault church leadership for ignoring evangelism altogether or redefining it as struggles for social justice. Ultimately, as liberation theologian Domingos Barbé comments, the sickness of our world is a spiritual illness that comes from a lack of a living relationship with God.²³ Without reestablishing that relationship, there can be no deep and lasting social change. Many people do need to undergo a change of heart. God must supplant the upstart ego. People do need to be "reborn" from their primary socialization in an alienated and alienating system—though conservatives are generally too acculturated themselves to go that far—and take on the radical values of God's nonviolent commonwealth.

Our times have produced tragic illusions about the power of new systems to create new people. The abolition of slavery in the American South did not produce transformed people, however much it may have improved the former slaves' lot and theoretically enhanced their capacity to achieve their true potentials. Soviet communism did not lead to the much-vaunted "New Man" (sic), but to an actual decline in human happiness and fulfillment. No doubt private property prompts greed, but greed is also observable where private property has been abolished. In intentional communes, fathers still molest their daughters sexually, treasurers abscond with community funds, and envy over the fairness of the distribution of power and goods persists. Social arrangements can perhaps help reduce the profitability and attraction of sin, but they cannot make it disappear.

Human misery is caused by institutions, but these institutions are maintained by human beings. We are made evil by our institutions, yes; but our institutions are also made evil by us. Not all sin can be projected outside the self; it is within us as well, far deeper than mere socialization. It is, in part, what makes socialization necessary.

Marx had rightly stressed that the self is "the ensemble of social relations." But that is not all it is. The self is that ensemble of social relations which also knows itself to be primordially grounded in being-itself, to have a name uttered over it, or within it, from all eternity. No state, or family, or employer can reach all the way to the core of our beings; and it is this residual irreducibility of the self to the social that makes it possible to resist society, to oppose the Powers, to transcend our own socialization. Much as we might like to lay the blame for all evil on the rise of the Domination System, we cannot do so without at the same time sacrificing responsibility and freedom. We are not merely socialized in sin, or sinned against; we also choose to sin, and it is this ontological capacity to sin that, paradoxically, insures our human freedom.²⁴

Marx, Rousseau, Ernest Becker, Eisler, Schmookler, and a host of others want to bring humanity the good news that evil is not our fault, that it is all a

confidence trick played on us by the structures we innocently and unwittingly created to dike ourselves against the rising flood of civilized anarchy. But anyone who has looked deeply within knows that not all evil has been introjected into us by the means of production or the government or patriarchy or the structures of society. Some evil would remain in our souls regardless of the social system. Otherwise, how can we account for the creation of these alienating structures in the first place? No arrangement of social cooperation, in which power controls power and anarchy is tamed, will produce human beings free from the lust for power.

Humanity longs for a world where the travail of personal transformation will not be necessary, where the arduous effort to develop a virtuous character can be avoided, where our neighbors will be judged by the standards we idealize but have exempted ourselves from achieving. Behind all such dreams of a perfected social structure lies the nightmare of totalitarianism. At what cost in personal freedoms must the dream of an anarchy-free society be bought? Unless people as well as their systems are changed, the crystal utopias of our fantasies will continue to dawn blood-drenched and inhospitable.

For once our dreams of paradise start to turn into reality, comments Milan Kundera, reflecting on his experience under Polish communism, people start to crop up here and there who stand in its way.

So the rulers of paradise have to build a little gulag on the side of Eden. In the course of time this gulag grows ever bigger and more perfect, while the adjoining paradise gets ever smaller and poorer. . . . Hell is already contained in the dream of paradise and if we wish to understand the essence of hell we must examine the essence of the paradise from which it originated. It is extremely easy to condemn gulags, but to reject the totalitarian poesy which leads to the gulag by way of paradise is as difficult as ever.²⁵

We must not, then, confuse any coming epoch (the Age of Aquarius, a harmonic convergence, a world federation of states, or whatever) with the reign of God. While history lasts, God's New Creation remains the transcendent criterion by which every system is judged. And any new social order instituted by human beings, whatever its form, will inevitably be a new, possibly better, but still pervasively fallen society. Such attempts may be able to ameliorate evil; that is the proper function of politics. But they will also recast evil into other forms.

The Fall is not a temporal event, the reach of whose effects we might someday, by sheer perseverance, outrun. It is mythic, which means it is always present. Whatever redemption, social change, improvement of working conditions, or

restructuring of government that takes place within history will take place under the conditions of the Fall.

Evil finally can be dealt with only through myth. And here the biblical myth repeatedly reveals its capacity to unveil the *not-said* and the *not-yet-thought*. The objection above, that evil cannot be wholly ascribed to our social or political or economic or religious systems, or all of them in concert, is not just an inference from the experience of the evil within ourselves. It is also a deduction from the narratives of the Fall in Genesis. The first fall is that of the man and the woman: human sin is ontologically prior to all social systems and structures. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to social determinism, but is an act of willful rebellion against God (Genesis 3).

The second fall is that of the angels: there is a rupture in the very spirituality of the universe (Gen. 6:1-4). Human sin cannot therefore account for all evil. There is a "withinness" or spirituality in things that is capable of covetousness and insatiable greed.

The third fall is that of the nations: the systems and structures that exist to protect human life become idolatrous and unjust, and subordinate the people they exist to serve to ends not ordained by God (Genesis 11).

Together, these three mythical tableaux from Genesis provide a vast panorama for contemplation. They prevent us from reducing people to society or society to people, the spiritual to the structural or the structural to the spiritual. They negate every attempt to blame evil solely on humanity (as most theology still insists on doing), solely on spiritual powers (as pentecostalism sometimes does), or solely on institutions and systems (as materialism does). Together these stories tell how evil came into a good world created by a good God, and they offer inexhaustible resources for discernment in the complex flux of everyday life.

The Irreducibility of the Social to the Personal

The problem with my Chilean friend's approach is not so much with what it affirms as what it leaves out. It ignores altogether the implications of Eph. 6:12 and all the companion references to the Powers: "For our struggle is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark age, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (REB). As long as these Powers were thought of personalistically—that is, as long as they were themselves reduced to the categories of individualism and imagined as demonic beings assaulting us from the sky—their institutional and systemic dimension was mystified, and belief in the demonic had no political consequences. But once we recognize that these spiritual forces are *the interiority of earthly institutions or structures or systems*, then the social dimension of the

gospel becomes immediately evident. These Powers with which we contend—and the biblical writer assumes we are all engaged in that struggle—are the inner and outer manifestations of political, economic, religious, and cultural institutions. Despite any excellences these institutions may individually possess, they are collectively caught up in a world-system blind to its Creator and drunk on self-aggrandizement. They are at one and the same time divinely ordained, and acolytes of the kingdom of death.

The principle of the irreducibility of persons to systems must therefore be matched by its opposite: the irreducibility of systems to persons. Structures have their own laws, their own trends and tendencies, quite independent of the human agents involved in them. The laws relevant to collectivities cannot be reduced to those of individuals, just as the laws of engineering that regulate the functioning of a tractor cannot be reduced to the laws of physics and chemistry that determine the behavior of the individual molecules and atoms that make up its parts. There are hierarchies of laws. People are the atoms and molecules of social systems. Every person is subject to the "laws" of personal development. But their interactions in a transnational corporation may have very little to do with the way their personal development is progressing. (I am told that over half of the managers of the Fortune 500 companies have had sensitivity training. Has the world noticed a difference?) The host of junior and senior managers surely vary in skill, maturity, and ethical integrity, but they are to a very high degree interchangeable and replaceable.

And what *motivates* them is almost irrelevant. They need not be greedy for profit at all; *the system is greedy on their behalf.*

Berdyayev once remarked that social changes cannot wait until people are made morally perfect. "The putting of an end to torture of the weak by the strong cannot await the moral perfection of the strong. . . . The weak must be supported by actions which change the structure of society."²⁶

Even the moral concern of a few is usually insufficient to change an oppressive system. The owner of a business, for example, may undergo an experience of spiritual rebirth, and genuinely desire to humanize the conditions under which her employees work. But she encounters immediately a fixed constraint: cost. If she deviates too much from the general norm for wages and benefits, the cost of the product will price her out of business. So she must be extremely cautious in introducing fundamental change, because her business is dependent on a world economic system that is utterly indifferent to her ethical concerns.

This is not to dismiss the value of that one business person's attempt to be more humane. That attempt, within the narrow range of her freedom, may be the thin margin between making work pleasant for her workers or miserable.

Her free choices can have a limited effect on her employees' satisfaction in life. And that is by no means negligible. New management styles have helped to humanize existence in some workplaces. But she cannot raise salaries sharply and still remain competitive when a factory owner in Taiwan or South Korea is making the same product with teenage girl laborers paid one-tenth of the salary and working twelve or fourteen hours a day six days a week. The system is greedy on her behalf, and if she rejects the system's values she may be ejected by the system. It is not just that people are making choices about how they will behave in the economic system: the system is also making choices about who will remain viable in the system. We do not contend against flesh and blood, but against the world rulers of this present darkness.

That example is rather simple. Consider now the more complex case of an agricultural researcher at a state agricultural experiment station. He typically hails from a farm or at least a small-town agricultural service community. The researcher has a genuine desire to serve the farmer by making farming easier and more profitable. Let us even imagine that the researcher feels this as a genuine vocation from God, as my Chilean friend would put it.

But now watch how the Powers strip from his hands the very capacity to fulfill his vocation. The researcher responds directly to the needs of the farmers. But these needs are *imposed* on the farmer by the system of production and marketing for farm products. That means he virtually has to use a tractor instead of a horse to plow and cultivate. He must till more acres to insure profitability and justify the cost of the tractor. He must buy commercial fertilizer because he no longer can produce enough manure locally, and he must buy a harvesting machine because he is farming more acreage, and an adequate labor force is costly and undependable.

So the farmer calls on the researcher to develop seeds with higher yields, and herbicides to kill the weeds. The researcher responds with a will, determined to serve the farmer. But all these demands are dictated, not by the farmer, but by the technological innovations that must be used in order to maintain profitability in a market in which competitors are taking advantage of these technological innovations also.

And our researcher? With the best will in the world, he perseveres in producing a hybrid corn seed that will increase yields for the farmer. But this backs the farmer into even greater dependency on the four seed companies that supply most of the U.S. corn belt. Since hybrids do not breed true, the farmer must now buy new seed each year instead of harvesting his own seed from the choice stock of his own crop. All this takes money; in the past seventy-eight years the average farmer's indebtedness increased eightyfold.²⁷ The agricultural researcher

does not intend to drive his clients into debt, yet this is the unintended result of his endeavors on the farmer's behalf. And since all such highly mechanized farmers can now produce tremendous yields, the price of corn drops, they cannot pay off their debts, and the bank forecloses.²⁸

The tragedy is that many farmers blame themselves entirely for what is in large part a systemic catastrophe. They feel shame for a failure that has all the inevitability of an avalanche. Our individualistic blinders cause us to seek private causes for public malfunctions. It is easier, for them and us, to blame bankrupted farmers for their own personal incompetence than to unmask the system that is doing them in. (And we have not even considered the role of agribusiness and the U.S. Congress in the farm debacle!)

We in the West have a tendency to think of people as primary and social institutions as secondary, as if the latter were an arbitrary and inessential framework invented by human beings. Studies of birds, dolphins, whales, and primates have shown, however, that social organization is by no means a human invention. We emerged as humans already graced with a broad repertoire of social institutions. Ervin Laszlo goes so far as to call these institutions "natural systems," because they are apparently as intrinsically and indispensably human as the need for food, drink, and sexual expression.²⁹

As long as human societies were small, minimal organization was required. Even with the emergence of the great empires of the Near East, Egypt, and China in the Bronze and Early Iron ages, where the king was identified with the high god, we find little awareness of the intermediate Powers that so profoundly determine human existence. Polytheism, to be sure, reflected a keen awareness of the multiplicity of Powers that shape the human psyche, but these primary intuitions were not given sociopolitical expression until the time of Alexander the Great, at least in the region in which the biblical religions took their rise.

With the sudden collapse of the city-states and the emergence of the Hellenistic cosmopolis, people were simultaneously stripped of the religious cosmologies that had sustained them and plunged into a world of vast and imponderable forces vying for supremacy. For the first time, the language of Principalities and Powers emerged as a way of identifying the *experiences* people were having of new spiritual forces embodied in the social and political institutions of Alexander's successors. If these spiritual Powers had been there all along, how can we account for their being identified so late? If they had eternal metaphysical status, why were they stored up so long and released only in the Hellenistic age? But if they were *new* spirits, the interiority of new social forces identified as the result of new perceptions, then their emergence precisely at that moment in history makes perfect sense.

These forces were not altogether new. The Hebrew Bible was already familiar with angels of the nations, for example (Deut. 32:8-9, a very ancient text; see also 2 Sam. 5:24; Ps. 82:1-8). But the range and ubiquity of these forces for the first time came to awareness in the post-Alexandrine era.³⁰ And what those capable of discernment testified is that these Powers were beyond simple human control.

This sense that affairs have passed out of human hands into those of supra-human Powers increased in the Roman period. A change of emperor might affect the ordinary Roman incidentally for good or evil, comments Harold Mattingly, but it was really the system that mattered, and the system changed very little, whatever particular occupant might be enthroned in the seat of the Caesars.³¹ The office of the emperor seemed to possess a power independent of its incumbent: "It was inevitable that the system should come to tyrannize over each Emperor of the moment, that caprice, never to be completely excluded, mattered less and less, that the Emperor should end by being as much a prisoner of his office as the meanest serf among his subjects."³² A highly placed officer at the Pentagon expressed to me the same sentiments: "Sometimes it feels like it's just a massive system that got going and no one knows how it happened or how to stop it."

For we are not contending against mere human beings, but against suprahuman systems and forces, against "the spirituality (*pneumatika*) of the evil Powers in the invisible order."³³

The modern sociologist Peter Blau concurs that institutions seem to be beyond human control: "Once firmly organized, an organization tends to assume an identity of its own which makes it independent of the people who have founded it or of those who constitute its membership."³⁴

People establish institutions, but they are in turn themselves molded by the institutions they have established. We come into a world already institutionally organized, often for injustice. "I suppose that at first, it was people who invented borders," writes the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "and then borders started to invent people."³⁵

"Fate" means literally "what is spoken"—not what we speak, but what is spoken over us to predetermine our future by blocking our free access to the reality we would choose.³⁶ It refers to the fact that not only individuals, but whole groups, classes, and races can find themselves in a state of physical or psychic detention. We are each defined in part by the sum total of possibilities that are denied to us, that is, by a future more or less blocked off.³⁷ The final triumph of the Powers, then, is to cause us to will to be where we have been detained.

To be created by God means that no system can totally determine us. But there is such a thing as "natal alienation," as someone has called it: the experience of being born into a world in which one is condemned in advance, by virtue of one's skin color, or gender, or disability, or malnutrition, or a mother's addiction, or AIDS, to a future more or less blocked off. We are talking here about not just an occasional aberration but about hundreds of millions of people. If South African "Bantu education" has been intentionally geared to teach just enough to train blacks for work in the mines but not enough for them to achieve competitive parity with whites, how free are they to "be all that they can be" under God?

Jesus denounced the Domination System of his day and proclaimed the advent of the reign of God, *which would transform every aspect of reality, even the social framework of existence*. To this end he founded an anti-structure³⁸ that provided a haven for those whose encounter with Jesus left them nowhere else to go (prostitutes, toll collectors, "sinners," the landless). It bodied forth a new existence under God, freed from legalism and the purity code. It also liberated people from the alienating spirituality of the Hellenistic ethos.³⁹ And it set in motion a permanent revolution against the Power System whose consequences we are still only beginning to grasp to this day.

Our charismatic friend in Chile regarded Jesus as only the savior of souls, not the savior of the world. Her Jesus was not the bringer of the New Order into this time and space, but a redeemer who saves people from this time and space into an afterlife. The proclaimer of God's reign on earth had become, for her, the divine broker who negotiates our forgiveness for personal infractions of the moral code. Christianity was, in her eyes, a fairly private affair, a matter of "spiritual life" only, which left uncriticized and unopposed a System exemplified in Chile, at the very moment we were speaking, by the iron-fisted dictator, Gen. Augusto Pinochet. The General had nothing to fear from her.

The Jesus who died at the hands of the Powers died every bit as much for the Powers as he died for people. The statement in Col. 1:20 that God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross, cannot apply just to people, since we are not in "heaven." It must mean the Powers referred to in v. 16, in both their visible and invisible aspects, as the reiteration of the phrase "on earth or in heaven" (1:16, 20) makes clear. It is these Powers that Christ reconciles to God through his death on the cross. That death is not, then, merely an unmasking and exposure of the Powers for what they are (Col. 2:15), but an effort to transform the Powers into what they are meant to be.

Philippians 3:21 further specifies: Christ will transform the world "by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself." The paradox

of the cross, however, prevents this from being just another dream by the powerless of a reversal of power. The one who subjects all things to himself is precisely the same one who abandoned all mimetic rivalry with God—"who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited"—and emptied himself of all desire to dominate, taking the form of the oppressed, identifying himself with the enslaved, and suffering a criminal's death (Phil. 2:6-8*). Subjection to such a ruler means the end of all subjugation. The rulership thus constituted is not a domination hierarchy but an enabling or actualizing hierarchy.⁴⁰ It is not pyramidal but organic, not imposed but restorative. It is presided over by naked, defenseless truth—the Crucified—not by a divine dictator. Christ makes all things subject to himself, not by coercion, but by healing diseased reality and restoring its balance and integrity.

Reinhold Niebuhr taught that organizations reflect the lowest common denominator of morality of their members, and are therefore less moral than most of the people that make them up.⁴¹ This is depressingly true of a great many groups; if it is the whole story, however, hopes for transforming institutions are incredibly slim. But in fact we all know of groups that lift people to a *higher* level than the individuals who compose them: Alcoholics Anonymous and groups for addicts of other kinds; or certain intentional Christian communities like the Latin American base communities, or Ground Zero, Church of the Savior, Sojourners, Koinonia Farm, and the Iona Community. Many clergy feel they have been able to help improve the churches they have served, as do many business executives their companies. Even this side of the reign of God, institutions can be impacted for the better.

The gospel is not a message of personal salvation *from* the world, but a message of *a world transfigured, right down to its basic structures*. Redemption means actually being liberated from the oppression of the Powers, being forgiven for one's own sin and for complicity with the Powers, and being engaged in liberating the Powers themselves from their bondage to idolatry. The good news is nothing less than a cosmic salvation, a restitution of all things (Acts 3:21), when God will "gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). This universal rectification will entail both a healing and a subordination of rebellious structures, systems, and institutions to their rightful places, in service to the One in and through and for whom they exist.⁴²

Redemption of the Powers requires neutralizing⁴³ their proclivity to evil and bringing them into subjection to Christ ("under his feet," 1 Cor. 15:24-27; Eph. 1:22; Heb. 10:12-13).⁴⁴ The Powers will enter the heavenly city, redeemed, transformed (Rev. 22:2), bearing as their "glory" all the artistic, cultural, political, scientific, and spiritual contributions whereby they have enriched the

world (Rev. 21:24). On this side of the New Jerusalem they will remain relatively good and evil, none perfect, none totally depraved. But some will become so destructively demonic in their self-idolization that they must be resisted with all our might.

The understanding that the Powers are created, fallen, and redeemable helps negotiate a truce between two camps long at odds. The one argues that all governmental, economic, educational, and cultural systems are intrinsically evil, though capable of some limited good. This position is held by some Amish, Mennonites, and others from the Anabaptist tradition. The other insists that governments and other public institutions are not just post-Fall phenomena but intrinsic elements of God's creation, and therefore capable not only of reform but even of being "christianized." This position is associated with the Calvinist tradition, but is also characteristic of Catholicism and most mainline Protestants.⁴⁵ Without such a truce, the invidious "either/or" of the debate leaves us either abandoning the Powers to secularity or installing an establishment Christianity: either withdrawal or theocracy.

Instead of these two extremes, the New Testament view of the Powers gives us a broad continuum of possible emphases, adaptable to every situation. There are no prepackaged answers that tell us how Christians should engage the Powers. One person may be called to try to reorganize the office where she works in a more humane fashion; another may have to walk out to protest sexual harassment. One may run for political office; another may despair of the electoral system and work to overthrow it. But all live in the paradox of "as if not," as being in but not of the Domination System. "Come out of her, my people" (Rev. 18:4) may be our marching orders, but so may be the call to assume secular office (as with Joseph and Daniel). Spiritual discernment takes the place of fixed rules. As Jacques Ellul argues, there really is no such thing as a "Christian ethic," only the ethical inventiveness of Christians.⁴⁶

Social entities *can* be changed, but they can only be fundamentally changed by strategies that address the socio-spiritual nature of institutions. Since we are not out to destroy people but to change the systems that hold even their beneficiaries in thrall, we must take as our spiritual weapons the "whole armor of God," the nonviolent armament of which Ephesians so eloquently speaks: truth, justice, peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, and above all, prayer (Eph. 6:10-20). That is, the church's peculiar calling is to discern and engage both the structure and the spirituality of oppressive institutions.

Have I ended by agreeing with my Chilean charismatic friend? We are certainly of one mind that the church's unique task is spiritual. We differ only in the recognition that part of the church's evangelistic task is proclaiming to the

Principalities and Powers in the heavenly places the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10). And that means addressing the spirituality of actual institutions that have rebelled against their divine vocations and have made themselves gods.

We are slowly beginning to read the events of our time in ways that honor both the social and the personal. The irreducibility of the personal to the social, and the irreducibility of the social to the personal: these two principles form an indissoluble and necessary duality that must be maintained against all simplistic attempts at individualistic *or* sociological reductionism. God's will is the transformation of people *and* society. Individuals will enter the New Jerusalem, but so also their nations, redeemed and healed by the leaves of the tree of life (Rev. 21:24-26; 22:2). Evangelism and social struggle are the twin pincers of a single movement for world transformation.

The Powers are good, the Powers are fallen, but the Powers will be redeemed. That is a hope worthy of the One in and through and for whom all things exist, and whose praises we hymn in anticipation of the final restitution of all things in the embrace of divine love.