

CAN CHRISTIAN ETHICS COUNTENANCE A COUP D'ETAT?  
THE CASE OF ECUADOR, JANUARY 21, 2000

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS

A political uprising erupts in response to injustice, corruption, poverty and suffering. A democracy is overturned in the name of a more authentic democracy. The instigators put forward powerful ethical arguments to justify their action against the state. At the same time, they employ both indigenous identity and the threat of military force to ensure their success. Suppose you find yourself in the midst of these events. Do you support the actions? Or oppose them? How forcefully do you act – if you act?

This paper is specifically intended to address the involvement of the *Christian* in times of political turmoil, when individuals are called upon to take a stand and to act. What elements of *Christian ethics* in particular might guide a person's decisions and actions in these circumstances?

In this paper, I (1) present the case of Ecuador on January 21, 2000; (2) name the wide range of ethical actors and issues, and select a few for particular attention; and (3) offer insights and proposals for how one's actions in this crisis might have been guided with principles and precedents from Christian ethics.

CASE STUDY: QUITO, ECUADOR, JANUARY 21, 2000<sup>1</sup>

On January 21, 2000, Ecuador became the stage of the first Latin American coup-d'etat in over a decade. Many are calling the dramatic events of January a "*levantamiento popular*" – a popular uprising – rather than a "coup." The revolt was non-violent and was led by an indigenous movement with widespread support throughout the country and backing from some sectors of the military. The uprising followed a year of disastrous bank failures, out-of-control inflation, and austere economic policies imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

*It was a persuasive protest against corruption to get the people to react, so that they would stop being passive, so that they would stop being witnesses to the debacle of our country. We did it to raise the people's self-esteem, to make them the protagonists of their own destiny. - Coup leader Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez*

The ousted president Jamil Mahuad was saddled with accusations of corruption. When 14 banks collapsed in March 1999, the Ecuadorian government outraged the public by freezing bank accounts to raise money for a bailout of the banks, while government officials and bankers whisked their own funds out of the country.

*The authorities have been breaking the constitution and breaking the rules whenever they have wanted to. They froze and stole the funds of thousands of Ecuadorians in the banks*

*that had their accounts - when people are not treated in hospitals, when there aren't resources so that our children can go to school to be educated.* – CONAIE (Indigenous Confederation) leader Miguel Lluco

60 percent of Ecuador's population lives in poverty. During Mahuad's term, the value of the national currency dropped by 80 percent, while prices for food and fuel skyrocketed, in part because structural adjustment policies demanded an end to subsidized prices. The implementation of IMF/World Bank-prescribed policies and the country's economic downturn hit Ecuador's poor particularly hard.

Throughout the 1990s, the Indigenous Nationalities Confederation of Ecuador (CONAIE) repeatedly mobilized thousands of Indians from the countryside to stage mass protests in the capitol Quito that would effectively shut the city down. But the January 21st popular uprising was different. The president had proposed to replace the national currency with the US dollar, provoking a firestorm. CONAIE said the plan would “dollarize poverty and privatize wealth.” As upwards of 20,000 indigenous protesters crowded into Quito, some 500 military personnel and a group of rogue colonels allowed the protestors to occupy the Congress building. Soon a three-man junta – CONAIE's president Antonio Vargas, army colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, and the retired Supreme Court chief justice – was greeting crowds from the balcony of the presidential palace.

*We have always said that the country is below God and above everything else, including the military as an institution and also our families. Therefore, we couldn't remain inactive when confronted with the waste of the country's funds, and people's money....A series of blatantly corrupt acts were committed. The state constitution was violated systematically. Given such constant criminal acts to satisfy the demands of a small group of shameless bankers and some business leaders, the military...must defend the people.*  
- Colonel Gutiérrez

The coup was short-lived. Several hours into it, the plotters turned power over to the armed forces' chief of staff, General Carlos Mendoza. The U.S. State Department and the Organization of American States immediately called Mendoza, warning him of international isolation and threatening to end all bilateral aid and World Bank lending to Ecuador. The next morning, General Mendoza turned the reins over to the vice president, Gustavo Noboa. Nonetheless, a powerful point had been made.

The question of what democracy really means within a system suffused with radical inequality, permanent indebtedness, and high-level corruption is a vital concern for the instigators of Ecuador's January revolution. The indigenous movement is articulating a new, more inclusive set of democratic ideals, calling for a more active civic participation than merely voting on election day. These ideals are largely a response to the perception that the government of Ecuador has long been a kind of feeding trough for insiders.

*[The new \$2 billion IMF loan] will go first of all to the bankers. The international organizations shouldn't continue supporting the same thieves who have stolen so much. The solution is in listening to the Ecuadorian people and implementing a plan that represents the majority view. It's not as if they're giving us money, they are loaning it to us. So what happens now is that the foreign debt increases - and we're already spending 54% of the budget on debt. The international organizations and media together have covered up and*

*been accomplices to the evils of Ecuador and to those who are corrupt. And in the name of what? In the name of defending democracy. What they have done is defend the democracy of thieves, the democracy of liars.... They haven't listened to the outcry of eleven million Ecuadorians, who are totally opposed to that kind of democracy. – Miguel Lluco*

### ETHICAL ISSUES

This case study presents us with a wide assortment of serious problems. These problems might make us to reflect on our own remote-control participation as citizens in a democratic powerhouse state that exerts tangible influence over the people of Ecuador from thousands of miles away. I ask the reader to go further, however, and to follow the lead of Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez: to try to consider these events from a position of solidarity with the poverty-stricken Indians of Ecuador – to try to get a feel for why they believe that the promise of representation by their own government has been perverted.

From a short-term perspective, the majority of the population of Ecuador suffered from deepening conditions of poverty during President Mahuad's term (average per capita income is \$1,600, but among Indians it is \$250; by January, 2000, the currency on which the poor depend had slipped to one-fifth of the value it had when Mahuad had taken office). Obviously, this is a regrettable trend, and most people would agree that appropriate action by government to reverse this trend would be a good thing. If the problem is seen as resulting from inadequate leadership – a president who is incapable of controlling events (Mahuad's approval rating dropped to 7%) – this is a regrettable state of affairs and may justify political action against that leader, but it does not constitute a strong *moral* case to circumvent the democratic process and end his term prematurely, even if such a move would improve people's lives. But the issue becomes a moral one if it can be shown that there are agents who are actively responsible for the immiserating trend, and even more so if they are seen to be benefiting from it.

If the leadership itself is seen to be participating in corruption at the highest levels, the moral case against them is much stronger. In fact, prominent bankers have been charged with theft and fraud but are rarely prosecuted. Insider information led to large-scale capital flight by elites (sending their money out of the country), protecting them from both the freezing of bank accounts and losses from hyperinflation. There is evidence of (possibly fraudulent) waste of funds from multilateral loans. If no legal mechanism is holding the executive branch accountable, then the case for direct action grows.

If conditions of endemic corruption, severe inequity in wealth distribution, abuse of power, and disproportionate control by a small group of self-serving elites are judged to be intractable, systemic features of the political system, then the growth of an organized opposition concerned with justice, fairness, and self-determination becomes quite likely. At this point, the decision comes: which side are you on? In Ecuador, this movement is identical with the cause of ethnic identity and assertion, as the unfinished 500-year history of oppression of indigenous peoples becomes a rallying point, successfully identifying the government as the heir of that legacy.

Considering the case in international terms, indigenous analysts point to collaboration between Ecuador's elites and international investors (through private banks in the U.S. and Europe), sponsors (such as the U.S. government), and multilateral creditors (the World Bank and International Monetary Fund). Indigenous leaders see an increasingly exploitative globalization system orchestrated through these intentional links. Yet such international actors have persuasive arguments in favor of such relationships: they say they are promoting the cause of economic

development by working to stabilize and strengthen the financial institutions within Ecuador; they are working with the authorities who have the competence and authority to effect change; they are working to promote order and stability. However, from the perspective of the indigenous opposition, these international actors do not listen and do not respect their locally appropriate proposals. The outsiders avoid relationships with the poor they are claiming to serve. Furthermore, by working with and extending credit to those who are in power, they are colluding in their crimes.

Finally, as long as Ecuador remains burdened by an unsustainable yet systemic debt (Ecuador defaulted on half of its \$13 billion debt in September, 1999), poverty simply cannot be meaningfully alleviated. Given that the debt situation has continued unchanged for a generation, the First World public ought to consider what responsibility it has to promote a change in the debt system, given that it finances the lending institutions.

I proceed now to a brief consideration of Christian ethical resources that can guide a response to these powers.

#### RESOURCES FOR A CHRISTIAN ETHICAL CRITIQUE OF THE POWERS

Ecuador is an unjust community. Such a systemic concentration of power and wealth is effectively antidemocratic. Those holding power and wealth have demonstrated a consistent pattern of corruption. The result is systemic poverty, an oppressive stealing of opportunity from those least able to endure it. To gain a Christian ethical orientation to this problem, I suggest that the reader start with a consideration of the Gospel of Luke's presentation of Jesus's first words upon embarking on his public ministry. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...to set at liberty those who are oppressed..." (Luke 4.18).<sup>2</sup>

Ecuador suffers unjust relations with its neighbors. The debt burden is fundamentally wrong, causing unacceptable suffering to victims who are not responsible for the existence of the debt and did not benefit from it. Ecuador's creditors (at the World Bank and IMF) are blind to their own complicity in supporting Ecuador's internal corruption. Those in government and the banking sector have benefited in an excessively self-serving way from their role in between international creditors and their own oppressed population. For a Christian ethical perspective, Jesus's teaching on loving one's neighbor is foundational: weighing the extravagance with which he applies the principle ("...do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you..." Luke 6.27-28), it's clear that Jesus asks us to set a higher standard: to extend the notion of neighbor to its furthest possible reach.

Finally, I would point to the sabbath legislation of Leviticus 25: "And if your brother becomes poor beside you, and sells himself to you...he shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee; then he shall go out from you...and go back to his own family, and return to the possessions of his fathers" (Leviticus 25: 39-41). The contemporary message of Jubilee 2000, the non-governmental organization promoting debt cancellation, and especially to the authoritative voice of Jubilee South, are especially helpful in guiding this ethic into action. The greatest thing that those in power inside and outside of Ecuador could do would be to listen directly to the voices of the poor and the marginalized and let these voices begin to guide them. My own work with Jubilee 2000 in North America has led me to believe that those of us in the North must, if this effort is to have any real effect, for once follow the lead of those in the South.

## PRINCIPLES AND PRECEDENTS FOR ACTION FROM CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Now we arrive at the central question I posed in this paper: if you were a Christian in Quito on January 21, 2000 – and in a position to actively aid those engaged in the uprising – what ethical resources from Christian scriptures and tradition might guide your decisions and actions? Under what circumstances is such uprising acceptable in Christian terms? What Christian resources are relevant here to justify action or non-action?

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Two arguments are provided in the Christian tradition for disobeying the state (or the church). First, when the state (or any entity in power) presents itself as an idol, one is entitled to fight against idolatry. Second, it is proper to distinguish the *person* from the *office* – and make thus to make judgements to act against the person without being disloyal to the office.<sup>3</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer bases his criteria for Christian political action on the role of the “mandates of creation,” which exist to keep things orderly and which include labor, marriage, government, and the church. Christ is the mediator in the relationships between the individual and each of these “mandates.” To allow any one of them to become overly important is to make an idol of it, and this interferes with the individual’s central relationship to Christ. Thus, for Bonhoeffer, Christ is *in between* each of these relationships, keeping them balanced. In effect, Christ triangulates every relationship. Bonhoeffer viewed the Nazi government under which he lived as having crossed over into that interfering-idol status. This gave Bonhoeffer license to respond against Hitler.<sup>4</sup>

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Gustavo Gutiérrez is the original genius of liberation theology. In his book *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, he builds a careful argument that the experience of social location is all-important to the application of Christian ethics. Gutiérrez challenges the reader to determine, where are you reading your scripture *from*? Can you locate yourself with the poor? Can you identify with the oppressed, or feel solidarity with the downtrodden? How does your own experience color your response to the word?

The goal of Gutiérrez’s approach is to provide the disciple with (a) a lens for interpreting his/her own relationship with those suffering people and communities whose cause Jesus champions, and (b) a way of applying his/her response to God in the form of practices which engage in concrete actions in his/her community. For example, Gutiérrez explains that if *conversion* is a break from sin, then “it will have to have both a personal and a social dimension.” Therefore, sins of omission – staying silent in the face of injustice – must be called to account. He goes on to quote the bishops and priests of Machala, Ecuador: “As the followers of Christ that we are trying to be, we cannot fail to show our solidarity with the suffering – the imprisoned, the marginalized, the persecuted – for Christ identifies himself with them (Matt. 25:31-46).”<sup>5</sup>

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When it comes to ethical guidance, however, it is well known that drawing on Christian scripture and tradition can not infrequently lead two people to completely opposite conclusions. In no realm is this more true than political action. Undoubtedly this is why many devout people are pleased to keep religion out of politics altogether. But ethics is the medium that connects the two realms, so the relationship is never clean-cut. A brief consideration of some biblical passages

that could be seen as offering guidance as to how to respond to this political crisis will illustrate the danger of cherry-picking bits of scripture in support of a position. I will argue that any such reference must be informed by a fundamental orientation to the meaning of Christian love and compassion.

- “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22.39)
- “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5.44)
- “...do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you...” (Luke 6.27-28)
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...” (Matthew 5:38-39)

Earlier, when I quoted Jesus’ injunction to love neighbors and even enemies, I said that he is advocating that we stretch our idea of “neighbor” to its furthest reach – including the suffering poor in other nations and even suffering nature. But loving your enemy could also be read as a call to slavishly accept the blows of abusive power as a willing submission to God’s will. Likewise, “Do not resist” and “turn the other cheek” can seem to argue not so much for pacifism or passive resistance as for outright passivity. But let us recall that Jesus was a world-class troublemaker, who repeatedly challenged others and pushed the powers to the brink.

- “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21)
- “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement....[the authority] does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer.” (Romans 13.1-4)
- “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to the governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.” (1 Peter 2:13-14)
- “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” (Romans 12:14)

The apostles all too eagerly pick up on Jesus’ ability to separate core matters of faith from the unavoidable impositions of worldly powers and convert it into a divine justification for the powers that be – even for unjust persecution, which will be compensated for by divine reward. Their circumstances no doubt called for some diplomatic accommodation. Yet this is precisely why one should not rely on isolated biblical passages for guidance without accepting the guidance of their larger vision. Which carries more weight according to Jesus’ teachings: relations to temporal powers, or relations to the suffering and the poor? Consideration of this point is what I mean by a “fundamental orientation.”

- “The Spirit of the Lord...has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to set at liberty those who are oppressed... (Luke 4.18)
- “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited

me, I was in prison and you came to me....as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:35-40).

Without pursuing the point further here, I would argue that Jesus presents, more than anything else, the modeling of appropriate compassion and love of neighbor for human beings, with the foremost emphasis on solidarity with and help for the poor, the weak, and the oppressed. Need I emphasize the relative weight of these two passages? The first is the opening bid of Jesus’ ministry in the gospel of Luke; the second is his criterion of righteousness which provides the “judgement” of the Final Judgement.

### CONCLUSION

A confession: the fact is, my own decision that I would support this action is one that I made with very little obvious reference to specifically Christian ethical categories. Yet here’s a situation that cries out for justice. If many Christians are uncomfortable with the linkages I have been building in these pages, or if Christian resources are simply judged to be not particularly relevant, what does that say?

My own view has changed during this writing. I have come to view the liberation perspective – the demand for compassionate solidarity with the poor and the suffering as the criterion of righteousness – as a hugely important resource for authentic Christian action, and, furthermore, as a valid and powerful basis for Christians to be involved in politics. With time, I believe that this expansive orientation might contribute new, better understandings of the nature of legitimate power than the apostles were able to muster. In some way, I would suggest, the operations of worldly power must be opened up, so that power’s subjective side is in view and available. In this way, power might eventually have to come into productive relationship with “the least of these.”

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### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Interviews and resources in the case study, and in all subsequent discussion of particular events in Ecuador, were developed from a script for *Making Contact*, a program of the National Radio Project, written by Nate Binzen, 2000.  
<sup>2</sup> All scriptural reference from the RSV.  
<sup>3</sup> From Martha Ellen Stortz, in class lecture, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Spring 2000.  
<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Touchstone, 1955), 204-210.  
<sup>5</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from our Own Wells* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984) 98-100.