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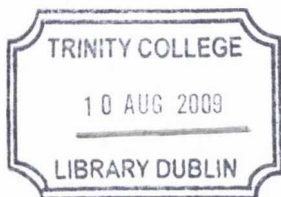
EMERGENCE OF A WORLD MADE OTHER:
A STUDY OF THE SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF
FRANÇOIS HOUTART

by

JEROME SAHABANDHU

Being a thesis submitted for the
Degree of Doctor in Philosophy

January 2009
Dublin



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TO

MY TEACHER

MS. YVONNE FERDINANDS

WHO TAUGHT WITH PASSION AND COMPASSIONATE CARE,

TO THE VICTIMS OF INJUSTICE

AND TO ALL THOSE WHO STRUGGLE TO

MAKE THIS WORLD

'OTHER'

SUMMARY

François Houtart is a Belgian social activist and sociologist of religion who defends the position that religion, as a social reality, can be an agent of change in a given situation. Houtart's ideas originate from Weber, Marx and Gramsci; for Houtart, religion is a social construction. Throughout Houtart's career he has struggled for social justice, especially in subaltern societies, expressed through his forceful resistance to capitalist globalisation, encouragement for the convergence of social movements, and emphasis upon the importance of collective consciousness and praxis within the changing global context.

In a Gramscian sense, Houtart is an *engaged intellectual*. However, he did not become this way overnight; it has been a gradual evolution and process of becoming. The *Sitz im Leben* of the working class in mid-twentieth-century Europe became his first sociological and ecclesiastical focus. Cardinal Cardijn's work influenced Houtart to apply the method of *see, judge and act* seriously in his work, while exposure to Latin American liberation theology challenged Houtart to rethink the established notion of developmentalism. Thus, Houtart adopted liberation and reinterpreted the role of religion in this light, learning about the correlation between theory and praxis. Houtart then went on to study religion and society in India and Sri Lanka, and as a professional sociologist of religion he studied Buddhism in Sri Lanka. In the last two decades Houtart emerged as social critic especially in relation to Globalisation of resistance.

This research is an exploration of:

- (a) Houtart's intellectual evolution by reconstructing the major turning points and shifts in his thinking;
- (b) three core areas of Houtart's thought: religion and society; church and society; and global justice.

One of the major incentives for carrying out this work was to reconstruct Houtart's intellectual contribution to each of the above areas. Houtart is neither as widely recognised nor appreciated as he deserves to be, especially in the Western, English-speaking world. This dissertation is a modest contribution towards addressing this lacuna, arguing for the significance of Houtart's discourse on religion, society, globalisation and theological education.

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Any research is a collective enterprise, and this dissertation is no exception. Many have contributed to this research in different ways and by various means. It is impossible to mention all who have contributed individually. However, some names, organisations and groups stand out.

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Jerome Sahabandhu

Dublin

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Abbreviations

AFIS	Auxilières féminines internationales
CELAM	Latin American Bishops Conference, <i>Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano</i>
CETRI	Centre Tri-Continental
CSA	Centre for Social Analysis
D.Th	Doctor of Theology
EU	European Union
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
FTAA	Free Trade Agreement of the Americas
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FERES	International Federation of Institutions for Socio-Religious and Social Research
GNP	Gross National Product
GOSL	Government of Sri Lanka
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISE	Irish School of Ecumenics
IIIS	Institute for International Integration Studies
JOC	Young Catholic Workers, Juventud Obrera Católica
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front)
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
M.Th	Master of Theology
OCED	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
SAM	Société auxiliaire des Mission
PAICV	Partido Africano da Independência de Cabo Verde (African Independence Party of Cape Verde)
TCL	Theological College of Lanka
UCL	Catholic University of Louvain
UNDP	United Nation
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
WFA	World Forum for Alternatives
WSF	World Social Forum
WTO	World Trade Organisation
WCC	World Council of Churches
YCW	Young Christian Workers
YCS	Young Catholic Students

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introducing The Project	1
Context of the Reflection	9
Background for the Choice of Houtart as the Subject of my Study.....	14
In a Global Context: A Sample of the Present Debate.....	15
The Emergence of a World Made Other.....	16
Method, Scope, and Limitations of the Study.....	18
Chapter Two: Emergence of a Social Thinker: François Houtart in Context	27
Introduction.....	27
Forces of the Twentieth Century.....	30
Adopted Approach	31
The Shaping of a Sociologist of Religion	32
Houtart's Formative Years and World War II	32
Entering the Seminary.....	34
Cardijn's Influence.....	35
First Turning Point: Pastoral Response to the Young Working Class (1940s).....	36
Chicago	37
Teilhard de Chardin	38
Institutional Connections	40
Second Turning Point: Latin America	41
Third Turning Point: Commitment Against the War in Vietnam	43
Fourth Turning Point: Sri Lanka.....	45
Fifth Turning Point: CETRI.....	46
The Main Strands of Houtart's Thinking.....	48
The Transition from Institutions to Values.....	49
The Shift from Christianity to Other Religions	53
From Development to Liberation.....	55
Short Summary of the Theology of Liberation.....	55
Latin American Theology	58
Feminist Theology	61
Houtart and the Theology of Liberation	61
From Modernity to Cultural Diversity.....	65
From Functionalism to Marxism	68
Conclusion	74
Chapter Three: Religion as a Social Agent: Some Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations	77
Introduction.....	77
The Phenomenon of Religion	78
The Study of Religion and Its Limits.....	80
The Emergence of a New Discipline	82
Religion as a Part of the Symbolic Representation.....	84
A Conceptual Framework for Social Analysis	87
The Current Status of Houtart's Model of Social Analysis	88
Scheme of Social Analysis.....	89
Symbolic Representation Revisited	91
Representations and Meanings	91
Religion, Ideology, and the Political Field	104
The Concept of Ideology	104
The Relationship between the Political and the Religious Fields.....	109
The Relationship of Religion and Ideology Further Clarified Conceptually.....	114
Religions as Institutions with Social Functions: Their Nature and Dynamics	116
Models of Social Types	117

The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions (1985)	126
Hai Van: Life in a Vietnamese Commune (1984)	128
Hunting Clans of South India	129
Animism	130
Confucianism	132
Conclusion	134
Chapter Four: Sociological Perspectives for Ecclesiology: Towards a Sociology of the Church	137
Vatican Council II	140
Some Questions and Issues	143
The Church as an Institution	147
Changing Institutions and Institutionalising Change	150
The Lag between the Social Reality and Ecclesiastical Thought	151
Leadership and Institution	152
Evolutive Quality	152
The Church as a Sign	153
Variations on the Theme of Houtart's Ecclesiology	158
Houtart and the YCW Movement as a Starting Point	167
The Sociology of Religion Is Not a Theological Discipline	170
Houtart and Latin America, Africa and Asia	172
Theology of Liberation	177
Conclusion	185
Chapter Five: Religion and Society in Dialectical Interaction	189
Introduction	189
Religion	195
Towards a More Precise Definition of Religion	195
Social Functions of Religion: Special Focus on Asian Religions	196
Identity and Belongingness: The Case of Sri Lanka	201
Religious Demands: What Do They Mean?	204
The Concept of Affinity or Correspondence	209
The Concept of Stress	210
Religious Fundamentalism: A New Awakening	213
Role of Religion	217
Max Weber's Study of Religion and the Spirit of Capitalism	217
Some Observations on the Marxist Analysis of Religion	229
Gramsci's Sociology of Political Praxis	232
The Theologies of Liberation	234
Legitimacy and Political Obligation	237
Society	243
Society and Ideological Construct	243
Power Relationships	244
Theoretical Models of Society	245
The Case of Colonial Societies: The Example of Sri Lanka	252
Postindependent Asian Societies	255
Dialectical Tensions	258
Religion and Society: Antagonism Between Two Opposing Systems?	258
The Conflict between Marxism and Religious Belief	260
Conclusion	261
Chapter Six: Towards a Movement for Global Justice	265
Introduction	265
Globalisation: A General Overview	268
Crisis of the Modern Nation-State	271

Further Definition and Analysis of Globalisation.....	273
What Postcolonialism Has to Say About Globalisation	278
Globalisation and Concepts of Modernity and Postmodernity.....	280
Globalisation as Replacement for Modernisation and Imperialism.....	281
Definition of Anti-Capitalism.....	283
Houtart's Analysis of Global Capitalism.....	285
The Origin and Development of Neoliberalism.....	287
Houtart's Reasons for Delegitimising Capitalism	294
The World Social Forum	297
An Example of Anti-Capitalist Movements: La Via Campesina.....	302
The Place of the Religious Believers in the Social Struggles.....	304
Towards a Globalisation of Justice, Love, and Life	305
A Spirituality Nourished by the Social Sciences	306
A Theology of Liberation, Source of Resistance, and Hope for the People	307
Towards an Ethics Inspired by the Radical Character of the Gospel	308
Liberation and Hope	309
Conclusion	309
Chapter Seven: Concluding Remarks.....	317
Introduction.....	317
The Inclusion of Social Analysis in the Theological Curriculum.....	318
Socio-Ethical Reflection and Praxis Based on Social Analysis.....	321
The Search for a Fresh Approach in Social Ethics	324
Ethics and Interreligious Relations: Some Problems.....	325
Ethics as Part of Symbolic Representation	329
 The Sociological Approach and the Theological Approach: Contradictory or Complementary?	 332
Presociological Choice of the Christians	333
Questions for Further Research	334
Let me offer some questions for further elaboration and research:	334
Synthesis	337
Appendix :(A) The Champagne Glass Effect.....	339
Appendix:(B) mind maps used for viva	342
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 343

TABLES

Table 1: Scheme of Social Analysis.....	92
Table 2: Summary of the Relation between Religion and Ideology.....	114
Table 3: Main Elements in Houtart's Scheme of Social Analysis	116
Table 4: Submissive Functions of Religion.....	121
Table 5: Religious System Scheme	126
Table 6: Structure of the Religious Sequences' Link to Social Relations Among the Kuravas, a Hunting Clan of South India in the First Millennium of Our Era	130
Table 7: Some Issues for Ecclesiology.....	146

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE PROJECT

Introductions are usually written at the end of the book and placed at the beginning, when the projected work is completely finished. In the present work, the General Introduction was written at the beginning as an anticipated vision of the whole, as a programme to follow, and as a set of guidelines to proceed in our work. As the work was proceeding and progressing, we had to adjust the initial vision when new unexpected data appeared as the result of our exploration. And once our proposed exploration and exposition was completed, we had to turn back to our General Introduction and make the necessary adaptations and amendments to make it correlative with the main body of our work.

The main purpose of this inquiry is to present François Houtart's social thought, with its corollaries on ecclesiology, social ethics, and political action, setting them in their historical and intellectual context while locating our investigation in the light of the current debate of the issues concerned. This is not intended as a systematic intellectual biography of François Houtart, but as an exposition of his main theme as a sociologist of religion and of some of its many ramifications for thought and action. Perhaps the readers will find important lacunae in the presentation of my exploration; I remind them from the onset that this work is expository and not strictly biographical in character.

François Houtart of Belgium (1925-) is an important and influential Christian scholar and activist who has made a significant contribution to sociology of religion and Christian social thought in the twentieth century. His findings can be extended and applied to the study of a global theology of liberation, social ethics in a pluralistic context, the pastoral work of the professionals of religion, and the role of the laity in the conflictive issues of today. During his long professional and vocational career (spanning

now a period of some 60 years), Houtart has appeared as a restless heart with a vigorous intellectual dynamism, an inexhaustible spiritual vitality, and a strong moral fibre, an indefatigable activist on behalf of the wretched of the earth, calling the official Roman Catholic Church and later other Christian churches and world religions, trade unions, intellectuals of different fields, social movements, and groups to join in a common orchestrated action to change the evil structures of this world and, in the process, to change their own structures of legitimation of the status quo.

Houtart began as a critical student of religious sociology in the tradition of the Chicago school of the sociology of religion, which deals largely with urbanization and religion; eventually he emerged as a professional sociologist of religion, as a global intercultural¹ social thinker, and as a social critic as well, adopting a Marxist methodological approach in his sociological research. In his long scholarly career, François Houtart has initiated, directed, and/or directly performed numerous research projects on the role of religion in society in many countries from Sri Lanka and Vietnam to Korea, from South Africa to Cuba and Nicaragua, from the United States to Russia. He is truly an ecumenical scholar and Christian in all the meanings of the word *ecumenical*.

Journeying through my own ecumenical pilgrimage, as a theological student from Sri Lanka, where religiosity, poverty, and ethnic conflict is the day-to-day reality, I ended up in Trinity College, Dublin, to pursue my doctoral studies; in the twinkling of an eye, I have made a qualitative leap from a premodern to a postmodern society, with their corresponding different frames of mind; being a Methodist, here in Ireland, I propose to study the thought of a Roman Catholic sociologist of religion from Louvain, Belgium, to bring his thought to bear on my own society and culture. Whereas this challenge seemed

¹Houtart's passion for bringing together social movements and forces of the global south for a dialogue on social struggles is, itself, an intercultural experiment (which will be discussed in detail as the study progresses), besides his initial response demonstrated from the early nineteen-sixties to go beyond European boundaries. In 1976, Houtart founded the Tri-Continental Center (CETRI) precisely to deal with south-south dialogue in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

to me, at one time to be an impossible enterprise, I have been encouraged to pursue it by thinking that François Houtart had made the same journey, though in the opposite direction: indeed, his doctoral dissertation was in my view an attempt to understand Sri Lanka, its cultures, religions, and ideologies in conflict. The result of his initial academic performance was his doctoral dissertation, eventually published in book form under the title *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*.² Often, I have thought that, if Houtart can analyse and understand my society, I am entitled to analyse and understand Houtart's thought.

It is now my opinion that the work of Houtart is neither appreciated, as it deserves to be, nor sufficiently studied or appraised. The number of his publications is many, but they are spread out in countless periodicals, chapters in collective books, occasional papers, lectures, Web sites, and scientific reports. His published books tend to be restricted in size and content, and most have a very limited edition and readership. For one person to collect all this material is an impossible task, but it is a bibliographical task that should be attempted by persons or institutions better qualified than I am. Therefore, this modest research intends to fill a gap in the literature on pioneering social thinkers.

By birth, upbringing, and academic education, Houtart belonged to the so-called European bourgeoisie; by vocation, he relocated himself in the Third World; he became a bridge of dialogue and understanding between the rich North and the poor South; as such, he is an ecumenical person in the widest meaning of the term *ecumenical*. However, Houtart is better known in the global South (in countries like Vietnam, the Philippines, Cuba, Nicaragua, Brazil, and Sri Lanka, where he has made specific contributions) than in the West, with the exception of some European countries with strong Roman Catholic tradition and generally Belgium, France, and Spain. Where he is known has something to do with the politics of recognition; given the recognition Houtart deserves.

²François Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka* (Bangalore: TPI, 1974).

Besides its primary objective, our research aims at making an academic contribution by introducing Houtart afresh to the English-speaking academic and religious communities at large.

Houtart did not develop a theology of liberation as such, even though there exists a mutual influence between his sociology and the society-oriented theologies written by others, but he has made a huge impact on Third-World theologies and ethics, as the Boff brothers have acknowledged,³ especially making a contribution to building bridges between theologies and the social sciences. Commenting on the foundational stage of the Theology of Liberation, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff say,

Lay persons such as Héctor Borrat, Methol Ferré, and Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza did valuable work in linking theology with the social sciences, as did the Belgian priest François Houtart and the Chilean G. Arroyo.⁴

We will discuss this connection between theology and the social sciences as we progress in our exploration.

Houtart began his academic and active career by studying the urban setting of the working masses, their gradual alienation from religious practices, and even their palpable hostility to the Church (meaning the Roman Catholic Church) with the youthful apostolic intention to win them back to the religious fold. Soon he realised that the workers would not join the cause of the Church if the Church did not join the cause of the workers. He did not make this discovery by reading authors such as Teilhard de Chardin and Chenu, but primarily by his direct observation and engagement. This awareness led him to the conviction that it was necessary, also, to transform the structures of the official Church. He saw a sign of this movement outwards and downwards on the part of the Church in the programme of *aggiornamento* launched by Pope John XXIII, his convocation of the Second Vatican Council, and especially in the elaboration and final official publication of

³Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, "A Concise History of Liberation Theology," in *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), <http://www.landreform.org/boff2.htm> (accessed October 5, 2005).

⁴Ibid.

the two main Constitutions of Vatican II, the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” and the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.” Thus, he was led to a commitment to collaborate with all those who were devoting their lives to the concrete interpretation and implementation of the message of those documents in their specific societies, mainly in Latin America. We shall try to study these formative years of Houtart in more detail as we progress in our study. Houtart has had many disappointments with the structures of the Church in this respect, as will be discussed later, but throughout he has tenaciously clung to his vocation in the world with the fervour of a prophet.

His evolution as a social thinker has been climaxed in the last decade or so in the form of a grand vision of a worldwide resistance to the spread of the capitalist globalisation as an alternative vision of ethical globalisation, which can be read as a form of political theology. However, Houtart’s first sociopolitical question was on ecclesiology.⁵ Some of his key questions have been raised in his work *Challenge to Change*,⁶ which will be analysed later in this study.

From the very outset of his thinking, Houtart became aware of the cultural and social power of religion. Some burning questions arose in his mind. At whose disposal is the Church placing all that “cultural and social power”? Is the Church at the service of the world, or does she expect the world to be at the service of the Church? As a young Catholic intellectual and priest in the late forties of the twentieth century, Houtart was aware and concerned about the progressive “de-Christianization” of the working masses in the European industrial countries; instead of just deploring the widening gap between the institutional Church and the masses of workers in the growing industrial neighbourhoods and cities, Houtart asked why the workers were anti-ecclesial. In short

⁵Houtart was first interested in the pastoral structures of the church trying to develop a sociology of pastoral ministry. Cf. François Houtart and Jean Remy, “A Survey of Sociology as Applied to Pastoral Work,” *Concilium* 1965, no. 3: 89-110.

⁶François Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964). (Title was written in the context of the Vatican II.)

why are these most vulnerable communities irreligious and even anti-religious?⁷ After prolonged and careful observation of the process of industrialization and urbanization of modern societies, with the sequels of secularization and de-Christianization of the working masses, Houtart concluded that the pastoral structures of the church, if they want to have a meaningful survival, if they want to avoid being fossilised as interesting antiquities in a historical museum, have to study and take the societal phenomena seriously. In the priority treatment of this question, Houtart sets the way to the creation of new intellectual initiatives which may help us to understand and perhaps overcome some of the conflicts resulting from a polarisation of religiousness and secularity.⁸

For Houtart, ignoring or suppressing the religious phenomenon is a profound philosophical and moral error, especially when it comes to the sociopolitical discourse and praxis. Hence, he vigorously insisted on the transformation of the traditional “pastoral studies” into the modern “socio-pastoral studies.” If in the past the study of “pastoral psychology” was instrumental and ancillary for the priest, Houtart insisted that, without denying the value of the individual psychological approach to pastoral care of the individuals (the “cure of souls”), a “pastoral sociology” is needed for the creation and nurture of the Christian communities. In other words, Houtart emphasizes the community over the isolated individual in the Church’s pastoral work. In this respect, Houtart had a very significant contribution to the creation of the innumerable centres for social and pastoral studies that we find in the Third World.

From a professional point of view, Albert Bastenier, at present the chief editor of *Social Compass*, has acknowledged Houtart’s long-standing contribution to that internationally reputed scholarly journal of sociology of religion. Houtart served *Social*

⁷It can be objected that there is no clear proof of “anti-religious” feelings among the workers or other segments of society and that a better term would be *anticlerical*; without entering into a debate on such terms, I can only say that Houtart uses the term *anti-religious*, and I respect his choice.

⁸This polarization has its roots to the Enlightenment paradigm. See Mervyn Fernando, *In Spirit and in Truth: An Exploration of Buddhist/Christian and East/West Crosscurrents* (Rathmalana, Sri Lanka: Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, 2001), 93f.

Compass as its chief editor for 40 years.⁹ He took over the journal in its transitional stage in 1960. Bastenier comments,

By diversifying the base of his editorial board and encouraging members to adopt a non-confessional, scholarly approach, François Houtart made of *Social Compass* a truly international journal, of recognised academic standing.¹⁰

Houtart, as a Catholic priest, is known to be a tactical insider who has had his share of problems with Rome, yet, strategically, he remains an outsider. In other words, in the beginning of his career, his work was done within the official channels of the Catholic Church, but is best recognised outside the official structures of the Church. He made frequent and energetic statements about the autonomy of sociology (including the sociology of religion) from the dictates of any authority except the scientific authority of the positive study itself. Since the late nineties of the twentieth century, however, he has been working outside the canopy of the Church of Rome.

Even though Houtart was a great ecclesiastical optimist—under the influence of Chenu, Schillebeeckx, Rahner, and Dom Helder Camara at the time of the Vatican Council II—he had what has generally come to be seen as unrealistic expectations of the Church’s influence in the social world, especially through the *Gaudium et Spes* diffusing process, despite the fact that the quality of the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” is still in need of being sufficiently quantified and assessed. For him, the official Church has fallen far below the expectations of the Vatican Council II. With some simplistic exaggeration, we could state that Houtart began with a good measure of illusion and ended up with an equal measure of disillusion. We will discuss this issue in the section on his ecclesiology.

Most recently, Houtart is becoming reasonably well known in his worldwide campaign for social justice, with special reference to Third World social movements

⁹ Albert Bastenier, “A Tribute to François Houtart,” *Social Compass* 47, no. 1 (2000): 5-6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

across the globe. His contribution to the theory and praxis is well noted, as is his search for alternatives to what many see as the inevitable and unstoppable march of the neoliberal globalisation.¹¹ He began his career in Belgium and has now served—including his contribution in active retirement—as a Catholic priest (at the time of this writing) for fifty-nine years.¹²

Houtart emerged in the context of the currents that brought about Vatican II. A change took place in his thought process that reflects on his work with his encounter with the popular movements of liberation and with the main exponents of the theology of liberation that helped him to discover the potential of religion as a relevant force for social change and also to correct some of his uncritical presuppositions that the solution for the Third World will come with rapid catching up in technology by the developing countries. His professional career as a sociologist of religion provided him with a basis for a sociological-economic analysis (especially as a dialectician¹³) as he laboured to explain these new prophetic engagements of spirituality. Houtart soon became a global voice in the debate on social justice and engagement in its praxis, with special reference to the current debates on alternatives to the neoliberal globalisation. One of his colleagues in this debate is Samir Amin.¹⁴ My task has been at times to make explicit what is still implicit in Houtart, based on an analysis of his lifetime contribution to the development of social thinking and praxis.

¹¹François Houtart and François Polet, *The Other Davos: The Globalisation of Resistance to the World Economic System* (London: Zed Books, 2001), 77.

¹²François Houtart was ordained a priest in 1949 in the Diocese of Malines-Brussels.

¹³The dialectical approach is opposed to the linear one, which sees the social reality as proceeding in one direction, generally according to the will of the dominant group or authority. On the contrary, dialectical thinking sees society as actors in action and reaction. This means that it is not pre-visible in which way it will go, except to measure the relationships of power and type of strategy of the actors.

¹⁴Egyptian-born and Paris-trained, currently Dakar-based, Samir Amin is one of the better-known Neo-Marxian thinkers, both in development theory as well as in the relativistic-cultural critique of social sciences. He is a promoter of the conscious self-reliance of developing countries, particularly for the Arab world. His concept of “Mal-development” is one of the best critiques for the modern-technological development theory. (See Samir Amin, *Mal Development* (Tokyo: UNU Press, 1990)).

Context of the Reflection

Let me begin with my own encounter with Houtart. I first encountered Houtart's work in Sri Lanka during my postgraduate studies for a Bachelor of Divinity degree at The Theological College of Lanka, Plimatalawa, Sri Lanka,¹⁵ in 1996. The main emphases in theological education at that time were on contextual theology¹⁶ and the use of critical social analysis in ethics and pastoral studies. For a long time the emphasis of the theological education in Sri Lanka has been on doctrinal and fundamental theology and the application of the same theology to the pastoral ministry. Neither societal analysis nor a systematic education on the beliefs and practices of people from other faith systems and ideologies were involved in the curriculum of theological education. In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, scholastic philosophy and theology have dominated the theological formation in Sri Lanka. Anglicans emphasized the Anglo-Catholic spirituality, and other reformed traditions emphasized the teachings of reformers and the theology of world mission that is commonly called "Evangelism." In general, the models were Western. However, things really began to change in the 1970s, even though there was a new appeal for indigenous theology as far back as the 1960s.

Houtart's methods of social-analysis had been used in Sri Lanka for a course entitled "Understanding Society and Culture," a large part of which uses Houtart's method of social analysis. The Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore University College, West Bengal, India, has accredited the course. It was the two eminent scholars in South India, namely Bastiaan Wielenga and Gabriele Dietrich—both serving the staff of the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary in Madurai—, who

¹⁵The mainline Protestant Ecumenical Theological School in Sri Lanka that is affiliated with the Serampore University College, West Bengal, India.

¹⁶For a comprehensive study on contextual theologies in Sri Lanka, see Ulrich Dornberg "Contextual Theology in Sri Lanka: Presentation and Analysis of Recent Ecclesiastical and Theological Developments" (diploma thesis in Fundamental Theology, Münster, 1985). Abridged version of the thesis is published: Ulrich Dornberg, *Searching through the Crisis: Christians, Contextual Theology and Social Change in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s*. Vol. 31 (3 & 4). Colombo: Centre for Society and Religion, 1992.

pioneered in introducing Houtart's approach to the Serampore system of Theological Education.¹⁷ We will treat this model in succeeding chapters of the research.

Social analysis from the viewpoint of the sociology of religion is only one of the many fields to which Houtart has contributed.¹⁸ In 1974, this awareness began to evolve further in the researcher with the initial response to Houtart's scholarly contribution entitled *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*.¹⁹ This is a groundbreaking work on the sociology of Buddhism and ideology in Sri Lanka. However, we cannot dismiss the fact that there are critics of Houtart's initial and almost programmatic work. Many have criticized Houtart, especially Marguerite S. Robinson,²⁰ for his exclusive treatment of Sinhalese Buddhists and the omission of the role in the religious field of the Tamil-speaking communities of Hindus and Muslims since the independence of the country.²¹ This seems like rather a serious critique when it comes to the present ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and it is not our intention to defend Houtart at this or any other point, because this is not an apologetical, but an expository work. In addition, Joseph B. Tamney argues that Houtart's *Religion and Ideology* did not reach a wider scholarly audience of religious and political discourse.²² Elitism, however, has been far from Houtart's intention in any of his writings during his career.

¹⁷Curriculum for the Bachelor of Divinity program, Senate of Serampore College, 2001.

¹⁸We could identify five possible areas in which Houtart has made a valuable contribution (*the following categorization is mine*): 1. Sociology of Religion, 2. Social-Empirical Research {e.g., country studies and social research he conducted for churches in different contexts. See François Houtart, "Summary of the Survey of the Catholic Church in Ceylon," *Quest* Second Edition, no. 43 (1971)}. This research was conducted at the invitation of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). 3. Ecclesiology, 4. Globalisation and Global Justice Discourse, 5. Utopia and Alternatives.

¹⁹François Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, (Bangalore: TPI, 1974). (This is a recommended text for undergraduate and graduate courses at the Theological College of Lanka, Pilimalawala, Sri Lanka).

²⁰Marguerite S. Robinson, "Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka by Francois Houtart," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (1977): 587.

²¹Ibid.

²²Joseph B. Tamney, "Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka by Francois Houtart," *Sociological Analysis* 44, no. 2 (1983): 165-166.

Gradually I became aware of Houtart's contributions to the socioreligious research in Sri Lanka after the Vatican Council II. Together with others,²³ he has done extensive sociological research on Sri Lankan society and reflected on the Church's response to the situation in the light of Vatican II. However, with the exception of a small minority of progressive forces in the Catholic Church of Sri Lanka (e.g., Tissa Balasuriya, Aloysius Pieris, Paul Casperz, Leo Nanayakkara and, from the protestant side, the Christian Workers Fellowship (CWF)²⁴, Lakshman Wickremesinghe), Houtart's innovative stance was not embraced by the rather conservative Sri Lankan Christian community. This appears to be the case, at least in part, as a result of the fact that the Christian community in Sri Lanka has unconfessed but undeniably true historical ties to wealth and privilege, and thus, many refrain from any social analysis that may entail a radical critique of given social structures, including the Church.

Thus, the results of this work (commonly called the "Houtart Survey"²⁵) have not been taken seriously by the Church, and the research has been shelved in ecclesiastical archives. Yet Houtart has continued to work with progressive secular and religious communities in Sri Lanka, even though the official Church does not use his services. Currently, he works closely with the Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR),²⁶ a Sri Lankan NGO, and a few other social movements and ecumenical groups there, together with presenting conference workshops on ethical Globalisation, coordinated by eminent theologians such as Tissa Balasuriya OMI²⁷ and

²³Fr. Joe Fernando of SEDEC was one of Houtart's collaborators in his post Vatican II research in Sri Lanka. (For a history of SEDEC, see www.caritassrilanka.org).

²⁴For an overview of CWF see, Tissa Balasuriya, "The Christian Workers Fellowship", *Concilium*, 1993/2:121-130.

²⁵The Houtart Survey of Catholics in Ceylon: A socio-religious research 1969/1970, *Quest*, 43 2nd ed. Colombo: CSR; 1971, p. 1-3.

²⁶See <http://www.geocities.com/monlarslk/index.htm>.

²⁷Balasuriya is an Asian Liberation Theologian, based in Sri Lanka, and a founding member of the EATWOT: Ecumenical Association of The Third World Theologians.

Shirley Lal Wijesinghe.²⁸ I, myself, was a participant when Houtart spoke in Colombo at the International Conference on *Reparation, Compensation, and Globalisation* in 2001, at which he made a presentation.²⁹ In 2004, Houtart raised a thought provoking question in the context of the impact of globalization on the developing nations: “Why Should Small Rice Farmers in Sri Lanka Disappear?”³⁰ Houtart’s contribution to Sri Lanka will be further appraised later in this research. Some feedback from the international academic front follows.³¹

A sociologist of religion, Anthony Mansueto, cites Houtart in one of his latest works, *Religion and Dialectics*, as one “who has pioneered the development of sociology of religion from the standpoint of dialectical tradition and who has perhaps done more than anyone else in the past century to promote a Catholicism devoted to human development and social justice.”³² Harvey Cox, author of the *Secular City*, in his introduction to one of Houtart’s early works on ecclesiology writes, “Houtart looks at the church through the hard unsentimental eyes of a sociologist.”³³ Though not often mentioned, Houtart has been instrumental in preparing the ground towards the emergence of the movement for the Third World Theologies in the 1970s. The Argentinean historian and philosopher/theologian Enrique Dussel speaks on the part Houtart played in the

²⁸Wijesinghe is a Biblical scholar, based in Sri Lanka, who engages in a socio-political re-reading of the Bible in Asia.

²⁹François Houtart, “The Debt of North to the South: Reparation and Compensation,” *Logos* 41, no. 1 (2002): 7-19.

³⁰François Houtart, “Why Should Small Rice Farmers in Sri Lanka Disappear?” (Unpublished Paper: CETRI Archives, 2004). Later published in François Houtart, “Why Should Small Rice Farmers in Sri Lanka Disappear?,” in *Politics and Social Movements in an Hegemonic World: Lessons from Africa, Asia and Latin America*, eds. Atilio A. Boron and Gladys Lechini (Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales, 2005), 309-315.

³¹Professor Robert Schreiter, Professor of Theology in Chicago at the Catholic Theological Union and also a guest professor of theology and culture in Nijmegen, communicated to me that François Houtart is one of the most remarkable sociologists of religion of contemporary times, someone who has contributed to the respective fields of sociology, sociology of religion, social ethics, and ecclesiology. (Personal communication with Prof. R. Schreiter, September 5, 2005.)

³²Anthony Mansueto, Jr., Foreword and Acknowledgements in *Religion and Dialectics* (Oxford, MD: University Press of America, 2002), xi.

³³François Houtart, *The Eleventh Hour* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 11.

preparatory stage in the foundation of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT):

In October 1974 [sic] I talked to François Houtart about the possibility of organising a dialogue between theologians of the peripheral countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. On 6th January 1975 he wrote to me: "I have made contacts with an African theologian and one from Asia, to discuss the project."³⁴

In this case, Houtart had acted largely behind the scenes. EATWOT was born in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1976.³⁵

Like every other social thinker and social philosopher, Houtart has also attracted criticism in recent years, largely from feminist theologians and liberal postmodernists, over his theory and praxis. Houtart has responded to the latter³⁶ and avoided the former. Secular communities, together with some feminists, have accused Houtart of being too uncritical of the Roman Catholic Church, especially in the recent past.³⁷ On the ecclesiological front, Houtart has been criticized for his liberationist Marxist position. However, these criticisms should be read in the context of historical movements and shifts in his intellectual genealogy.

Houtart began by working on ecclesiology and society and moved towards liberation movements; on the professional front, he has moved from religious sociology to sociology of religion.³⁸ From the perspective of the social theory, he has moved from the appeal to development ("developmentism") to a search for alternatives to the Globalisation of capital (in Houtart's words, "another Globalisation").³⁹ He has been a catalyst in developing a dialogue and network among Third-World social movements,

³⁴Enrique Dussel, "Theologies of the 'Periphery' and the 'Centre': Encounter or Confrontation?" *Concilium* 1984, no. 1: 87-97.

³⁵EATWOT, *The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians* (accessed November 1, 2007); available from <http://www.eatwot.org/>.

³⁶François Houtart, "Religion, Subjectivity and the Market in Cuba," *Concilium* 1997, no. 2: 51-57.

³⁷Interview with Prof. Lieve Troch, who is a feminist theologian from University of Nijmegen, July 2, 2005, in Dublin.

³⁸Religious sociology has been developed primarily in the service of the church. The sociology of religion is understood as a sub-discipline within sociology.

³⁹Houtart and Polet, eds., *The Other Davos*, 78.

especially through his initiative Centre Tri-Continental (CETRI) in Louvain-la-Neuve, founded in 1976.⁴⁰ Recently, he has focused on indigenous religiosities, especially in Latin America. However, throughout his career, he has been telling secularists to take religiosity seriously and has also urged religionists/theologians to take the socioeconomic reality and critical analysis of the same with equal seriousness, while emphasizing the correlation of secularity and religiosity.

Can Houtart's method work as a bridge between secularity and religiosity? Are the theological approach and the sociological approach always contradictory to each other? These are questions to grapple with.

Background for the Choice of Houtart as the Subject of my Study

Sri Lanka and South India are the specific contexts in which my reflections have been shaped: first, questioning how to do theology and pastoral work effectively and meaningfully in our own context, in which some of the characteristics of our living reality have been the daily experience of extreme poverty, ethnic violence, and a divided social fabric, plus living in a permanent challenge of interfaith confrontation and/or dialogue and co-operation. To face the aforementioned challenging realities, the question is what are the problems and limitations of the traditional method (the deductive approach, which starts with doctrines/dogmas and then applies them in the world) in theological education. How can we search for an alternative approach within Christian education and spirituality itself? How do the new issues challenge the traditional approaches, for example, the problems with an ethics based on the practice of "charity" and on the "common good"? If the present models of theological education are in crisis, then what changes are needed in theological formation?

⁴⁰“Le CETRI, dont le nom est inspiré de la Conférence tricontinentale de La Havane (1966), fut fondé en 1976 à Louvain-la-Neuve par François Houtart, avec pour mission de contribuer au développement de rapports Sud-Sud dans une perspective de justice sociale” (See <http://www.cetri.be>).

Second, it is also important to reflect on how the colonial past of Sri Lanka (nearly five hundred years)⁴¹ has had a negative impact on our culture, and equally important is the need to rethink the role of religious ethics in that context. This issue is also linked to the traditional association of Christianity with the ruling power of colonialism. As a Christian coming from a protestant tradition, I have to ask how to engage in a self-critique of the complexities, negativities, and the destructive impact of some trends in the Christian tradition in explicit or implicit associations with the colonial past on what we experience today. As we search for alternatives to the old and the search for a fresh approach, we must include not only Christians but also those of other faiths and secular communities in a dialogical encounter for reflection and action.

It was with this encompassing background of reflection that I picked up Houtart, as he provides a courageous attitude to the world of cultures, as a Christian using the Marxist social analysis as a tool (not as dogma), and moves towards searching for the liberating capacities and dimensions of religiosities. Thus, I have designed my research particularly in view of the specific purpose of a viable social communication of the Christian theological teaching-learning community, while having social ethics as my wider interactive base. Thus my reconstruction and presentation of Houtart's thought is primarily targeted at the Theological Educators.

In a Global Context: A Sample of the Present Debate

The discussion of globalisation is not a new discourse, but the old one taking a new orientation and shape: Today we debate how globalisation and ethics relate to each other, how globalisation is the latest form of capitalism, what can we do to resist and oppose it, and how such resistance needs to be done.⁴² It is of secondary importance from

⁴¹ 1505-1948.

⁴² Dialogue on public theology of global civil society is one of the notable trends emerging today. For information on The Global Network for Public Theology initiatives in which Irish School of Ecumenics is a partner see <http://www.ctinquiry.org/gnpt/index.htm>.

which point one enters the debate. Critical analysis and reflection on the global situation of our world today will likely lead us to conclude that we are living in an “unjust” world.⁴³ Houtart himself gives an example: Of the world’s 6 billion people, 2.8 billion—almost half—live on less than \$2 a day, and 1.2 billion—a fifth—live on less than \$1 a day. The 20% richest get 80% of the world’s income. The 20% poorest get 1.4% of the world’s income.⁴⁴ Forty-four percent of the poorest live in South Asia. These figures are an effect of the ongoing systematic globalisation.

The interconnected and inhuman effects of past colonization, neoliberalization, and globalisation have brought this situation to the world. In this context, ethics can no longer be exercised or practised on the basis of old models, such as the individual ethics of good behaviour, the private ethics of decency, the charity ethics of helping the poor, or the ethics of the common good.⁴⁵ It is necessary to find the causes and address them.

The Emergence of a World Made Other⁴⁶

Why use this eschatological title for the research? In Schillebeeckx’s language: this is how “contrast experience”⁴⁷ comes into play in Houtart’s thought: “In experiences like this, human beings discover that the world in which they live is in contrast with the world as it should be.”⁴⁸ New models of understanding are necessary. For Houtart, doing social ethics without a critical social analysis of reality is meaningless. The most dangerous popular emphasis today is the deterministic and fatalist belief that we have to bear with globalisation (neoliberalization) and that we cannot change the world. We have

⁴³Samir Amin and François Houtart, *Globalisation and Alternatives: Follow-up to the Copenhagen Alternative Declaration* (n.p.: Center for Technology and Innovation Management, 1995), 11.

⁴⁴François Houtart and François Polet, eds., *The Other Davos*, 1.

⁴⁵For a long time, Christian social witness was based on the “common good.”

⁴⁶I borrowed this from Dr. Jose Luis Lana for applying and synthesizing François Houtart’s social thought. Lana’s major is Eschatological Thought. For his contribution see José Luis Lana Solano, “Eschatology and Utopia: The Relationship between the Eschaton and Utopia in a Historical Perspective” (doctoral GTU, 1988). Lana was formerly a faculty member and currently an advisor to the postgraduate programme of the Theological College of Lanka, Sri Lanka.

⁴⁷Erik Borgman, “Theology as the Art of Liberation: Edward Schillebeeckx’s Response to the Theologies of EATWOT,” *Exchange*, 32, no. 2: 104.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

to swim with the current, not against it. There is no alternative. Therefore, today the main trend says that we must not talk about alternatives. But surely this is “social illiteracy”! François Houtart is one of the courageous people who has built an antithesis to this form of negative ideological thinking. Houtart’s message is “a different world is possible.” The Ugandan economist Yashpal Tandon, speaking at a WCC plenary on economic justice, says “Against Thatcher’s famous dictum that there is No Alternative (TINA), people are saying *there are Hundreds of Alternatives (TAHA)*”⁴⁹.

Of course, this is a utopian vision. This is not talk about the other world (other worldly spirituality), but a critical reflection on how to make this world *other*. We must work for an alternative society and world. Towards this end, we need a new social and global vision. Houtart’s approach to globalisation and ethics deserves a profound debate in the new context of ethical globalisation, which is where we find ourselves today. When we experience a certain situation as unjust and we resist the injustice, we are anticipating a situation of justice that is as yet absent, anticipatorily present in this act of resistance.⁵⁰ The systematic theologian José Luis Lana Solano writes about a shift in the church’s missionary imperative today in the context of poverty: a shift from other worldly mentality to a participation of “a world made other.”⁵¹ Houtart hopes, imagines, contemplates, and actively participates in the *emergence of a world made other*. This is a project of making a world into a just society—the birth of a new community. In activist language, it means “another world is possible,”⁵² or a different world is possible. Houtart’s message is that we should hope and work for the other world. Thus, an

⁴⁹Yashpal Tandon, *Wealth and Poverty: Challenge to Churches: WCC Plenary on Economic Justice* (n.p.: WCC, 2006) <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/porto-alegre-2006/2-plenary-presentations/economic-justice/yashpal-tdon-presentation.html> (accessed November 1, 2007).

⁵⁰My notes on Gutierrez and Schillebeeckx are based on a lecture given by Erik Borgman (October 2003, Nijmegen).

⁵¹José Luis Lana, *The Lord of the Poor and the Poor of the Lord* (Kandy: Unpublished, 1999).

⁵²Battle cry of the World Social Forum (WSF). For an assessment of WSF see: Candido Grzybowski, “Different Worlds from the Viewpoint of Planetary Citizenship,” *Concilium* 2004, no. 5: 27-34.

emergence of a world made other synthesises the basis of Houtart's entire career and thought process.

For this reason, Houtart's intercultural contribution became my topic of interest within a wider conceptual framework of social ethics. Therefore, it is my intention to rediscover where François Houtart's importance lies.

Method, Scope, and Limitations of the Study

The disciplinary framework and the layout of this present study are designed to reconstruct Houtart's social teachings with a special reference to intellectual genealogy, ecclesiology, and globalisation. The project has been carried out from a Third-World theological perspective, with special reference to Sri Lanka (South Asia), based on bibliographical research and personal interviews with François Houtart himself, a rare privilege that I enjoyed and now treasure in my memory. These extensive interviews, which were conducted in the initial stages of my research in 2005 and 2006 in Louvain-la-Neuve, have enabled me to obtain an extensive view of the development, intellectual itinerary, and straightforward itinerary of Houtart and, thus, have helped me to reconstruct his thought, not in a system, but in a sequence. It can be said that my study is linear rather than structural.⁵³ In the process of the research, I made the proposal to invite François Houtart to Dublin for a conference, which took place February 21-22, 2007, under the auspices of the Irish School of Ecumenics and Institute for International Integration Studies (IIIS), Trinity College, Dublin. Houtart spoke on globalisation and ethics,⁵⁴ and

⁵³Interviews have been published: Jerome Sahabandhu, *The Person and Work of François Houtart* (n.p.: Seeking Wisdom, 2006) <http://seekingwisdom.com/pwfh.html> (accessed September 8, 2006). See also Jerome Sahabandhu, "Portraying the Person and Work of François Houtart," in *Australian E-journal of Theology* (2006) http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_8/index.html; Jerome Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society," in *Australian E-journal of Theology* (2007) http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_10/index.html.

⁵⁴François Houtart, "Alternative Perspectives from Social Reality on Globalisation" (IIIS, Trinity College Dublin, 2007), <http://www.tcd.ie/iiis/pages/events/seminars0607past.php> (accessed April 5, 2007); François Houtart, "Capitalism, Its Consequences and Its Logic: A Challenge for Liberation Theology" (IIIS, 2007,) <http://www.tcd.ie/iiis/pages/events/seminars0607past.php> (accessed April 6, 2007); François Houtart, "The World Social Forum Nairobi" (IIIS, Trinity College, Dublin, 2007), <http://www.tcd.ie/iiis/pages/events/seminars0607past.php> (accessed April 7, 2007); François Houtart,

Lieve Troch from the University of Nijmegen responded so that the seminars strategically fulfilled two goals: 1. To hear François Houtart in an English-speaking academic context. 2. To resource the present research with Houtart's presentations. During my research, I also made a field visit to Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in July 2007 to observe and assess how the Centre for Social Analysis (CSA) of this seminary uses Houtart's methods in its theological education.⁵⁵

This study is limited to the exploration of the social and ethical teachings of Houtart, while acknowledging that his empirical work is beyond the scope of our competence. The method is a multidisciplinary reconstruction of a threefold subject, namely, a) Houtart's contribution as a social thinker, b) an exploration into selected aspects of his thinking, and c) an inquiry into the appropriateness of applying Houtart's insights for teaching social ethics in Sri Lanka and South India. Thus, the study is structured in five chapters, a general introduction, and some concluding remarks.

The general introduction is the first chapter, and the second chapter, entitled "Emergence of Houtart as a Social Thinker: The Person in a Socio-Political Context," aims at the reconstruction of an intellectual itinerary of François Houtart in a socioecclesial setting, allowing us to navigate the difficulty that we have in differentiating among Houtart's social theory, social ethics, theology, and sociology. We must allow for a good measure of evolution in his thought and concerns, for only thus we will see how the relationships among these areas change over time, as the problems of society change, thus permitting us a clearer discussion of his thought in a contemporary context. Indeed, it seems legitimate to speak of three successive stages in Houtart's thought and practical concerns: 1. his discourse on Church and Society, ca. 1950-70; 2. the dialectical

"Common Good Ethics: Deconstruction and Reconstruction," in *Globalisation and Ethics*, ed. Jerome Sahabandhu (Irish School of Ecumenics: Transcription of the lecture given by Prof. Houtart is available at CETRI Archives, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2007).

⁵⁵A short description of my visit to the Center for Social Analysis in Madurai is given in the third chapter of the dissertation.

interaction of Religion and Society, ca. 1970-88; 3. reflection and action on globalisation, ca. 1989 to present.

At this point, I venture a distinction between a “religious sociologist” and a “sociologist of religion.” A religious sociologist is the religious person who studies society and social movements with the hidden or manifest intention of bringing society back to religious practices; we may fairly say that the religious sociologist studies society with a hidden religious apostolic and missionary agenda. A sociologist of religion, on the other hand, studies the religious phenomenon alongside other social phenomena, to better understand society, without a preconceived intention to make society more “religious.” Houtart clearly began his career as a religious sociologist and made a switch to a sociologist of religion primarily during his encounter with the Latin American social situation.

Though Houtart began as a religious sociologist, using the methods of the Chicago school of urban sociology (in the 1950s), he gradually shifted towards a sociologist of religion less concerned with statistics of religious practices and more with the understanding of society itself until he equipped himself as a neo-Marxist social thinker in a twentieth century context. The genesis of the sociological thought of Houtart, thus, took place in a Chicago urban sociological school; he then encountered functionalism and adopted a Weberian approach. He finally shifted towards a Marxist approach. Due consideration will be given to the contextual historical aspects by tracing important turning points in Houtart’s life, thought, and concerns. His professional contribution as a university teacher and researcher, in addition to being chief editor of an international journal of sociology of religion, *Social Compass*, and as a consultant/contributor to *Concilium*, cannot be ignored. However, our scope does not allow us to investigate his impact fully on some theologians of liberation, especially those in EATWOT with the emphasis on the Asian branch, plus how he has exerted considerable influence on several

Asian theologians such as Aloysius Pieris, Tissa Balasuriya and Paul Cazperz (social activist). We do not feel competent enough to assess his contribution holistically to the development of Latin American theologies. (Camilo Torres, it is worth mentioning, graduated in sociology from the University of Louvain.)

As the investigation moves to its second part, it is aimed at reconstructing Houtart's social thought in its intellectual and social setting. Then, in the light of the above discussion, the three areas in Houtart's thought have been identified and selected for discussion and exposition: church and society, religion and society, and globalisation issues. Again, our choice has been made to keep in mind our own concern for social ethics, as well as both the global topic and the development of Houtart's intellectual genealogy. However, here I want to avoid a strictly chronological approach because the three areas appear simultaneously in the late 1970s and Houtart moves from one to the other, according to the needs of the moment. I, therefore, first wish to discuss the development of Houtart's theoretical outlook of sociology of religion and read Houtart's ecclesiological insights in the light of that.

Chapter Three is an inquiry on religion and society, which is the core theoretical area of exploration in the evolution of Houtart's ideas. In this chapter, there will be hardly any mention of "Catholicism" or "the Church" or even "Christianity"; the different varieties of Christianity introduced in Asia will be treated as one form of religion, without any value judgements, in interaction with different societies and cultures. Religion will be treated simply as a social and cultural reality.

In that chapter, I endeavour to make an exposition of Houtart's dialectical approach between religion and society and focus on themes of religion as a social reality, religion as a symbolic representation, religion as an institution with social functions, and the relationships of religion and ideology. In addition, I explore Houtart's defence of the thesis that "Religion is not necessarily a superstructure of sacral legitimation of the status

quo, but it can be an ‘infrastructure of revolution.’” This idea can bring a number of issues to the fore for the new religious context we find ourselves in today. However, the main thrust of the chapter will be to reconstruct and develop the idea of religion as a social agent in the Houtartian sense.

Having obtained an encompassing view of religion in interaction with society, in Chapter Four, I move backwards and centre the discussion on the relationship between church and society (ecclesiology). This discourse in Houtart’s development emerged in the context of the contemporary ecumenical movement, Vatican II, and a postconciliar theological and sociological context. While appreciating the initiation and the continuing relevance of Houtart’s theses on the church in the modern world and the church as an institution, I will make only a passing mention of his optimism in progressivism and his initial approval of the technological civilisation, a view that was heavily influenced by American functionalism, and how Houtart later shifted to an alternative stance of opposition to the neoliberal globalisation. A reexamination of Houtart’s thesis on the church as a social institution is a core issue in this chapter.

What has been said of the relationship between religion and society is applicable to the relationship between church and society, especially in those societies where Christianity is the majority religion, as in the case of Latin America. Here, we see that Houtart is no longer a “pure” sociologist, detached from the phenomenon under his scrutiny, but engages in a campaign to transform the structures and orientation of the Church herself, so that she shifts her main role from a sacral legitimator of the status quo (the ideological superstructure of sacral legitimation) to becoming an instrument of transformation of the unjust social realities where she is installed (the infrastructure of revolution). If, in Chapter Three, we see Houtart as the social scientist who endeavours to see and understand, in Chapter Four, I try to present Houtart as a Christian prophet as well, who tries not only to understand society and religion on a grand scale but also to

judge the structures of that society as unjust and the structures of the Church as obsolete and inadequate to say the least. We have here some hints of ecclesiology in Houtart, though he emphatically states that he is not a theologian but a sociologist; in any event, his ecclesiology is “sociology of the Church.”

In Chapter Five, I shall develop deeper into Houtart’s examination of religion as such and not specifically the Christian religion or the Catholic Church. In this chapter, I concentrate attention on the religions and societies of the vast region of South East Asia, though not exclusively as fields of exploration and experimentation.

The fifth chapter acts as a “link chapter” that serves as a transition between the Houtart that moves within the limits defined by Christendom and the Houtart that reaches out to the outer expanses of the main world religions in his professional studies as a sociologist of religion. The year 1974 marks the turning point in his career with his research on Buddhism and ideology in Sri Lanka, which will serve also as a springboard for his assessment of the power of religions and religiosities as ideological weapons of the subaltern classes in their struggles against the onslaught of globalisation that they view as a consequence and prolongation of European colonialism after the emancipation of the colonies to become sovereign nation-states within the United Nations Organisation. Here, we can perceive Gramsci’s influence on Houtart, influence that has not been sufficiently recognised. To better understand this liaison in Houtart’s development and the flow of this sequential study, some of the basic concepts that Houtart has used previously will be more deeply explored, as well as the influence of some of the giants that have paved the way for Houtart’s understanding of the dynamics of societies and religions in dialectical tensions and interactions.

The fifth chapter will serve also as a link to connect the three stages (or facets) that we discover in Houtart: 1. the social scientist who helps us to see accurately the social and political reality; 2. the prophet of contestation and denouncement of the unjust

structures of society who helps us to judge them in the light of the Gospel (in the Christian case) or of other founding scriptures and traditions of other religions, and 3. The zealous pastor and apostle who announces the coming of the new alternative reality and invites us to join forces to act in a global combat against the destructive forces of globalised capitalism. Thus, the chapter will lead us to study the final stage of Houtart's career, which we analyse in the final chapter.

Chapter Six, then, is a response to the question of globalisation, with reference to his utopology.⁵⁶ Houtart founded CETRI as an organisation to promote south-south and north-south dialogue. From the very beginning, he emphasised the need to bring Third World social forces together and network them as a counter-cultural movement to the dominant model of globalisation. While critiquing the neoliberal capitalist globalisation, Houtart wanted to use the new possibilities of communication to globalise resistance. Houtart's thesis on delegitimisation of capitalism and renaming a new historical subject⁵⁷ is central here. Houtart moves on a broad Weberian-Marxist spectrum, albeit gradually less Weberian and more Marxist. Houtart's defence of a Marxist approach will be discussed in the light of the post-1989 trends (both questioning communism and rereading socialism). The very question of whether there can be a fair globalisation⁵⁸ or ethical globalisation is of crucial importance in this discussion.

Chapter Seven presents my concluding remarks, which address the scope and limitations of the application of Houtart's sociological approach in a contemporary discourse. My discussion will commence with a rereading of the concept of the "common good" in theological ethics, especially in a subaltern society like my own. I discuss how

⁵⁶J. L. Lana has coined this term to describe the study and discourse on utopia. (Cf. Solano.) 3.

⁵⁷In social theory the very category of *working class* is no longer the historical subject. The new historical subject is being redefined in the light of wider socio-political, cultural and religious subjects. This is currently being debated at the WSF.

⁵⁸International Labour Organization (ILO) identifies *fair globalisation* as a priority area in relation to work: rather than driving people into the informal economy or creating massive migration, global expansion must find ways to deliver opportunities for decent work where people live. See: ILO, *Facts on Decent Work: A News Letter*, June 2006.

ecumenical social ethics and Catholic social thought justify the common-good approach.⁵⁹ The traditional concept of common good has been questioned in the contextual theologies, which are based on critical social analyses, with particular reference to the models of theological education in South India and Sri Lanka. I will also appraise the limits of the contextual approaches and Houtart's own use of doing social analysis from the perspectives of the poor and marginalized communities (as a presociological question). However, we are interested in what role Houtart's approach has played in this critique of "common good" ethics and what influence his approach has made on some of the emerging social and theological movements in this part of the world. We will make an appraisal of Houtart's overall contribution to Sri Lanka and South India, limiting the discussion to possibilities of teaching ethics within the programme of theological education and ministerial formation.

Another topic in Chapter Seven will be what epistemic and practical fields can further facilitate to complement Houtart's approach. Finally, in my concluding remarks, I will try a personal appraisal of Houtart's influence on my plans to teach some of the subjects related to his work, especially in the fields of social analysis of a pluralistic society in a plurality of conflicts and opportunities for action. In doing so, I will suggest some models for ethical reflection and praxis. However, these models must only be considered as hypotheses for further exploration and verification and not as end products or demonstrated conclusions in themselves.

⁵⁹David Hollenbach, "The Common Good Revisited," *Theological Studies*, no. 50 (1989).

CHAPTER TWO
EMERGENCE OF A SOCIAL THINKER:
FRANÇOIS HOUTART IN CONTEXT

Introduction

Every social thinker has a sociopolitical and cultural context from which his or her thought patterns emerge. For Houtart, as a Catholic priest, the ecclesiological context forms an integral element of such background. Houtart's thought emerged and gradually matured during a period in which the Church was coming to terms with the sociointellectual movements that challenged the "Church-God centred"¹ social paradigm, known also by other names such as "Régime of Christendom" and "Constantinian Era." The Church's post-Enlightenment attitude could be encapsulated in the dictum *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* ("no salvation outside the Church"), which reflected a defensive attitude of the Church against the onslaughts of rationalism and scientism that ran throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Church condemned all manifestations of reason's autonomy and independence from the divine revelation as deposited and entrusted to the Church and took refuge in the fortress of an authoritarian doctrinal and moral dogmatism that culminated in the proclamation of the *Syllabus Errorum* of Pius IX (1864) and Vatican Council I (1869-1870).

The mentality developed from this event was variously called "ultramontanism" and also "fortress mentality." In its extreme form, we have the mentality called

¹This is the social model generally attributed to the Middle Ages [See Declan McGrath, *Rapid Revision History* (Dublin: Folens, 2002)], 25. For a comprehensive history of the Church from a standpoint of successive paradigm shifts, see Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History and Future*. (New York: Continuum, 1996).

“integrist,” which is parallel to Protestant fundamentalism, and even its Catholic equivalent. Ultramontanism was not identical to the whole Catholic Christendom; there were other more positive and less hostile responses to the political, intellectual, and social movements in the world, of those Catholics who believed that involvement in the world, rather than condemnation of the world, was the Christian imperative. They began their work with the premise of the “autonomy of the temporal order” from its counterpart “the spiritual order,” with a clear conception of the world divided into two orders or “planes,” the spiritual and the temporal. Prominent among the currents and counter-currents of the social-intellectual forces was the Catholic Action with its many branches; of special interest here are the branches of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) and Young Catholic Students. The Catholic Action was established and promoted by the Catholic hierarchy as a movement of lay apostolate in all spheres of life; its members had the commission to implement in the world the teachings of the Church under the remote inspiration, mandate, and direction of the local bishops and the immediate spiritual direction of priests who specialised in the lay apostolate to serve as “advisors” to the local groups. Pope Pius XI aptly defined the Catholic Action as “the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy.”² The Catholic Action, then, was still an instrument to serve the hierarchical Church.

As a young man, François Houtart was involved in two branches of the Catholic Action, the Young Christian Workers and the Young Catholic Students, inspiring and being inspired by them. Besides the Catholic Action, there were also other Catholic renewal movements at local, national, and international levels. These progressive movements brought a number of issues to the fore, for example: How should the Church exercise its power in the modern world? Was the Church sufficiently equipped to encounter modernity? What should be the relationship between the Church and society?

²*Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v., “Catholic Action,” <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9021824> (accessed September 17, 2006).

Among the Catholic workers affiliated with the YCW some uncomfortable but crucial questions gradually appeared: In case of conflict of loyalties between the demands of the other fellow workers and the directions of the Catholic hierarchies, which side should they take in the struggle for social justice? In the conflicts between the management of the factory (that happened to be Catholic) and the workers' unions (that happened to be non-Catholic), whose side are the young Christian workers supposed to take? Since the young Christian workers were strongly encouraged to become affiliated with the different Catholic trade unions, should the young Christian workers act independently of, or even against, other trade unions of a non-Catholic inspiration and orientation? Should they not rather join hand-in-hand with all other trade unions that pursued the same goals of justice and equity? Houtart worked among the Young Christian Workers and the Young Catholic Students who were asking those burning questions, and as a young priest, he was burnt himself by the questions.

Together with many others, such as Chenu, Teilhard de Chardin, Rahner, Congar, and Schillebeeckx, to mention only a few, Houtart belonged to the social and ecclesial currents and movements that explored such questions and sought innovative answers. Chenu published some seminal books on the theology of work and was a life-long inspiration to the worker-priests movement even after the movement was suppressed by a decree from Pope Pius XII; Teilhard de Chardin strove to present a synthesis of the evolution of matter, into a vision of a final convergence of all things in an Omega Point that is identified with God and, throughout his life, endeavoured to find a synthesis between the natural sciences and religious mysticism; Rahner developed a reinterpretation of dogmas and presented them in a language that modern persons could understand and assimilate; Congar worked on a theology of the laity, and Schillebeeckx on theology and culture. What distinguished Houtart was that he approached the Church and all human reality from a specific sociological point of view, examining the Church as a social agent,

as contrasted to a purely theological perspective. Houtart originally emerged as an insider, applying sociology under the auspices of the Church, but he as stated earlier gradually evolved into a strategic outsider.

What follows is an examination of Houtart's transition from Catholic confessionalism to sociological professionalism and from espousing modernity ("developmentism" or *desarrollismo*) to an approach of postcapitalism. In order to help in understanding Houtart's social teachings, this work will situate this ecclesiological and sociological context in the wider context of the twentieth century.

Forces of the Twentieth Century

The most productive part of Houtart's life (1925-) belongs to the twentieth century, a century characterised by the forces of annihilation and destruction of much of what was built up during the nineteenth century; it has been a century when the astounding technical and mechanical advances in the nineteenth century at the service of production and consequent accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few, gave way to the devastation and destruction of two world wars and innumerable conflicts in the twentieth century. With the devastation of cities and populations, the two wars produced a corresponding devastation of European optimism about the benefits of indefinite and uncontrolled technical progress to solve all the problems of humankind. The European collective conscience was shocked, and this prolonged state of shock gave way to pessimism, nihilism, and existentialism.

But it was also the century of social movements of liberation, especially from the oppression of slavery—bonded labour—and colonialism. The capitalist globalisation in all its forms came to realisation also in the twentieth century. From the viewpoint of political philosophy, the emphasis on democracy and human rights proclaimed by the United Nations was also very much on the agenda. Having passed through the process of industrialisation and into the age of postmodernity, Europe and the United States of

America were negotiating the so-called postmodern turn,³ while the global South was coming to terms with the postcolonial conditions.

This is the temporal-cultural context of Houtart's emergence. Houtart's formative years should be understood in the context of the sociopolitical, intellectual, and theological forces in the early part of the twentieth century, and the same factors in the latter part of the century must be applied to any examination of his maturation as a social thinker. In this context, Houtart read sociology in the light of the Church's mission and soon turned to reread the Church's mission in the light of sociology, approached the interaction between religion and society dialectically, and finally came to terms with the issue of globalisation.

Adopted Approach

In this chapter, I will try to adopt a historical perspective by engaging in a reconstruction of Houtart's intellectual genealogy, with special focus on the turning points in his life. The reader will not find in it a rigorous chronological sequence, only broad changes and transitions. To develop the necessary theoretical framework for my research in this regard, I was privileged to conduct a series of personal interviews with François Houtart. The first of these has been published in 2006 as "Portraying the Person and the Work of François Houtart" in the *Australian E-Journal of Theology* and the same was published in Sinhalese under the title "Agama Deshepalinikai by Kithusara," in August 2006.⁴ The second interview was published as "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society" by the same journal in 2007.⁵ The first-hand information obtained in these interviews provided me with invaluable material to achieve the main objective of this chapter, namely, to examine the impact of these turning points on the intellectual

³Zygmunt Bauman, "Is there a postmodern sociology?" in *The Post Modern Turn*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 187-204.

⁴*Agama Deshepalinikai (Religion is Political)*, Kithusara, Colombo: n.p., 2006 (Interview with François Houtart by Jerome Sahabandhu, Sinhalese edition, in 2006). Sahabandhu, "Portraying the Person and Work of François Houtart."

⁵Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

formation and gradual transformations that Houtart has undergone. I have identified five major turning points⁶: 1. The situation of the working masses before, during, and immediately after the Second World War; 2. his encounter with Latin America and, especially, the Young Christian Workers Movements there; 3. his commitment against the war in Vietnam; 4. his professional research in Sri Lanka and his encounter with Buddhism and other world religions; and 5. the founding and directing of the Tri-Continental Centre in Louvain-la-Neuve (CETRI).

The second part of this chapter will make use of a theoretical perspective in addressing the gradual transformations in Houtart's thought. The following shifts will be examined:

1. From institution to values.
2. From Christianity to other faiths.
3. From developmentism to liberation.
4. From modernity to cultural diversity.
5. From functionalism to Marxism.

Finally, I will discuss Houtart's influence on a selection of movements and persons, with special reference to Sri Lanka and South India. Let us now turn to the formative years in Houtart's development as a social thinker.

The Shaping of a Sociologist of Religion

Houtart's Formative Years and World War II

François Houtart was born in Brussels on March 7, 1925, to a devout Catholic family of fourteen children: eight boys and six girls.⁷ In 1932 the Houtart family set up

⁶Where relevant within these turning points, I will attend to the four schools of sociology of religion that have influenced Houtart as a thinker: the Urban School of Sociology in Chicago; Functionalism; Weberianism; and, finally, Marxism.

⁷François Houtart, *Curriculum Vitae*, 1.

home in a villa in the Zoute area.⁸ François' father—named Baron Paul Houtart—was a businessman; he was educated by his own mother in his early years, following the curriculum of the Belgian Christian schools. His pious mother also educated François Houtart in his early childhood. Following the Belgian government's decision to discontinue in Flemish schools all teaching in the French language and to introduce the national Flemish instead, François Houtart's mother found an additional reason for teaching her son how to read and write at home, in French! After the decree was issued, Houtart began following the Jesuit curriculum for the Saint-Michel school of Brussels by correspondence.⁹ In 1934, the Houtart family moved to the Bailliage de Gaasbeek house, and at the age of ten, having finished his primary schooling at home, Houtart entered the 6th grade (Latin option) at the Jesuit college of St.Jean Berchmans at Rue des Ursulines in Brussels.¹⁰

Houtart's childhood coincided with a period of some hardships in Belgium between the two world wars. On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded Belgium, along with Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Houtart was just a fifteen-year-old boy at the time, but able to understand many of the social and historical currents of the time, and was profoundly affected by the horrors of war. Another formative factor in his intellectual development was his family, who provided a place for discussion about the many issues of the day.

During the armed conflict, Houtart and his brother Edouard participated in the resistance movement against the German occupation. Their very first actions were in the area of reproducing and transporting subversive banned pamphlets and the delivery of important documents. When found with compromising bulletins, the brothers were

⁸J. F. Houtart, "Baronne Paul Houtart," in *Cahiers Houtart, Bulletin de l'Association de la famille Houtart*, 24 (December 1998): 29. (a monograph)

⁹*Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁰E. Houtart, ed., *François Houtart. Prêtre (1949-1999)* (Témoignages: Tervuren, 1999), 10. (collection of letters edited by Houtart's brother)

arrested and brought to the offices of the Gestapo. However, they were released that same afternoon.¹¹

The most salient experiential context of Houtart's formation was the atmosphere of the post-World War II period. The Sri Lankan humanist Carlo Fonseka writes of this time,

The war swept across five continents and led to the slaughter of over 50 million human beings . . . It maimed tens of millions and caused unimaginable waste of productive resources. Some of the outcomes of the Second World War were neither intended nor even foreseen.¹²

The entire European social foundations were shaken by this war. It had a huge impact on Houtart in his commitment to social justice in general and against the later war in Vietnam in particular, the latter of which Houtart himself considers as one of the major turning points in his life,¹³ which will be discussed later.

Entering the Seminary

During this time, young Houtart developed a great conviction of his priestly vocation and decided to become a missionary. Following a meeting with his cousin, Bishop Etienne Carton de Wiart, Houtart entered the seminary at Malines in 1944.¹⁴ He remarked about that time,

I really wanted to go to Asia as a missionary for the Société Auxiliaire des Missions (SAM) [Auxiliary organisation for missions] founded by Father Vincent Lebbe¹⁵ in the 1930s. [Lebbe], who was a missionary in China, was also at the forefront in the ordination of the first Chinese bishops. The principle of the SAM was to have foreign missionaries working for local clergies in countries such as China, Thailand, the nations of Africa, et cetera.¹⁶

¹¹J.F. Houtart, "Baronne Paul Houtart," 27

¹²Carlo Fonseka, *Towards a Peaceful Sri Lanka* (Helsinki: World Institute for Development Economics Research [WIDER], United Nations University, 1990), 87.

¹³Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵For a brief biographical note on Father Lebbe, see *Archives Vincent Lebbe* (Denée, Belgium: Informatique et Bible, 2006) <http://www.vincentlebbe.net/> (accessed November 7, 2006).

¹⁶F. Houtart, interview by author, October 30, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

According to Houtart, this was a revolutionary idea at the time, because the decision-making authority was in the hands of the local bishops as opposed to the foreign missionaries, while foreign missionaries were under the jurisdiction of the missionary societies that sent them. Moreover, SAM was only operational in parishes where a local bishop was present.¹⁷ However, Houtart's desire to become a missionary could not be fulfilled, as his father was advanced in years and did not want his eldest son to be so far from home.¹⁸

In Malines, the seminary had to be closed due to the German invasion and occupation of Belgium. Nevertheless, the philosophy classes were held underground, in the form of a "flying" seminary. The young seminarian completed his courses on philosophy and theology in Malines in 1949 (24th April) and was ordained a priest in the same year. His seminary formation had been scholastic and traditional (neo-Thomist), with little or no exposure to sociology or the social problems of the time; rather, it was the sociopolitical context of war itself that constituted Houtart's first lessons in social analysis.

Cardijn's Influence

It was in this context that Houtart met Father Joseph Cardijn, founder of the Young Christian Workers movement (YCW).¹⁹ Cardijn's method of social commitment for the young Catholic workers is commonly referred to as the method of *see, judge, and, act*: observe the situation, analyse the situation, and change the situation. This method

¹⁷F. Houtart, interview by author, October 31, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

¹⁸Ibid. Although Houtart never fulfilled this ambition, one of his sisters, Godelieve, joined the international lay auxiliary movement and worked in India and Bangladesh in a medical mission. Godelieve worked for Auxilières féminines internationales (AFIS).

¹⁹"The Young Christian Workers (YCW) is an international youth movement, which values the dignity and worth of each young person. It enables its members to challenge social exclusion and take action to bring about change in their home, their workplace, and their social life. Founded in Belgium in 1925 by Fr. Joseph Cardijn (1882-1967), the YCW believes that each young worker has a vital role to play in solving of his or her own needs and problems. Starting with their own lives, members are encouraged to review their life and look at possible solutions to bring about change." YCW, *Young Christian Workers* [http:// www.ycwimpact.com/](http://www.ycwimpact.com/) (accessed November 6, 2006).

was adopted consistently by the Latin American Conference of Bishops (hereafter CELAM) meeting at Medellin, Colombia, (1968) and is widely used by many social and progressive Church movements all over the world today.²⁰ We will witness how this method of threefold activity has accompanied Houtart throughout his life in a veiled or overt way. At that time, Houtart's preoccupation was the situation of the working class. Houtart became interested in the approach, and worked with Cardijn on the issues of young workers. Making the choice to work with the working-class communities became the first turning point in his life and proved to be fertile ground for the genesis of his sociological thinking.

First Turning Point: Pastoral Response to the Young Working Class (1940s)

Houtart encountered one of the very crucial social issues at that time, the appalling situation of the working-class community. As he described it,

The situation of Young Workers at that time was extremely difficult. The working class during the Second World War and after the war was going through a very hard time.²¹

However, Houtart's concern was not only with the workers' struggles but also with the question of why these workers were anti-clerical, anti-ecclesial, and anti-religious. Houtart refers to this phenomenon as the de-Christianisation of workers.²² This preoccupied him greatly, and soon after his ordination, he decided to study sociology as a means of exploring the reality of the workers.

Two questions immediately arose:

1. Why was the working class so much against the Church?
2. How can we formulate an effective pastoral response to the issues of the working class?

²⁰CFM, Christian Family Movement, Hungary, <http://cfm.org.hu:8080/ourgroups>.

²¹Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

²²See the author's correspondence with Houtart, February 23, 2005.

Houtart studied the religious situation of the cities with a view to approaching the above questions.²³ He compared Brussels with other European cities, concluding that the reason for the observed de-Christianisation was that the Church had allied herself with the enemy of the working class, the bourgeoisie.²⁴ He also discovered that the pastoral institutions such as the parishes were much less present in working-class neighbourhoods than in others. The identification of the Church with the bourgeoisie had occurred alongside industrialisation. As he noted, "During the whole 19th century the Church was really literally absent from the places where the working class was constituted, neighbourhoods and also in the big cities."²⁵ Of course, some priests worked with the working class, but they faced many troubles. After studying these issues, Houtart obtained a Licentiate in Socio-Political Sciences from the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL) in 1952.

Chicago

His experiences in Brussels led Houtart to Chicago to study sociology, primarily because of the Urban Sociological School that was established there. It was there that he came under the influence of the writings of Robert Park and Ernest W. Burgess, the ideas of the mentor of his research in Chicago, Everett Hughes, and his tutor for Urban Sociology, Louis Wirth. He discovered that the situation of the workers in the USA was just the opposite of their situation in Europe in terms of their adherence to the Church and their religious observance. The Church in the USA was strongly present among the working class, who were not as anti-church as in Europe. The reason for this seemed to be that there were priests living and working among the migrant people. Houtart comments:

²³Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

²⁴"The social order that is dominated by the so-called middle class. In social and political theory, the notion of the *bourgeoisie* was largely a construct of Karl Marx (1818–83) and of those who were influenced by him." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "*bourgeoisie*," <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?tocId=9015964> (accessed March 1, 2006). For the conceptualization of the working class, Houtart holds to Marx's approach; to "the working class" or proletariat as "those individuals who sell their labour and do not own the means of production," who he believed were responsible for creating the wealth of a society (buildings, bridges, and furniture, for example, are physically built by members of this class).

²⁵Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

In the USA the Catholic migrants constituting a large proportion of working class were accompanied by priests. The European Church had thought that the migrants were going to a Protestant country, and that a Catholic priest should accompany them, so that they would not become Protestants. The good aspect of this was that priests were present there and the pastoral work was being carried out. Priests were natural leaders of the group and they strongly identified with the cause of the class. So there was no anti-clericalism among the American working class. In Europe it was the other way around.²⁶

While studying in Chicago, Houtart was associated with St. Gall's parish²⁷ of the Archdiocese of Chicago. He also maintained close contacts with the YCW and the Catholic Labour Alliance in Chicago.²⁸

On completion of a postgraduate course in Urban Sociology at the University of Chicago in 1954, Houtart embarked on a postgraduate-diploma programme in City Planning at the Institut Supérieur d'Urbanisme Appliqué in Brussels. In this period, Houtart's interest was dominated by the twin considerations of religion in the city and the working class. Thus, urban sociology has dominated his thinking, with a view of applying his knowledge to his apostolic concern for the religious well-being of the working class.

Teilhard de Chardin

One of Houtart's favourite thinkers was Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Houtart's renewed interest in the 1990s in the idea of the convergence of social movements and trends for creating a new society can be traced to his reading of Teilhard de Chardin. But Teilhard's influence appears in his early thought as well. Houtart writes in his *Challenge to Change*:

²⁶Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

²⁷The address is: St. Gall 5511 S. Sawyer Ave. Chicago, IL 60629.

²⁸While in Chicago, Houtart maintained a journal. (See François Houtart, "Sermons, Retreats and Recollections: St. Gall, 5511 S. Sawyer Ave," CETRI Archives, 1952/1953, and François Houtart, "Field Diary: 1952/Journal Notes," CETRI Archives, 1952/1953.) On November 6, 2007, I had a telephone conversation with Janet Bhone of the parish office at St. Gall Church, and in turn, she wrote to me saying "the only thing I can tell you is according to our baptismal records, Fr. Houtart performed baptisms at St. Gall Parish from April 5, 1953 to May 12, 1953. At that time a lot of priests lived at our parish while attending school or just passing through our city. St. Gall is about 2 miles from Midway Airport. Being the only airport here at that time, we were the closest rectory and had enough room for visitors to stay while in Chicago. As I told you when you phoned, I was only 7 years old, but I do remember him being here." Cf. Janet Bhone, "E Mail Message on Father Houtart," ed. Jerome Sahabandhu (Chicago: 2007).

And so we come to the idea of Father Teilhard de Chardin that all this progress is conducting humankind to what he calls the omega point so that the whole process is toward unity in God. This theory has not yet perhaps been completely formulated but it has a strong appeal to non-Christians because it is a real effort to integrate the whole knowledge of humanity and nature and the whole new knowledge of the socialisation of humanity and the social evolution of humankind into a spiritual vision leading to the spiritualization of the human and to unity in God.²⁹

Houtart did not develop the theological aspect of Teilhard's vision, but was inspired by its possible sociological significance and appeal. This is evident in his ideas of collective consciousness and collective actors, as well as his repeated call, later in his career, to the "convergence" of all the existing social forces, movements, groups, and churches into one single campaign to delegitimise the capitalist globalisation and into a vision to discover alternatives and a common effort to implement them.

In sum, in the early 1950s, Houtart's main preoccupation was his attempt to explain why such a contradiction existed between the anti-religious attitude of the working class and the Gospel's demand for social justice and opportunities for the marginalized. In Houtart's own words,

Precisely the people who were suffering more from the economic system were the ones who did not believe in the message of the Gospel, and the good part of the bourgeoisie was the one, which was most near to the Church.³⁰

Houtart's proposal was that the Church should change its strategies and projects. Later in his development, he would propose that the Church should change also her attitude to the world, her direction, her functions and structures, and not only her strategies, programs, and tactics.

²⁹François Houtart, *Challenge To Change*, 67 (emphasis added).

³⁰Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

Institutional Connections

In 1956, Houtart founded the Centre for Socio-Religious Research (CSRR)³¹ and in the same year became the secretary general of the International Conference of Sociology of Religion. From 1958 on, he directed various research projects and empirical studies for the International Federation of Institutions for Socio-Religious and Social Research (FERES).³² Houtart used these institutional connections to develop two important aspects of his profession.

1. The socioreligious research on particular countries.
2. The editorial leadership of *Social Compass*, an international journal for the sociology of religion.

Through CSRR and FERES, and in collaboration with his colleague Geneviève Lemercinier,³³ Houtart conducted extensive socioreligious research in various parts of the world, such as Malta, Latin America, the USA, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Nicaragua, and was consulted also for socioreligious research in South Africa, Korea, the Philippines, Cuba, Russia, Hong Kong, Poland, and Italy. Most of these studies were empirically based.

³¹Initially, CSRR started as an interdiocesan organisation of Belgium Bishops Conference. It was later integrated into the UCL.

³²This was the successor of Kerkelijk Sociaal Instituut in The Hague pioneered by George Zeegers.

³³"G. Lemercinier was born on 8 December 1922 and died on 13 January 1996. She taught at all levels, from primary school to university level and also in social services. From 1955 she was a researcher at the Centre de recherches socio-religieuses, then at the Centre Tricontinental. She was the secretary to the department of sociology of UCL. Her commitment towards the liberation of different peoples brought her the Medal of Friendship from the Vietnamese nation and another on the tenth anniversary of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua." *Eucharistie d'accompagnement de Geneviève Lemercinier vers la grande espérance* [Accompanying Eucharist of Genevieve Lemercinier towards the supreme hope], Louvain-La-Neuve, January 18, 1996, 1. On the occasion of Lemercinier's passing, the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff had this to say: "She constantly reminded me that it was the messianic message which had precedence over the institutions." Houtart names, amongst others, three areas of study, which were very dear to G. Lemercinier. They are: "Solidarity, Christian faith and the global analysis of societies in the manner outlined by Marx". ID., *Homélie de l'eucharistie célébrée lors des funérailles de Geneviève Lemercinier* [Homily of the Eucharist celebrated at Genevieve Lemercinier's Funeral, January 1996, 2, 6. (Translated for the author by François Polet of CETRI, Louvain-la-Neuve)].

Houtart was the chief editor of the international journal *Social Compass* from 1960 to 1999.³⁴ This journal aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the theoretical and methodological aspects of the sociology of religion. It was originally a Dutch magazine, founded in 1954 by Professor Georges Zeegers of the Katholiek Kerkelijk Sociaal Instituut in The Hague. Houtart took over the direction of the journal in 1960 and transformed it into a unique international forum for research in the fields of sociology and anthropology, as well as other sciences of religion.³⁵ The journal has been called one of the most significant European journals in the field of sociology of religion.³⁶

It should also be mentioned in this context that Houtart served on the advisory council of the Catholic journal *Concilium*, originally published in Nijmegen, contemporaneously with his directorship of *Social Compass*.

Second Turning Point: Latin America

In the late 1950s, Houtart's main preoccupation was the situation of the working classes in the vast subcontinent of Latin America. He first visited several countries of the region in 1953 in connection with his work with the YCW. This work allowed Houtart to see the Latin American Church and the sociopolitical contexts in which it was situated from the perspective of the poor. As he noted:

[It] was the most Catholic continent in its full demographic expansion, with very deficient pastoral structures and also with quite radical social movements at that time. The Church and the ecclesial structures were

³⁴Albert Bastenier, "Remerciements à François Houtart. A Tribute to François Houtart," *Social Compass* 47 (2000): 5-6.

³⁵The journal *Social Compass* provides its readers with an annual international bibliography covering 130 journals in eight different languages. This journal publishes the works of the oldest organization in the field, namely the Société internationale de sociologie des religions (SISR). Each year an issue is dedicated to the last bi-annual conference of the SISR, one containing the publication of the minutes of the conference, and the other the open communications within the different working groups. The articles are written in French or English and a summarized version in both languages is attached.

³⁶Barbara Hargrove, *The Sociology of Religion* (Illinois: Harlon Davidson, 1989), 12. *Social Compass* celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in July 2003, and Houtart was invited to deliver the celebration lecture. See François Houtart, *Les Cinquante ans de Social Compass: auto-biographi d'une revue qui s'est trompée de nom, July, 2003*. (The lecture material is available in cyclostyle form for reference at the archives in CETRI, Louvain-la-Neuve.)

extremely far away from the great problems. That is why I began this research on Latin America, on all the countries of Latin America.³⁷

Houtart was deeply moved by the appalling situation of the entire subcontinent of Latin America. The human condition that he encountered among the workers and peasants of the entire sub-continent was commonly described as “infra-human” condition and the proposed work for the Church was to humanise the continent that was nominally and sacramentally Christian: baptised, but not evangelised. In the many centres of pastoral sociology in every Latin American country was the burning question of relating evangelisation with human promotion, hence, the conclusion of many that, in a situation of non-redemption (or liberation), the *humanum* must have precedence over the *Chistianum*. This issue will be dealt with later in this study.

Houtart undertook a great deal of research throughout the region. The research was finished just before the first session of the Second Vatican Council took place in 1962. Dom Helder Camara, then vice president of *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM),³⁸ asked Houtart to present a summary of the research to all the bishops and theologians at the beginning of the council.³⁹

Houtart was an optimistic and energetic facilitator for the Vatican II council on two fronts: first, by serving as a secretary⁴⁰ of the subcommittee called Signs of the Times, which was responsible for the introduction of the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” (*Gaudium et Spes*), a document which was to become a key instrument in twentieth century Christian social teachings; and, second, by advising the Latin American bishops during and after the council. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak write thus on the members of the committee,

³⁷Sahabandhu, “Portraying.”

³⁸CELAM: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano—Latin American Episcopal Conference was created in 1955 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Cf. F. Houtart and E.Pin, *The Church in the Latin American Revolution* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965).

³⁹François Houtart, “The Latin American Church and the Development of Socio-Religious Research,” *Concilium* 1965, no. 9: 29-81.

⁴⁰Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II: The Mature Council - 2nd Period and Intercession, September 1963-September 1964*, vol. 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 413.

The sub commission on the signs of the times invited Danielou, De Riedmatten, Ligutti, Gagnabet, Medina, Lebreton, Putz, Greco, Martelet, Dingemans, Neuer, Caramuru, Gregory, Galilea, Moeller, Joblin, Delhaye and Houtart (who became the secretary).⁴¹

Gaudium et Spes was a groundbreaking work in the tradition of ecclesial documents because, for the first time in ecclesial documents, it took an inductive approach instead of using a deductive method,⁴² though Norman Tanner identifies *Mater et Magistra* in 1961 as having the same orientation.⁴³ Houtart had invested substantial energy in the formulation of this seminal text, and it was Houtart's friendship with Dom Helder Camara that led him to his position as advisor to the Latin American bishops.

In addition to his research and advising activities, Houtart had a number of other close ties in Latin America. Among these was a close relationship with Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest who, in 1966, paid with his life for his commitment to the needed revolution.⁴⁴ Houtart had had a friendship with Camilo Torres even prior to Torres becoming a priest and had invited Torres to come to Louvain to study sociology. Houtart's experience in Latin America led him later to discover the context of Vietnam, the role of the American war there, and the liberation movements and wars in Africa.

Third Turning Point: Commitment Against the War in Vietnam

During the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, Houtart became interested in international affairs. Three interconnected issues interested him particularly:

1. The war in Vietnam.
2. The liberation struggles in the Portuguese and other colonies.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²*Sources Locales De Vatican II*, Symposium Louvain 23-25-X-1989, (Leuven Bibliotheek Van De Faculteit Der Godgeleerdheid Van De K.U: Leuven, 1990), 35-36. Cf. Marie-Dominique Chenu, "The Church's 'Social Doctrine,'" *Concilium* 1980, no. 10: 72.

⁴³Norman Tanner, *The Church in the World: Gaudium et Spes*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 6.

⁴⁴Camilo Torres was born in Bogotá in 1929, a priest and Colombian revolutionary. So convinced was he of the need for radical social reform that he severed all links with the Catholic hierarchy and was the inspiration for a movement whose failure drove him to espouse the guerrilla movement. He was killed during a clash with the army in the San Vicente region of Chucuri on February 15, 1966. See, François Houtart, "The Meaning of Camilo Torres' Choice," Unpublished article (Ref: FH Doc3.Bis/36, CETRI archives).

3. The reaction of the Church to those issues.

After World War II, the first years of the Cold War, the domino doctrine was prevalent in Western political thought. According to this doctrine, there was a widespread communist movement that would replace all noncommunist governments through wars of liberation; when one piece falls, it makes its neighbours to fall in succession; therefore, this process must be stopped and checked by all means. The United States considered the French war in Indochina as an opportunity to check the spread of communist and national liberation movements, particularly in the southern hemisphere, leading to a direct US involvement in the Vietnam War. By 1960, the American military had a presence in Vietnam. During the war (1954-1975), the international anti-war front became stronger and stronger, supporting the Vietnamese in their fight against the US.

Houtart took a position against the war and became associated with many of the anti-war movements of the left, especially the communist movement. Houtart's experience as the vice-president of the Belgium-Vietnam Association helped him to discover the other wars of liberation in the Third World and elsewhere. Of course, at this juncture, Houtart had already been involved with the struggles in Latin America for quite some time. He also became interested in the way the Portuguese Church was legitimising and defending the fight against communism in Africa. Houtart comments on this period in his life:

I became involved with many of the leaders of African Liberation Movements - South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, and Cabo Verde. Later, I became the Chairperson of the Belgium-Vietnam Association and was invited to Vietnam (during the war to South Vietnam in 1968 and, later, in 1974, to North Vietnam). That was also the origin of my sociological research on Vietnam. This coincided with my dream of doing research on a socialist country and the Vietnamese asked me to collaborate on the creation of the Sociological Institute in Hanoi. I have maintained the relationship ever since then and have been invited to give a speech at the celebration of 60th anniversary of the Republic of Vietnam in August this year (2005). The war in Vietnam was a very strong turning point in my social commitment.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

Houtart was preoccupied with the way the American Church viewed the American role in Vietnam.⁴⁶ his experience would eventually lead him to his socioreligious research on Vietnamese communes.⁴⁷

Fourth Turning Point: Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has also played a major role in Houtart's life. It was Father Tissa Balasuriya who first invited Houtart to Sri Lanka in 1968⁴⁸ to conduct a socioreligious study for the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, generally referred to as the "Houtart Survey." Balasuriya was the Rector (1964-1971) of Aquinas College in Colombo at that time. Here, Houtart made some recommendations for the postcolonial Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, including changes in her pastoral structures. With the exception of some progressive groups, Houtart's research in Sri Lanka has largely been put aside and forgotten.

Inspired by his experiences there, Houtart decided to write his doctoral dissertation on Sri Lanka. His doctoral thesis, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, was presented to the Catholic University of Louvain in 1974 and was published under the same title in 1974 by Hansa, India. The work was considered a groundbreaking systematic study in the sociology of Buddhism and ideology in Sri Lanka. It was in the context of this work that Houtart began to study Marxism systematically (at the University of Peradeniya). He grappled with the question of how the Marxist approach had been useful not only in understanding the precapitalist tributary societies and modern societies, but also in interpreting the role of religion in these societies.

⁴⁶ It was none other than a person like Cardinal Francis Spellman, the Archbishop of New York, who called American soldiers as Christ soldiers. (cf. *Time*, 1959/May, 11).

⁴⁷ François Houtart and Geneviève Lemercinier, *Hai Van: Life in a Vietnamese Commune* (London: Zed Books, 1984).

⁴⁸ Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

Fifth Turning Point: CETRI

In 1976, Houtart founded the Centre Tricontinental (CETRI) in Louvain-la-Neuve in order to address Third World issues, with the aim of enabling and facilitating the convergence and solidarity of social movements, particularly those in the southern hemisphere. CETRI comprises a documentation centre with a collection of more than 500 journals and bulletins originating from or concerning the Third World. This collection is made available to researchers; social, political, and cultural activists; and young people who wish to broaden their horizons. CETRI operates its mission in Latin America, Asia, and Africa,⁴⁹ and its work consists primarily in providing updated information concerning liberation movements and in communicating them to countries that have already acquired independence and wish to carry out social projects. More precisely, it is intended as both a source of information and study and a place of mediation between the scientific sociological analysis and the world of action. The Third World Documentation Centre of CETRI was integrated into the library of the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL) in 1989, under the auspices of the Faculty of the Economic, Political and Social Sciences.

CETRI hosts researchers and postgraduate students for periods ranging from one to three years. The centre has also hosted personalities from the Third World, such as political and religious leaders, liberation theologians, intellectuals, leaders of workers' and peasants' movements, and representatives of indigenous minorities, among others, with the objective of improving intercommunication between the Third World and the affluent societies of the North.

The organisation of and participation in learning or research seminars in the three above-mentioned continents and in Louvain-la-Neuve constitute a large part of CETRI's work. The most frequent areas of research are rural sociology, convergence of social movements, and sociology of religion. As a result of an inter-university agreement

⁴⁹See <http://www.cetri.be>. Web site for the Tri-continental Centre (CETRI), a non-governmental organisation founded in 1976 and based in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium (accessed on December 14, 2006).

between the Central American University (UCA), El Salvador and the University of Louvain, Nicaragua has been the object of the most extensive research. The collaboration between the two universities has resulted in the creation of the *Centre d'analyses socio-culturelles* (CASC) in the UCA and in numerous exchanges of professors, researchers, and students between the two universities.

Moreover, there has been a steady cooperation since 1975 between the CETRI and the Centre of Socio-Religious Research of the Cuban Academy of Sciences. The areas of cooperation include research methods, the formation of scientists, and the publication of their results in international journals. In 1986, Lemercinier and Houtart lectured in an intensive course on the sociology of religion in Havana.⁵⁰ In the same year, CETRI was approved by the Belgian Ministry of Cooperation and Development as an NGO in the area of education and information.⁵¹

CETRI facilitates the publication of works in the sociology of culture, religion, and development in many languages in about thirty countries in Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The journal *Alternatives Sud* supports the aims of CETRI. This journal was founded in 1994 with the aim of spreading the ideas of Third World researchers and intellectuals, with a view to finding alternatives to the contemporary neoliberalism. The journal is compiled and edited by the CETRI staff and co-published, initially, by *l'Harmattan* of Paris and, since 2003, by Syllepse of Paris. On its twentieth anniversary, the CETRI created a biennial prize, *Culture et émancipation des peuples*, whose first recipient was Ernesto Cardenal from Nicaragua.⁵²

In 1996, on the occasion of CETRI's twentieth anniversary, Houtart proposed a meeting that later became known as the "Other Davos," creating a counter-movement to the dominant world economic forum in Davos in 1999. Houtart, who was also

⁵⁰François Houtart, interview with the author, October 31, 2006.

⁵¹Information booklet: *Le Centre*, 1-2.

⁵²Information booklet: *Le Centre*, 2.

instrumental in founding the World Forum for Alternatives (1997), paved the way for the meeting of the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre in 2002.⁵³ The goals of the World Forum for Alternatives (WFA), *Forum du Tiers Monde*, which were set out in 1997, are to contribute to the numerous economic, social, political, and cultural struggles in the world, especially those of oppressed peoples, workers, farmers, women, young people and communities; to spread new alternative perspectives; and to promote theoretical and political research on viable developmental alternatives to neoliberalism and Globalisation, based on popular democratic values, while respecting national, cultural, and religious differences. More specifically, the Forum will identify various levels of research that can contribute to resistance movements, notably macroeconomic questions, social movements, local development, and so on; contribute to the development of new ways of thought to analyze the current situation; and above all, define the objectives and the means of a more just and democratic society.

In Chapter Six, we will discuss in more detail the development of the World Social Forum and its activities up until the present.

The Main Strands of Houtart's Thinking

This section presents an analysis of the main theoretical shifts in Houtart's thinking. In the early 1960s, different experiences brought about a broadening of his thinking to include Christian churches other than Roman Catholicism and religions other than Christianity; with that shift, he obtained an appreciation of multiculturalism and its inherent values. His thought also opened up to elements of Marxism, as well as to the concept of "liberation." The terms *shift* and *broadening* may appear to be opposing terms at first sight. The term *shift* suggests transition from one stage to another different stage of thought, leaving behind the previous one as obsolete. The term *broadening* suggests an

⁵³S. Amin, *Forum du Tiers Monde* (Dakar: n.p., 1997): 8, 10, 18. <http://www.social-movements.org/en/book/print/285> (accessed October 24, 2006).

expansion and enrichment of the same into the same, to make it a fuller reality. But looking at the result of this progressive broadening of the reality and its horizons, we see that the quantitative change results also in a qualitative difference. We must understand Houtart's development not in a linear direction (shifts), but in concentric circles or, more accurately, in a spiral direction, in an unbroken continuity. In light of this concept, an analysis of the five main strands of Houtart's thinking follows.

The Transition from Institutions to Values

By the early 1960s, Houtart had come to believe that the more refined, historical and sociological the perspectives of the Church become, the clearer the contradictions between practices and stances taken by the Church and the underprivileged populations appear. According to Houtart, "the history of the pastoral movement in European cities is strewn with compromises with the burgeoning middle classes,"⁵⁴ and in Latin America, "the recovery of hegemony severely rocked by liberal regimes remains the bedrock of political and institutional projects, of the mainstream ecclesiastical hierarchies."⁵⁵

This perspective is visible in the gradual move in focus in Houtart's works from the ecclesiastical institution to questions concerning the suitability of pastoral action in a changing social climate. Among such issues of pastoral action were the role of the laity within the specialised groups of the Catholic Action, such as the Juventud Obrera Católica (JOC) and other movements linked to social work, or that of the liturgical renewal, with a more meaningful participation of the laity in their own language, which preceded the Second Vatican Council.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ François Houtart, "Genèse et développement d'une démarche socio-religieuse," in *Rupture sociales et religion. L'éthique religieuse des rapports sociaux dans les sociétés du Sud et en Europe*, ed. François Houtart (Paris: L'Harmattan/CETRI, 1992), 12. (Translated for this author by François Polet of CETRI).

⁵⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 11. Houtart wrote his first article entitled *Apostolat de l'Eglise dans les Notes pastorales jocosites* in 1949. Between 1949 and 1954, Houtart wrote sixteen articles completely focused on the ecclesiastical institutions and the pastoral movement. From 1954 to 1962, Houtart published 234 studies, composed of 23 on Latin America (from 1955 onwards), two on Malta (1958 and 1960), one on the Congo,

As an expert member—in an observant and advisory capacity—of the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965, Houtart observed from the inside, not only the workings of the ecclesiastical institution, but also the dynamics of change and resistance in society.⁵⁷ At the start of the 1960s, one event had a profound effect on Houtart's life and on the path of his career: the War in Vietnam. From the outset, his keen interest for this country manifested itself through a series of undertakings, such as his participation, as early as 1964, in conferences and demonstrations against the war, and also his first visit in 1968, when contacts with progressive Catholic groups were established.⁵⁸ He refers to the Vietnam War as “the starting point for breaking new ground in the experience and defence of human values, residing outside the religious template.”⁵⁹ He also adds that “such a discovery was perceived as suspicious for a lot of believers, and even more so, inside the ecclesiastic institutions.”⁶⁰ Still, he insisted,

Our commitment, side by side with non-believers and communists, in our opposition to war in Vietnam, its emerging neo-colonialist nature, the uncovering of capitalistic motives on an international scale, criticism towards the use of religious arguments as a means to defend a certain type of society, all helped to bring my existing, but concealed intuitions (for want of a more sophisticated conceptual framework) out into the open.⁶¹

and another on Israel (1960), with two others on the liturgical revival that preceded the Second Vatican Council (1960; 1961). During this period, Houtart's publications were focused on the adequacy of the pastoral apparatus in relation to new social realities. Among the significant articles on the pastoral movement and his dedication to it between 1949 and 1954 were the following: “Quelques notes sur la question ouvrière et l'apostolat en milieu ouvrier [Some writings on the working class question and vocations in that environment]” (Louvain-la-Neuve: CRSR, 1951), and “Structures sociales et circonscriptions religieuses, [Social structures and religious areas]” *Lumen Vitae*, t. 6, (1951): 221-231. Other titles, on the theme of the adequacy of the pastoral apparatus in relation to new social realities, between 1954 and 1962 include: “Peut-on parler d'une crise paroissiale dans nos villes modernes ?” *Jeunesse et vie*, (February 1955): 4-5; “Le planing paroissial,” *Architecture* (1956): 781; “Aspects nouveaux de la paroisse,” *Mémorial de la réunion prosynodale des 23 et 24 Juillet 1958 du diocèse de Tournai*, (1958): 380-39; “Les conditions sociales de la pastorale dans les grandes villes d'Amérique latine,” *Social Compass*, (1959): 181-200. *Bibliographie*, 1-4. Houtart, “Genèse et développement,” 13.

⁵⁷F. Houtart, “Genèse et développement,” 13. Between 1962 and 1965, Houtart published 154 pieces of work, including three on the Second Vatican Council (two in 1962 and one in 1964) and forty-six on the Church in Latin America. *Bibliographie*, 4-7.

⁵⁸The first of Houtart's articles about Vietnam was published in 1966: “I Must Come to Vietnam,” *Commonweal* 84 (1966). On the other hand, from 1966 to 1968, Houtart produced only four articles on Vietnam out of 63 pieces of work. During those two years, Latin America was Houtart's main area of study (seven articles). *Bibliographie*, 7-9.

⁵⁹Houtart, “Genèse et développement,” 13.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 13.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 14.

These issues were also brought to the fore by Houtart's links with liberation movements in Africa. He was invited to the Episcopal Conference of South Africa in order to provide input in terms of socioreligious objectives for the local Church.⁶² These kinds of experiences triggered fresh questions within him:

Why did the church often act as a barrier to a nation's emancipation whilst pontificating with a contradictory viewpoint? Why was the archbishop of New York labelling the American soldiers as "Christ's soldiers"? Why was the Holy See silent towards the West's injustices, but so vociferous towards those of communism?⁶³

This questioning was not looked upon kindly by the Church establishment. In 1968, the Holy See applied a veto to Houtart's participation as an expert for CELAM (General Conference of the Latin-American Episcopate) at the conference gathered in Medellin from August 22 to September 6 of that year. The topic of the conference was "The Church within the present transformation of Latin America in the light of the Second Vatican Council."⁶⁴ Despite this setback, Houtart was invited to the National Liturgical Conference (1968) in Washington on the theme "The Church and Revolution."

Houtart's involvement with the populations of the Third World countries gave him a certain amount of insight into the societies trying to obtain alternatives to capitalist

⁶²From 1968, Houtart published prolifically on Africa, particularly on the subject of Portuguese colonies. Between 1968 and 1977, he produced 277 studies, comprising 24 on Vietnam, 22 on Sri Lanka, 21 on Africa, 14 on Latin America, 9 on India, 3 on The Second Vatican Council, 2 on Bangladesh, and one on the Philippines. *Bibliographie*, 9-16.

⁶³Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 14. (referring to Cardinal Spellman)

⁶⁴Medellin (1968): Pope Paul VI delivered the opening address in which he put the emphasis on the importance of development, considered as "the new term for peace," while outlining to the peasants that "violence is not evangelical." This reminder is very significant in the troubled Latin-American context soon after Che Guevara's death and that of Camilo Torres. Writings from the Latin-American episcopate regularly describe the situation in terms of "injustices that are tantamount to institutionalised violence; one must not test the patience of a nation that for many years has had to put up with conditions that no human being with an improved awareness of human rights would have done." The impact of these passages has been comforting and has facilitated the development of the main strands of liberation theology. G. Mathon and G.-H. Baudry, eds., *Catholicisme. Hier Aujourd'hui Demain*, t. 14, (n.p.: Lille, 1996) t. 8:1059. The Medellin conference remains a turning point in the pastoral intervention of the continent's Church. The inspiring Cardijn's "see-judge-act" method turned out to be the main source of reflection of the conference. Medellin kicked off with a simple acknowledgement, stating that there is a massive contradiction between the overwhelming state of poverty and the Catholic faith. In its evangelisation enterprise, the church must face challenges put to it by Latin America's structural poverty, challenges that can no longer be ignored. She wants to build an impoverished church with the impoverished. The Medellin conference, therefore, encourages basic ecclesial communities (BCC's) and, in particular, promotes the chain of practice that exists between daily life, Bible reading, and celebration. G. Harpigny, ed., "Évangélisation de l'Amérique Latine: histoire et projet," *Revue des diocèses de Belgique*, 5 (1992): 438. (Translated for the author by François Polet of CETRI, Louvain-la-Neuve.)

philosophies. It was in Vietnam that Houtart found the opportunity to conduct a sociological study in a socialist country. From 1977 to 1981, Houtart (with Lemercinier as his assistant) established a working collaboration with researchers from the Hanoi Sociological Institute (now called Institute of Sociology).⁶⁵ This collaboration led to the publication of a work in 1981 titled *The Sociology of a Vietnamese Commune*.⁶⁶ The collaborative work ran into political difficulties, among others. At the time, an institutional link with the Catholic Church did not guarantee ready access to a socialist country, and the opposite was also true.⁶⁷

On the changeover from the Catholic University of Louvain to Louvain-La-Neuve, Houtart felt the need to carry on with his activities, which were parallel to his academic functions, in an autonomous environment. In this context, the Tricontinental Centre, which draws its name from its namesake, came into being in 1976. The Centre aims to bring together people from these continents and to facilitate meetings between social counterparts from Third World countries, by providing comprehensive documentation regarding their respective countries. There is also research, carried out on various aspects of the countries undergoing periods of transition, such as culture, and how they are portrayed in foreign media, religion, and attitudes. The underlying idea driving this new initiative by Houtart is that the combination of knowledge and analysis plays an essential role in the pursuit of values, which contribute directly to the establishment of more just societies.⁶⁸

Following Vietnam, Nicaragua became another source of concern and focus for Houtart. From 1982 onwards, this country, which he described as "torn between a

⁶⁵Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 14, 15.

⁶⁶Houtart and G. Lemercinier, *Sociologie d'une Commune vietnamienne. Participation sociale, modèles culturels, famille, religion, dans la commune de Hai Van, Louvain-la-Neuve*, 1981. F. Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 15. See also, Houtart, "Réponse de l'Episcopat au front sandiniste sur les questions religieuses" [Reply from the Episcopate to the Sandinistas on religious questions], *Amérique Latine*, 4 (1980): 59-62. *Bibliographie*, 16-20.

⁶⁷Houtart, op. cit., p. 15.

⁶⁸Information booklet: *Le Centre*, 1.

hierarchical church, which is enclosed in a narrow institutional vision of evangelisation, and Christian groups which are mindful of the values to be passed on, within a revolutionary framework,”⁶⁹ became the favourite base for the work of the Centre Tricontinental.⁷⁰ In Nicaragua, Houtart discovered an existential relationship between Marxists and Christians, a dialogical model for liberation.

Through his work with developing countries, Houtart reached the conclusion that was to define his subsequent work: values of social justice take precedence, whatever stance the Church may take as an institution. The latter, in the eyes of Houtart, remained forever locked into hierarchical prerogatives and removed from social realities. From this viewpoint, Houtart saw that the Christian beliefs he embodied as a priest could be called upon to lend support to revolutionary movements, be they communist or not, insofar as these movements furthered those very aims.

The Shift from Christianity to Other Religions

All of Houtart's first writings had Catholicism as a point of reference. Then, in the 1960s, a first movement towards the outside occurred. On the request of Jean Frisque (a Belgian theologian in the service of the French Mission), Houtart contributed to a work entitled *Bilan du monde*⁷¹ [The world's situation], which aimed to portray the religious situation of every country, as well as an analysis of important themes like Catholicism, ecumenism, and the principal religions. This would be followed by another work, solely based on ecumenism, under the supervision of David Barrett, an Anglican priest and committed sociologist stationed in Kenya. This work took over ten years to complete; the Centre for Socio-Religious Research of Louvain covered all sections related to

⁶⁹Houtart, op. cit., 16.

⁷⁰Ibid., 16.

⁷¹“The Living Church and Catholic Relief Service (CRS),” *Bilan du Monde, Encyclopédie du monde Chrétien* [World Christian Encyclopedia] (Paris: Casterman, 1964); Houtart, “Genèse et développement,” p. 16.

Catholicism as well as those concerning sociopolitical analysis. The end result was the *World Christian Encyclopaedia*.⁷² Houtart came on the editorial board of this grand work.

Houtart's study at the University of Chicago also opened up new perspectives by allowing Houtart to establish contacts with Protestant churches. It was, however, in his collaboration with the World Council of Churches that his cross-religious works began in earnest. Houtart became involved with the WCC's programme to combat racism in the 1960s.⁷³ He also contributed to the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*.⁷⁴ As part of these varied activities, Houtart met with representatives of the Orthodox faith, notably Metropolitan Nikodim, bishop of Leningrad, who was in charge of the external relations for the Russian Orthodox Church.⁷⁵ The latter had Houtart's work *L'Eglise et le monde* [The Church and the world] translated into Russian. Following the Second Vatican Council, Houtart's scope of research was widened to include Judaism. On the initiative of the American Jewish Committee of New York, Houtart and Lemercinier jointly published a work on the portrayal of the Jewish people in textbooks of the Catholic catechism.⁷⁶ This was a significant initiative in response to Christian anti-Semitism at that time.

Though his perspective was greatly broadened by his engagements with non-Catholic Judeo-Christian religion, it was his encounter with Asian religions that had the most significant impact on Houtart's approach to methodology and theory. In 1968, at the request of Father Tissa Balasuryia from Sri Lanka, whom he had encountered at a meeting of the Christian students' movements in Kenya, Houtart carried out a study on

⁷²D. Barret et al., *World Christian Encyclopaedia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982); Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 16.

⁷³Houtart has worked with Philip Potter (WCC general secretary from 1972 to 1984) and Boudewijn Sjollema (former director of the programme to Combat Racism) of WCC. Houtart also had contacts with Walter Muelder, a Methodist scholar from Boston, who worked a lot on Church and Society issues for WCC.

⁷⁴Nicholas Lossky et al., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC, 1997). See pp. 216-218 for Houtart's article on colonialism.

⁷⁵Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov) of St Petersburg and Ladoga, died in 1978, is still very well known in the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and in international ecumenical organizations.

⁷⁶Houtart and G. Lemercinier, *Les Juifs dans la catéchèse. Etude de la transmission des codes religieux* [Jews and catechetic. Study of the passing on of religious codes], (Louvain: Centre des Recherches Socio-Religieuses, 1971); See for a review of this work: Jean-Pierre Deconchy, *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* 32, no. 32 (1971): 238. Houtart, op. cit., 17-18.

Sri Lanka's Catholics. For the next fifteen years, Houtart would focus on issues within Asian societies. He conducted a survey on Christian minority groups in Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Korea, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Vietnam. He also turned his attention to many religious congregations who wanted to rethink their social and religious engagements.⁷⁷

Still, Houtart realised that he could not ignore the topic of the religions of the majority. It was along those lines that Houtart would write his doctoral dissertation at Louvain in 1974, called *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*,⁷⁸ which dealt with Buddhism within various successive societies in Sri Lanka. Lemercinier also presented a dissertation on the same topic on the Kerala region of Southern India. The two works shared an ideological basis, and Houtart's approach was greatly influenced by Lemercinier's work.

From Development to Liberation

Before analysing the influence of the theology of liberation on Houtart's development in thought and actions, we must examine briefly what this movement really involves.

*Short Summary of the Theology of Liberation*⁷⁹

In a rather simplistic way, we may state that so-called "classical" theology emphasized that salvation and eternal life will occur up there in heaven, after this transitory life on earth has ceased. Life on earth is only a preparation for the life in

⁷⁷Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 18.

⁷⁸As to why Houtart's PhD thesis was written at such a late stage, see Houtart, interview with the author, November 1, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. He explains that, in fact, in the 1950s, he had started a thesis in Chicago called *Catholicisme Américain*. In 1957, he decided to publish the work without submitting it for an academic examination. The book became one of the top ten award-winning books in France in the field of religion for that year. Having felt some hostility towards him from the academic authorities at UCL in relation to the Chicago work, Houtart decided instead to present his thesis on Buddhist Sociology in Sri Lanka in 1974. The conclusion to the study of American Catholicism was, that Catholicism was becoming really an American religion by integration of the Catholic population into the American society with a tendency of overestimating the American values in order to be accepted.

⁷⁹For a comprehensive analysis of Liberation theology from a historical perspective, see David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology*. Vol. 1, *Religion in the Americas*, ed. Hector Avalos, (Boston: Brill Academic, 2002).

heaven; we are like exiles in this “valley of tears.” This idea led to a contempt for the realities of this world, which are as nothing compared with the true treasures that await us in heaven; in Augustinian terms, it said that we must not be attached to this world, but rather to the realities of heaven, where we shall enjoy direct vision of God for ever. Thus, traditional theology stresses the other-worldly character of salvation and, hence, a deterministic and fatalist acceptance of things as they are. Correspondingly, this kind of theology stressed the subordination of the temporal order to the supernatural order, as the body is subordinated to the spirit, and the lower “planes” of reality must be subordinated to the higher “planes” of reality. There was a kind of superposition of realities.

The so-called theology of liberation, on the other hand, emphasizes the intra-worldly character of salvation and, correspondingly, values human activities in the responsible creation of just structures of society so that God’s Kingdom is progressively established in this world, to culminate in the life of the world to come. There is no such superposition of the two “planes” or spheres or realms, the spiritual and the temporal, because the spiritual takes place in the temporal, as God’s salvation of the world takes place in the incarnation of God’s Son in the flesh and bones of his world. The Kingdom is God’s gratuitous gift, for sure, but far from lulling us to wait for it to come down while doing nothing about it, calls us to a full commitment in this world to combat the sinful structures of oppression in order to install new structures of justice and peace. The name for salvation is *liberation*, a word with profound political and emotive undertones in Latin America.

This new shift—from other-worldliness to this-worldliness—in theology appeared and quickly spread in the second half of the twentieth century. It was not a theology dictated by the teaching authority from above, but a theology from below, in dialogue and collaboration with the movements of liberation wherever they could be found, illuminating and connecting them with the light of the Gospel. Its starting point was the real-life

situation of all those who were potential or actual recipients of the message of liberation brought about in the person, the words, and the praxis of Jesus. In other words, it claims that the Gospel is addressed “to all men and to the whole man,” not only for the salvation of the soul, but of the person in its complex totality as a social being. Conversion meant not only the individual’s turning away from the world and to God, but also and mainly the task of transformation of political and economic structures of oppression and exploitation of the many millions of workers and peasants—Christians or other—in the Third World. The role of the Church in the modern world is not so much to speak and to teach from outside and from above in order to guide people to become Christians, but must be immersed in this struggling world as a sign and instrument of salvation-liberation (as a sacrament of liberation) rather than a legitimator of the sinful structures of oppression, in order to turn the sub-human condition into a fully human construction of the world.

This concern for the intra-worldly dimension of salvation-liberation spread out to other groups both in the First World and in other continents of the Third World: Black Americans, African peoples, Asian peoples, and women of all countries. The common denominator shared by such groups is that they are exploited or looked down upon, degraded and deprived of their human dignity, reduced to a sub-human condition, and that they are striving to achieve a fully human state. We cannot be fully Christians unless we become fully human. This form of theology originated from the margins of society and takes its inspiration from the Bible rather than from traditional dogmatic formulations, aiming to rescue people from alienation, exploitation, and misery.

Though different forms of liberation theology developed, depending on where they first appeared and the people who created them, they all aimed to work for the liberation of those for whom human dignity and liberty are still empty words. In all these varieties, Christian praxis in this world has the primacy over theories (dogmas are infiltrated with ideologies) about the speculative “other world.” The following discussion

addresses four types: namely, Latin American theology of liberation, African, Asian, and feminist theology.⁸⁰

Latin American Theology

The theology of liberation was born in Latin America and spread from there to Asia and Africa. Latin American theology entered into a formative phase after the Second Vatican Council, specifically in the period 1960-1970, though it had its precursors and antecedents, reaching back to the wars of emancipation in the early nineteenth century, and even to the vigorous denunciation of the conquest in the sixteenth century. It entered the mainstream after the conference of the Latin American episcopate in Medellin in 1968. Prior to this, in the 1960s, most Latin Americans had been in favour of western-style technological development as a way out of their "under-development," and a certain number of Latin American Christians actively espoused this model for solving their national and international problems. However, this model, imported from the northern hemisphere, engendered such contradictions that it was widely opposed by the most creative minds of Latin America. It came to be known as *desarrollismo* ("developmentism"), and it merely deepened the dependence of the South on the North and opened even more the gap between the few rich and the many poor in the countries concerned.

At the same time, left-leaning Christians were opposed to this type of development, which was responsible, in their opinion, for the further impoverishment of the poor and the further enrichment of the already wealthy. Their critiques were inspired by the theories of dependence⁸¹ formulated by Latin American political scientists, sociologists, and economists. In response, a group of progressive Christians formulated a new theology designed, in the light of the Christian faith, to accommodate ways of doing

⁸⁰G. Mathon and G.-H. Baudry, eds., *Catholicisme. Hier Aujourd'hui Demain*, t. 14, (Lille, 1996) t. 8: 1086.

⁸¹Fernando Cardoso and Celso Furtado were two theorists who worked in this line.

away with a sense of general resignation and fatalism on the part of the poor and the fascination with the western model on the part of the rich.⁸² We perceive five major elements in this theology, while acknowledging that it is not a clear-cut system of thought and there are many varieties of expression. These five elements seem common to all. First, by taking sides with the poor, Latin American liberation theology breaks with theology's traditional identification with the establishment. Being put at the service of the Church, it hopes thus for the Christian community to turn away from being a superstructure of conservation and legitimation of the status quo, to become an instrument of transformation of society. Second, liberation theologians promote the creation of Christian grassroots communities ("ecclesial base communities")⁸³ as a better alternative to the hierarchical structure of the Church, with the parish as the basic unit of that organization; these base communities are run by lay people who, living among the sufferers and being sufferers themselves, will campaign for social transformation and enable the Church's work with and among the poor.

Third, liberation theologians tend to use the Marxist analysis (not as a system of dogmas) in order to establish a link between the process of impoverishment and the contradictions present in Latin America with a capitalist-type growth, a "dependent capitalism." Fourth, the theologians of liberation emphasize the primacy of praxis over theory and engage in a "praxis of liberation," which they define as an ensemble of practices intended to change reality and transform the relations of dependence. Theology is, therefore, "a critical reflection on the praxis of liberation in the light of the Gospel."⁸⁴ Fifth, the idea is that the Biblical concrete Utopia and Jesus' practical works serve as visions for the construction of the future and a model to be followed; Jesus Christ the Liberator is present among us, not so much to be worshipped and imitated, as to be

⁸²Ibid., 1086-87.

⁸³See my B.Th. thesis entitled "Towards a New Ecclesiology: A Study in Basic Christian Communities in Sri Lanka and Elsewhere," Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa, 1993.

⁸⁴Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1971), 11.

followed. According to liberation theologians, the message of the Bible leads us to believe in a God who is not only sympathetic with the social revolutionary movements but actively on their side: He is on the side of the oppressed, not to console them and to recommend turning the other cheek, but rather to encourage them to stand up for themselves.⁸⁵ Jesus is with us, telling us "Stand up and go!"

The African and Asian liberation theologies originated also in the 1960s. They are characterised by two major tendencies. On the one hand, Asian and African theologies of liberation proclaim that the Gospel, far from being a destroyer of native cultures, should respect and elevate them. Christ is being incarnated in all cultures. According to liberation theologians, if the Gospel has a civilising influence, as European missionaries repeated over and over again, it is by impregnating and fecundating the cultures where it is introduced, not by substituting the western civilisation for native cultures. The mere adaptation of the Gospel to local cultures in different garb would be equivalent to condemning Christianity to being a foreign presence in the Asian or African countries concerned: It would still be an imported culture.

On the other hand, the African and Asian liberation theologians, influenced by Latin American theology, are particularly concerned with the social and human distress of their respective continents. The influence is reciprocal. A good number of Latin American Theologians are now turning to the study and promotion of the native cultures of the region influenced, in a significant measure, by their colleagues in Asia and Africa, while African and Asian theologians are becoming more and more aware of the political implications of the Christian Gospel, partly under the influence of Latin American theologians.

The African liberation theology has a further major tendency: "incarnation." This theology, in fact, is closely linked to a movement of cultural reappropriation of Black

⁸⁵Ibid., 1090-91.

identity, in French-speaking Africa especially, which tries to prevent the Church from being seen as a foreign import rather than as part of African reality.⁸⁶

Feminist Theology

The feminist theology of liberation began to take root in the Church from 1971 to 1972, together with other forms of liberation theology, as women became conscious of past and present oppression or marginalization in society and in the Church. More precisely,

Feminism aims to reunify what has been divided, separated and rendered inferior by the widespread acceptance of supposed masculine sexual superiority. This combat, in society, is inseparable from the struggle within the Church to tear God himself away from the masculine image, which penalises women both socially and personally.⁸⁷

For the feminist theology, Christianity must be made to work for women's liberation instead of being requisitioned by the male establishment as a guarantee of masculine domination. For this reason, the feminist theologians have concentrated on three points: The first is the task of finding ways to purify the Holy Scripture of patriarchal ideology (e.g. texts of terror) and symbolism. Second, as regards to tradition or, more specifically, Church tradition, outmoded historical cultures must be identified in order to highlight the subversive character of the principle of equality before God. The third major area of interest for feminist theologians is theology itself. Efforts have, thus, been made to establish that the paternal figure of God in no way excludes a maternal equivalent, insofar as God is not considered a sexual being.⁸⁸

Houtart and the Theology of Liberation

By Houtart's own admission, his first works on the subject of the Third World were based on a favourable vision of development and modernity, which the so-called

⁸⁶Ibid., 1091-95.

⁸⁷Ibid., 1095-96.

⁸⁸Ibid., 1097-99.

under-developed countries would inevitably attain. Within the various strands of this way of thinking, Houtart was one of those who advocated for radical reforms but, without being overly systematic, limited them to a series of measures intended to improve the lives of the most impoverished.⁸⁹ This is branded in Latin America as “reformism,” in their contention that what we need is not the reformation of the structures of oppression, but their radical transformation in order to make them structures of life, rather than structures of death. We can say that Latin American Christians have to make a shift from a conformation to the ways of this world to the reformation of themselves and of the structures that oppress them, to end with a transformation of those sinful structures and, by doing so, transform themselves from being the passive victims of history into becoming the protagonists of their own history.

According to Houtart himself, it was between 1964 and 1968 that he adjusted his conception of development. During this time, that is to say, between the end of the Second Vatican Council and the Medellin Conference, a radicalisation of many Latin American Christian social and political ideas was taking place. Houtart speaks of

a time of dictatorships connected with a new phase of capitalist accumulation and with an ideological basis in the national security doctrine imported from the United States through the local American-sponsored military schools.⁹⁰

Speaking of the role of the Church in the revolutionary struggles, he reveals to what extent the

financial imperialism imposed its logic of the accumulation of wealth on the whole planet. This is the vicious circle that had to be broken and religious factors were implicated in this despite the objections of many.⁹¹

⁸⁹Houtart, “Genèse et développement,” 19.

⁹⁰Ibid., 20.

⁹¹Ibid., 22-23. On the subject of the Church’s role in revolutionary struggles, Houtart cites the example of the Iranian Islamic revolution, which was the subject of a course he taught at Louvain for many years: “How can it be understood without including such things as Mossadegh’s reactions to foreign domination, how can it be explained without going into the mechanism of the strident modernity of the ‘new society,’ the result of the enforced westernization imposed by the Shah in order to make Iran a part of the active periphery of foreign capitalism?”

The awareness of these practices, of the socioeconomic situations of different countries, and of the dissemination of certain research in the sociology of religion, all contributed to the formation of the theology of liberation. According to Houtart, the logic of the capitalist economic system at the time represented the main obstacle to development.⁹² When asked by the present author if he considered himself a liberation theologian, Houtart replied,

No, because I am not a professional theologian who writes or teaches theology. Of course, I did study the discipline for four years at the seminary of Malines, but such an education was not recognized as a university degree in theology. Nevertheless, I am close to the thinking of liberation theologians: I have worked with them in the field of sociology, especially in Latin America. Sociological research is, in the end, the basis of theological thinking.

As a sociologist, he felt that, in order for real development to take place, not only would the theoretical framework of the sociology of development have to be revised, but also that of the sociology of religion and especially such aspects of religion as its worldview, its ethical reference points, and its organisation. And this is, indeed, one of the main presuppositions on which the theology of liberation builds.

In this context, Houtart organised and facilitated several seminars (FERES seminars) that were held in Asia, in order to carry out a “structural analysis” of society, meaning by this expression the analysis of the given structures of society; this term he prefers to the more politically charged term “Marxist analysis.” This type of analysis, which was becoming more and more widespread, situated the different aspects of social reality, such as religion, in their social contexts. By 1977, the method had spread to countries such as the Philippines, having such an impact that the following year Houtart was refused entry to the country by President Marcos.⁹³

⁹²Ibid. 20, 21. Houtart, interview with the author, November 1, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

⁹³Houtart, “Genèse et développement,” 20,21. Houtart, interview with the author, November 1, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

In the same period, Houtart and Lemercinier finished research requested by various Catholic groups on the redirection of the Christian involvement in development. One of these studies concerned the activities of the Church in Kerala, South India.⁹⁴ From Vietnam to Angola, from Cuba to the countries of Eastern Europe, Houtart participated in innumerable public and private discussions concerning the role of religion in society. For some Marxists, to be a revolutionary is incompatible with religious belief, yet for others, religion can be a source for social change. In an inverted parallelism, for some Christians, to be a Christian is incompatible with adherence to Marxism in any form. In 1988, Lemercinier and Houtart were asked by the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party to teach a two-week course on the sociology of religion to the professors of philosophy of the leading academic and political institutions of the country.⁹⁵ As a result of this, Houtart himself confides, the Central Committee resolved to remove from the Constitution of the Party the clause that ruled that no confessed Christian can be a member of the Communist Party.⁹⁶

The aim of liberation theology is the total liberation (body, soul, and mind in a social and political milieu), through Christ, of those people who live in misery, which accompanies the growing wealth of modern capitalists. Thus, the Church can serve as an instrument of liberation, taking into account that the overwhelming majority of the oppressed in Latin America are also baptised Christians and members of the Church. Houtart's sociological studies were undertaken in this context, at first tentatively, then more openly, beginning in the 1960s. He became conscious at that time that the logic of the capitalist economic system represented the main obstacle to the development of the poorer countries. His unceasing social engagement meant that he became a leading figure

⁹⁴Houtart and G. Lemercinier, *Church and Development in Kerala* (Bangalore: Hansa, 1979). Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 21.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 21-22.

⁹⁶Houtart, interview with the author, November 1, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

in the sociology of religion, which led him to take part in a series of conferences and seminars in many of the Third World countries.

From Modernity to Cultural Diversity

Even in his earliest works, Houtart advocated for the idea that capitalism produces unjust societies while the material, scientific, and technological progress it employs cannot be disputed. It is, therefore, normal that the culture it spreads, what one calls *modernity*, should constitute a sort of universal parameter. With a good measure of oversimplification, we could state that, at that stage of Houtart's development, he believed that the solution of the problem consisted of extending the benefits of capitalism from the hands of the few to the hands of all, without substantially changing the system. Soon he realized that such a solution is an impossibility and a contradiction. Thus, the problem for religion and for the religious and pastoral institutions, Houtart thought at that early stage, is to adapt themselves to modern values. In short, development involves adopting suitable behaviour in order to become truly modern.⁹⁷

However, after having worked on a study of demographic and social problems related to food production with Michel Cepède,⁹⁸ representative of the French government to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization),⁹⁹ Houtart began to doubt his own earlier convictions.¹⁰⁰ The Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua had an equally profound effect on Houtart's sociological thinking. He gradually came to realise that, before the revolution, "the traditional popular religion in Nicaragua was to a large extent a product of the people, and the institutions were obliged to tolerate it."¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, he concluded, "these ancestral practices needed institutions for the carrying out of religious

⁹⁷Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 22.

⁹⁸Michel Cepède: French agronomist, professor at the Institute of Agronomic Sciences in Paris.

⁹⁹See <http://www.fao.org/>. Web site for the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations.

¹⁰⁰Houtart, op. cit., 23.

¹⁰¹Houtart, op. cit., 23.

sacraments, such as baptisms, et cetera.”¹⁰² For Houtart, the Sandinista movement was nourished to a significant extent by Christians originating from the petty bourgeoisie and the urban middle classes. It also had the support of peasant groups, whose conception of the Christian faith had evolved in a radically different way, thanks to the work of priests influenced by the new openness of the Church after the Second Vatican Council and the Medellin conference.¹⁰³ The traditional view of a “God above” contrasted with a “humankind below” was replaced with a new view of a God who was present in human history, in solidarity with the poor in their struggles. This representation introduced a new dimension whereby ethics took the centre stage as a result of the human being, as an actor, becoming significant. For Houtart,

it is for man to construct a society where the values of justice and brotherhood which define the New Testament can become an everyday reality. This creates the necessity for condemning injustice and the struggle to create alternatives.¹⁰⁴

At the same time, for Houtart, every group of social actors develops its own form of religion corresponding to its own culture. Indeed, not only in Nicaragua, but in all of Latin America as well, an answer was being sought to the vacuum created by the collapse of the traditional social structures during a period of transition. However, at the time, the Catholic Church and its priests were not ready to deal with this type of problems. Rather, the Church was more oriented towards the control of the masses than towards revitalising smaller groups.¹⁰⁵

For its part, the Church establishment struggled to win back the ground that the Sandinista revolution had taken from it by taking over its responsibilities in the definition of values, education, and health, by nationalising them; to recover the lost ground, the hierarchical Church took sides with the *contras* that, with the aid of the US government,

¹⁰²Houtart, interview with the author, November 1, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Houtart, “Genèse et développement,” 25-26.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 25.

were attempting to topple the Sandinista regime; thus, the Church became anti-popular, and the people became more anti-clerical and even anti-religious. According to Houtart, the Pope's visit to Managua confirmed

this position of the Church, by condemning unconditionally any effort at reconciliation between Christians and the Sandinista revolution.¹⁰⁶

In addition to Nicaragua, a number of other countries requested that CETRI perform studies on their culture and the importance of culture in situations of change. Worth mentioning among such studies was the research on the mentality of members of the PAICV (a party founded in Cape Verde by Amílcar Cabral during the anti-colonial struggle) as part of the preparations for its party congress.¹⁰⁷

Although Houtart faced the challenges of the day in his own particular way, he was aware that the critique of modernity was not limited to one strand of thought. Among the alternatives to modernity, we find the concept of "postmodernism," which can be defined as an open-ended period, characterised by the loss of confidence in certain values of modernity, such as progress, emancipation, and grand narratives (meta-narratives). But even "postmodernism" seems redolent of capitalist ideology. Being sceptical of many of the aspects of modernity, Houtart expressed doubts about the validity of the whole concept. He asks the following question:

Was it really necessary, in reaction to overly rigid or socially imposed systems of thought, to resort to the dismantling of ideas and concepts, and to reject theory under the pretext that reality is too complex?¹⁰⁸

But postmodernism is not the solution to the problems created by modernism. Along with Alejandro Serrano, a Nicaraguan philosopher who then served as the ambassador in Paris and rector of the National University in Managua, Houtart was of the opinion that

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 26.

¹⁰⁷Houtart and N. Nayak, *Kerala Fishermen, Culture and Social Organization* (CETRI: Louvain-la-Neuve, 1988); F. Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 26.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

postmodernism was linked to neoliberalism.¹⁰⁹ This issue will be examined later in the discussion on globalisation in Chapter Six.

We may conclude, then, that from the beginning of the 1960s, Houtart defended the idea that it is up to man to construct, according to his own culture, a society where the values of justice, brotherhood, and sisterhood defined in the Prophets of Israel and in the New Testament can become a reality. He had come to reject the idea developed in his early work that the modernity of the so-called developed countries should be the ideal to which everyone should aspire. Moreover, in the 1980s, Houtart expressed his doubts over the validity of the concept of postmodernism, which he believes implies, an over radical rejection of the values of modernity and which he sees as an extension of neoliberalism.

From Functionalism to Marxism

Houtart owed his discovery of sociology to Jacques Leclercq, who introduced the main elements of the discipline in a course he taught at U.C.L. Houtart has indicated that his early work was inspired by the concept of “functionalism” as a system for interpreting social reality. This influence is especially evident in his contributions to the international conference on sociology of religion in Bologna in 1960.¹¹⁰ For him, the “functions” and “dysfunctions” of religion in the context of social integration were the basis of his thought, while the adaptation of religion to a certain type of modern society was an underlying preoccupation. Gradually, however, he became aware of the defects of this type of analysis:

As the questions asked became more precise and fundamental, concentrating more on values than on institutions, addressing the urgent problems of social conflict and viewing history from a wider perspective than that of the West in its industrial development stage, functionalism became unsatisfactory.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹Ibid. See also Houtart, “Marxist Analysis of Religion and Post Modern Critique,” *COELI* 76 (1st Trimester, 1996): 2-7.

¹¹⁰Houtart, “Variables et rôle intégrateur de la religion [Variables and integrating role of religion],” *Social Compass* 7, (1960): 21-38; Houtart, “Genèse et développement,” 27.

¹¹¹Ibid.

To some extent, Houtart was also influenced by Weber, an influence evident in his doctoral thesis *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, in which he began to work with a Weberian approach. This issue will be addressed in the fifth chapter in the discourse on religion and society.

The idea of examining the thought of Marxism more closely began to appeal to Houtart in the 1970s. He was not totally ignorant of the Marxist perspective, thanks to some courses he had taken at Louvain, notably those of Canon Grégoire.¹¹² Moreover, his sojourns in France with worker-priests had put him in contact with grassroots communist militants. However, what he described as “the anti-religious character of Marxism and the Christian world’s attitude towards its social project, together with the haughty attitude taken towards it in academic circles,” discouraged him from applying a Marxist methodology to the analysis of societies.¹¹³ Houtart did, however, realise that “the distinction between philosophical perspective and sociological methodology is as important for Marxism as for other currents of thought”¹¹⁴ Finally, his close contact with some Third World revolutionary movements gave him an indication of the importance of this ideology for those movements. Houtart would go on to read Marx’s works more systematically in Sri Lanka.¹¹⁵

Paradoxically, it was the study of precapitalist societies that enabled Houtart to penetrate the Marxist methodology. His investigations (in cooperation with Lemercinier) of the place of religion in these types of societies raised the theoretical questions concerning modes of production.

¹¹²“Franz Grégoire: Sombreffe (Waloön, Namur), 1898-1977. Canon, doctor in philosophy and theology, he taught at the University of Louvain. He was one of the world’s leading authorities on Hegel and based his teaching on the fundamental problem of religious consciousness. A nephew of the biologist Victor Grégoire, he was a member of the Belgian Royal Academy (1963).” T. Denoël, ed., *Le nouveau dictionnaire des Belges* (Brussels: n.p., 1992), 344.

¹¹³Houtart, op. cit., 28.

¹¹⁴Houtart, op. cit., 28.

¹¹⁵Houtart, op. cit., 28. Houtart spent most of his time in University of Peradeniya, Kandy, Sri Lanka while writing his doctoral dissertation.

The writings of Maurice Godelier,¹¹⁶ professor at the *École des Hautes Études* in Paris, on the Asian mode of production, introduced Houtart to Marx's *Grundrisse* (translated as *Fundamentals of the Critique of Political Economy*).¹¹⁷ This Marxist social analysis caused him some problems later on, during a seminar in Hanoi in Godelier's presence. Houtart asserts, "for one section of the Vietnamese Marxist intellectuals, there was no such thing as an Asian mode of production. It had become a political question."¹¹⁸ Finally, his research on Sri Lanka and Kerala constituted a veritable testing ground for the Marxist analysis of the religious phenomenon.¹¹⁹

At the request of the Université Libre of Brussels, François Houtart took up the Francqui Chair from 1976 to 1977, under which he taught a course entitled Religion and Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production.¹²⁰ The courses he gave at Louvain at that time were closely related to this topic.¹²¹ In both cases, Houtart's studies of the Marxist analysis met with some resistance. As he later confided,

¹¹⁶Maurice Godelier: philosopher, economist, and anthropologist of a Marxist orientation with whom Houtart is still in contact. He has often been invited to the Catholic University of Louvain. Godelier is doctor *honoris causa* of sociology at U.C.L. Houtart, interview with the author, November 1, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

¹¹⁷Vinh Nguyen Quang, *La terre, le pouvoir et les génies. Bases sociologiques de la transition dans le village vietnamien* [Land, power and genius. Sociological basis of transition in the Vietnamese village] (Louvain-la-Neuve: 1981), 3.

¹¹⁸Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 28 This is Houtart's account of the incident: "In 1981, I participated in a seminar at the Institute of Sociology of Hanoi. The subject was the capitalist mode of production, with the participation of one of my friends, M. Godelier, who was an expert in the matter. From the beginning the older Vietnamese participants who had been trained in the USSR refuted the thesis of an Asian mode of production (sometimes called Tributary mode). According to them, there were only, as Lenin had asserted primitive, then slave-owning, then feudal, then capitalist societies. Unfortunately, and even if I secretly agreed with Godelier because of my work on Kerala, he committed the grave error of arguing against the older members of the assembly by replying. 'If Lenin said that, he was wrong!' Even though the younger Vietnamese researchers approved of Mr. Godelier, their elders could not stomach losing face in a Confucian society! The incident was reported to the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Party, and the director of the Institute of Sociology, Mr. Viu Kieu, was even accused of having brought agents of the Vatican into the university! On Mr Viu Kieu's advice, I consulted the Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Nguyen Ko Thac, who advised me to be patient. I followed his suggestion and, after having attended the end of the seminar, I left discreetly and did not come back to Vietnam for ten years. In addition, I was greatly preoccupied with Nicaragua at the time. Nevertheless, during this long absence, the Vietnamese ambassadors never failed to visit me whenever they came to Europe. Another sign of friendship was given to me by Pham Van Dong's secretary when I left in 1981, because he wished me 'a good trip,' as if he could do nothing else in such a divisive situation". Houtart, interview with the author, November 1, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

¹¹⁹Houtart, "Genèse et développement."

¹²⁰Ibid., 29.

¹²¹Ibid.

When I held the Francqui Chair, the Rector of U.C.L., E. Massaux informed me that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) at the Vatican wanted me to leave my post at U.C.L. A few years later, moreover, the Congregation of Universities linked to the Vatican reiterated this demand. I was, however, supported by Cardinal Suenens. Anyway, in Belgium a teacher who is paid by the State cannot be dismissed or removed unless a judicial commission can prove that he has committed a serious academic misdemeanour.¹²²

Although Houtart officially retired in 1990, he has, nonetheless, continued his research and has been invited to sessions on the formation of social analysis in Asia, Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Latin America. He made contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church and even with Muslim authorities and some Islamic countries (On the issues of Christian minorities' e.g. Bangladesh, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Mali, Sudan, Egypt etc.) For Houtart, the Marxist contribution to the sociology of religion will always be relevant.¹²³ The study of this fifth point shows the importance of the Marxist analysis in the work of Houtart. It appeared to him that it could help him to overcome the defects of functionalism, which he had first tried to apply.

The prelate and professor Jacques Leclercq¹²⁴ was responsible for the introduction of the sociology of religion at the University of Louvain. In 1946, he officially instituted religious sociology as part of the curriculum.¹²⁵ Following Leclercq, Houtart fully committed himself to the development of the sociology of religion, not simply to a

¹²²Houtart, interview with the author, November 3, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium.

¹²³Houtart, "Genèse et développement."

¹²⁴Jacques Leclercq: (Brussels, 1891-1971). Prelate and professor of moral philosophy and natural law at the University faculties of Saint-Louis of Brussels and, after, at Louvain University, he founded and was the director of *La Cité Chrétienne* from 1926 to 1940. He was an inspiring force to the young Catholic intellectuals—he was founder and chaplain of the Catholic Students Youth Movement in 1930—rather than a scientific man. He opened, however, new perspectives in the area of natural law (*Leçons de droit naturel* [*Lessons in natural law*]) and contributed in bringing Christian doctrine closer to the gospel and to spirituality (*Essais de la morale catholique, l'enseignement de la morale chrétienne* [*Essays on Catholic ethics, teachings of Christian doctrine*]). He published prolifically in terms of spirituality, notably about the lives of saints and well-known people (*Vie du père Lebbe* [*The life of Father Lebbe*]). He was a well-rounded Christian for his time and a wise man, always sure of himself and serene about things (*Eloge de la paresse, Vivre chrétiennement notre temps* [*Ode to laziness, Living a full Christian life in our day*]) He also founded the Centre d'études sociales de Louvain [Centre for social studies of Louvain]." T.Denoël, 442. See also, P. Sauvage, *La Cité Chrétienne (1926-1940). Une revue autour de Jacques Leclercq* (Brussels: Duculot, 1987). A. Boland, "Leclercq Jacques," *Dictionnaire de la spiritualité*, 9, (Paris: n.p., 1976), col. 446-467. Gh. Morin, *Introduction à l'étude de Jacques Leclercq*, (Gembloux: n.p., 1973).

¹²⁵P. Sauvage, *Jacques Leclercq 1891-1971. Un arbre en plein vent* [A tree in a windstorm], (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium: Duculot, 1992), 192.

“religious sociology” with the doctrinal presuppositions and at the service of a particular religion. This school of thought was principally focussed on the religious phenomenon in transitional situations in a large number of communities on various continents.¹²⁶ Beginning in the 1960s, Houtart developed a number of hypotheses concerning the manner in which the sociology of religion should evolve. He would carry out his body of work, with the help of numerous colleagues and collaborators, at the *Centre de recherches socio-religieuses de l’université catholique de Louvain* [Centre for Socio-Religious Research of the Catholic University of Louvain], which he founded in 1956. This would also be the case at the Centre Tricontinental de Louvain-La-Neuve.¹²⁷ Sauvage describes the Centre for Sociological Research as

a privileged place for exchanges with Latin America in terms of research and education. It is managed by François Houtart who acts as a real catalyst. He knows the realities of Latin American life: He has been invited by Latin-American bishops to help prepare for the Medellín Conference and from the outset he has been in personal contact with liberation theologians. One of his strengths is to create an awareness of the need for sociological analysis of religion and to gather human beings around the same project table.¹²⁸

Houtart’s initial viewpoint was that the starting point of one’s sociological work is a pastoral philosophy linked to the working class and, more particularly, concerned with young workers. So, up to this point, Houtart’s sociology was still at the service of the Church, with a “pastoral” or apostolic intention and orientation. This “pastoral philosophy” would progressively lead him to a structured and disciplined approach in his social studies.

The prime motivator for Houtart’s project was a desire to apply his knowledge to pastoral activities. This desire would lead to the foundation of the Centre for Socio-

¹²⁶Houtart, “Genèse et développement.”

¹²⁷Ibid., 7; Houtart, interview with the author, November 3, 2006, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. P. Sauvage, “Relations entre Belges et Latino-Américains à propos de la Théologie de la Libération (1970-1980),” in *La modernité religieuse en perspective comparée. Europe Latine – Amérique Latine*, ed. J.-P. Bastiaan (Paris: Karthala, 2001), 296. Translated for the author by François Polet of CETRI, Louvain-la-Neuve.

¹²⁸Sauvage, “Relations,” 296.

Religious Research in Brussels in 1955, which Houtart directed from 1956 until his retirement from the professorship.¹²⁹ The Centre was, first, a part of the interdiocesan programme for socioreligious research and, since 1964, a university research centre of KUL. From 1956 to 1964, Houtart was acting general secretary for the International Conference on Religious Sociology.¹³⁰ In 1958, he was entrusted with teaching a course entitled *Sociologie de la Pastorale* (Sociology of Pastoral Work) within the faculty of political and social sciences of Louvain University, on the initiative of Leclercq.¹³¹

A number of requests for socioreligious research were now being proposed to him from contacts he made outside of Belgium. In response, Houtart started a study on pastoral care in Malta (1958) and delivered a course on the sociology of religion applied to pastoral care within the Theological Faculty of Tilburg in The Netherlands¹³². Between 1958 and 1962, he conducted a valuable study on the Church's impact in terms of social change within the Latin American countries.¹³³ This work was not greeted with particular enthusiasm within the Church and was perceived with some suspicion by Rome. An initial collaboration was set up with CELAM (Episcopal Conference of Latin America) and a number of Latin-American sociologists; among them were some former students from Louvain, including Houtart's close friend and colleague, Camilo Torres.¹³⁴ The aim of all this work was to establish the means to facilitate the Church's adaptation to the new situations of the subcontinent, thereby challenging the traditional pastoral structures.¹³⁵

As these works progressed, the need for a coherent theoretical and methodological approach became apparent. As Houtart explains,

¹²⁹Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 9.

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹Ibid, 9; Houtart, interview with the author, 1 November 2006.

¹³²Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 9.

¹³³Houtart, "Genèse et développement," 9.

¹³⁴Ibid, 10. CELAM (Episcopal Council of Latin America) is a liaison organism, linking the twenty-two national Episcopal conferences of Latin America. It was created in 1955, and its assemblies are normally held every two years. G. Harpigny, ed., "Évangélisation de l'Amérique latine: histoire et projet," *Revue des diocèses de Belgique* 5 (1992): 435.

¹³⁵Houtart, op. cit., 10.

the sociology of religion which had been at the centre of the classical thinkers' pre-occupations (Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and even partially, in the case of Marx and Marxist thinkers such as Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky) had, during its contemporary phase in Europe, been taken over by pastoral interests that brought it outside the reach of "professionals" (academics who would have studied the subject in depth and had practical experience of its application in the field).¹³⁶

Houtart always argued for the case of professionalism that should go beyond confessionalism (in other words, a sociology of religion rather than a religious sociology), though the Church may use sociology of religion for its mission work as a tool. This Houtart learned, primarily, through his experiences with non-European cultures and non-Christian religions.

Conclusion

It is difficult to assess Houtart's influence worldwide, not only on the Roman Catholic Church, but also among the protestant churches. Two instances that I know well may suffice to hint at how his thought and method is penetrating the activity of the churches in the world. Some of the theological colleges and institutes in South India and Sri Lanka, such as The Theological College of Lanka (ecumenical-protestant) in Sri Lanka, and the Center for Social Analysis (CSA) in the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (also ecumenical and interconfessional), have introduced explicitly and specifically Houtart's methods of social analysis into their theological education curricula, and importantly, with the approval of the Senate of the University of Serampore in West Bengal, India. These modules and the philosophy behind them have been of great qualitative influence on the Christian ministers and laity who opted for theological formation in South Asia, as mentioned before.

Houtart has been invited to be a facilitator at many conferences and workshops around the world and continues to maintain contacts with many of the countries and

¹³⁶Ibid.

contexts in which he has worked in his long career. He has shared his expertise with groups in many developing countries, such as Tanzania, Cuba, Vietnam, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India, Brazil, and Haiti, where his approach and methodology have been adopted by many, especially as it relates to social movements, development, liberation, theological reflection,¹³⁷ pastoral planning,¹³⁸ and political action. Additionally, Houtart has been a consultant to international agencies and groups in the USA, Canada, Spain, France, Belgium, and other European nations.

The year 2008 marks the fifty-ninth anniversary of Houtart's ministry and service. We have traced Houtart's genealogy in context and have examined the way in which he has made an intercultural contribution. The next chapter will be devoted to an exposition of Houtart's social thought in its evolutionary perspective.

¹³⁷The *Baguio Report* shows how some theologians in Asia have been using Houtart's analysis of religion as a background to their theological reflections: Cf. *Religion and Development in Asia, Baguio Feres Seminar Report* (1976), 164-245.

¹³⁸Houtart, "Summary of the Survey of the Church in Ceylon" *Quest* 43, (1971): 3. In the introduction to the summary of this survey, Fr. Tissa Balasuriya O.M.I speaks of the need for pastoral action based on Houtart's analysis.

CHAPTER THREE
RELIGION AS A SOCIAL AGENT:
SOME THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Introduction

Having retraced François Houtart's intellectual itinerary in the second chapter, it is most appropriate that the aim of this chapter should be devoted to locate François Houtart in the context of the sociology of religion, concentrating our focus on the exposition of his thought. Houtart begins with the understanding that religions are social realities and institutions with social functions, without denying their transcendent character as well; however, this transcendent character is beyond the realm of scientific analysis. In his scientific study of religion, Houtart reminds us over and over again that religion is part of culture ("symbolic representation"), and not an alien system of ideas, beliefs, rituals, and codes of ethics that are injected into any culture from outside and from above. Houtart defends this without falling into the trap of "culturalism" or "cultural absolutism," which reduces religion exclusively to a human creation; that would be positivistic reductionism.

Religion and society interact dialectically. Correspondingly, social structures and religious structures are always in dialectical tension with one another, as Richard Niebuhr so brilliantly described in his seminal book *Christ and Culture*.¹ Sometimes religion is subservient to the social and political institutions, such as in the case of Eusebius of Caesarea; other times, religion and society are in frontal opposition to each other, as in the case of Tertullian, to mention only two examples at both extremes. Religion and religious

¹Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).

ethics have the capacity to facilitate social change and progress, even in spite of and against sociopolitical institutions; they can openly militate against them. Though Houtart has been engaged primarily with the social functions of three forms of religion, namely Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism, he has recently been focusing his attention on the indigenous religions of Latin America as well.

The Phenomenon of Religion

As a social scientist, Houtart is not interested in discovering the essence of religion but its manifestations in their respective social and political milieus; he is strictly interested in religion as a phenomenon and, specifically, as a “social phenomenon.” A brief panoramic view of the overall context may be quite appropriate here in order to focus our attention more clearly on the place Houtart occupies in this wide field and the role he plays in the study of religion and society.

Religion² is a phenomenon that exists in an interactive relationship with the life and history of humankind, though this interactive relationship varies and differs from society to society, from time to time, from culture to culture, and from context to context. There has never been and there is no society without some form of religion. Also, nowadays there is no existing society with a single established religion in it. There is a universe of *living* popular religiosity in an amazing and exciting diversity; *living* world religions and new religious movements plus new religious trends, all witness to this assumption. Against the contention of some secularists that claim the demise of religion, the death of God, and the eventual abolition of religion in all its forms, religion is still

²We try to avoid the risk of conceptualising religion over against a theistic view. *Religion* is a broader term. The Latin word *Religio* means to ‘re-connect.’ Cf. Ben Mendis, *Awalokitha Ishwara* (Colombo: Mary’s Fener, 2001), 1. Ninian Smart mentions China as one of the main fertile intellectual and cultural areas in the human civilization. See Ninian Smart, *World Philosophies* (London: Rutledge, 2000), 2. It would be relevant also to mention the Chinese understanding of religion; the term *Zongjiao* (means teaching of the ancestors) has been used for religion in Chinese. Religion is defined as a tradition with a strong element of rites, which became norms of conduct of society. Cf. Tilemann Grimm, “Our ‘Stand on Sino-Marxism,’” in *The Encounter of the Church with Movements of Social Change in Various Cultural Contexts*, ed. G. Decke (Geneva: Department of Studies, Lutheran World Federation, 1977), 15. Houtart also mentions China as one of the two great poles of Asia, the other being India.

alive and enjoying good health, and we witness the revival of the religious sentiment all over the world: Shamanism in Korea; Buddhism in Sri Lanka; the Sathya Sri Sai Baba movement in India; Christian Pentecostalism in North America, Chile, and Brazil; the Islamic revivalism in the Middle East, West Asia, and Africa; and the vigorous renewal of indigenous religions throughout the world are only a few examples.

When we use the word *living*, it does not always denote the sense of a commonly accepted positive role in society, something promoting the common good; it could also denote a violent behaviour in society.³ Instead of judging its role or evaluating religion's role sociopolitically, what we are interested in here is the study and exposition of the dynamic and relational nature of religion in any given society.

The sociologist James A. Beckford writes, "Religion is a potential quality of human experience."⁴ In Teilhardian phraseology, it is the "phenomenon of the human." Religion is a phenomenon within the human phenomenon.⁵ All so-called major religions, all forms of folk religion, indigenous religions, and different forms of spiritualities are part of this phenomenon. In other words, religion, as a human creation and institution, is part of culture and is present in all cultures.

It is also important to note the phenomenon of interreligious activity in the world, whether it is dialogue or tension. The interreligious activity exists as another layer of the human-religious context or sphere. Some predictions of the Enlightenment-secularist paradigm that proclaims the demise of religion have been falsified as we observe a renewed interest in religions and spiritualities today.

³François Houtart, "The Cult of Violence in the Name of Religion: A Panorama," *Concilium* 1997, no. 4: 3-9. This is a discussion of the relationship between religion and violence—with references to Algeria, Ireland, former Yugoslavia, India, and Sri Lanka—and with a strong emphasis on the necessity of social analysis of the issue.

⁴James A. Beckford, "Religion," in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Social Thought*, eds. William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

⁵Mervyn Fernando, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: An Outline of His Thought on Man: His History and His Future* (Piliyandala: Subodhi, 1991), 2.

Religions are still living: acting, interacting, and reacting. Because they are living, they become a part of the social reality. Whether religion, as some secularists believe, is to be an expression of people's powerlessness⁶ or, as still others believe, it is to be the source of human empowerment (e.g., an agent of peace), it must be studied and interrogated.

The Study of Religion and Its Limits

Religion could be studied in diverse ways and by diverse means, looking at it from different angles, using a variety of methods, and also looking at different perspectives.⁷ Two observations can be made immediately. First, the very study of religion is part of the cultural and intellectual heritage and endeavours of humankind if this academic activity is viewed from a sociological as well as a pedagogical perspective. Second, the study of religion is an enterprise with its own limitations, irrespective of whatever approach or method it might employ. According to Eric J. Lott, the religious complexity makes it impossible for just a single methodological approach to be sufficient in the study of religion,⁸ because religion is a multi-dimensional phenomenon.

Houtart considers that

every science, for methodological reasons, must limit its object. But this does not mean that it negates all other dimensions. A sociologist who ignores the psychology of religion, who does not recognize the right of philosophy to speak about religion, or who claims that a theological approach is impossible would be a very bad sociologist.⁹

The study of religion is becoming multi-disciplinary in nature because of the complexity of every major human social phenomenon. This approach permits the students of religion to be faithful to their own religious traditions while still remaining scientific and critical.

⁶Sergei Takarev, *History of Religion* (Moscow: Progress, 1986), 395.

⁷*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Social Aspects of Religion." This article acknowledges the existence of multiple approaches to the study of religion, for example, from the perspectives of history, philosophy, aesthetics, linguistics, theology, psychology, anthropology, and sociology.

⁸Eric J. Lott, "Approaching a Religious Tradition," in *Religious Traditions of India*, eds. P.S.Daniel, David C.Scott, and G.R.Sing (Kottayam: ITL, 1988), 6.

⁹François Houtart, "Religion and Development," in *Religion and Development in Asia* (n.p.: Baguio Feres Seminar Report, 1976), 4.

In sum, what the sociological approach suggests could be called “religion as a social reality.”¹⁰

The questions and issues that sociologists raise in connection with the phenomenon of religion¹¹ include the following: 1) how religion is related to the structure and processes of human societies; 2) how religion both reflects and affects the stratification systems in society, the political and economic processes, the levels of integration and conflict, and the course of social change; and 3) what are the varieties of religious patterns and types of religious leadership.¹²

J. Milton Yinger writes,

The social scientist is rather concerned with the conditions under which the various beliefs appear among the societies, groups and individuals and the consequences of the various conceptions for social interaction.¹³

What aspects could sociologists of religion consider through empirical sciences and what aspects through non-empirical¹⁴ are other questions of methodological interest. These very questions also highlight the limitations of all empirical approaches.

Another interesting question is how religion has dealt with social crisis¹⁵ and undergone change throughout history. It is relevant to mention here how Houtart looks at crisis and religion:

Theologically speaking the word *crisis* generally carries a negative connotation; yet it is important to recognize that sociologically speaking crises really act very positively in a process of change; more than a negative sense is implicit in the meaning of *crisis*.¹⁶

On the significance of crisis, this time from a theological perspective, Felix Wilfred writes, “As regards to significance, crisis could be viewed as a normal growth process in

¹⁰This is typical of Houtart’s approach.

¹¹*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “Social Aspects of Religion.”

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Beckford, “Religion,” 555-557.

¹⁵François Houtart, “The Roman Catholic Church and Social Change in Latin America,” in *The Church and Social Change in Latin America*, ed. Henry A. Landsberger (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 113-133.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 114.

any individual institution, in which case the facet of opportunities it offers gets highlighted.”¹⁷ However, the approach to crisis depends on the chance we take and the context in which we interpret it (hermeneutics), because any interpretation of crisis in a given situation otherwise can be generally negative.

Coming back from this digression to the main concern of our study, we may ask, how can we analyse and interpret the social aspects and meaning of religion? How do religious people themselves use sociological methods (as in the case of Houtart) and analysis both in self-understanding and self-expression in their relationship to a wider society? How have religious ideas and concepts emerged and been reformulated in a given sociopolitical context? These questions also have a place on the agenda of the sociologist of religion. Houtart had to face them frequently in his professional work and attempted adequate answers to them. They help to test the assumption that religion is a social phenomenon and even to test religion as a social agent.

The Emergence of a New Discipline

The nineteenth century was a most fertile era for the scientific study of religion; in reality it marked the beginning of a new era in the study of society in general and witnessed the formative years of the new discipline, the sociology of religion, in particular.¹⁸ A systematic approach to the questions that have been raised above began in the nineteenth century.

Auguste Comte, Emil Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, Levi-Strauss, Sir James Frazer, and Edward Tylor are among the key figures who have pioneered this movement in academic circles. Yet there is little agreement among scholars as to who should be considered the actual pioneers of the sociology of religion. Two problems would explain this difficulty:

¹⁷Felix Wilfred, “Christianity between Decline and Resurgence,” *Concilium*, 2005, no. 3: 29.

¹⁸*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “Social Aspects of Religion.” See also H.Paul Chalfant et. al., *Religion in Contemporary Society* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1987), 7f.

1. In the strictest sense, one cannot call the above named figures sociologists of religion, but they could be called the founding figures of social sciences who contributed to the field of the sociology of religion.

2. The other problem for this lack of consensus lies, according to Ninian Smart, in the difficulty in drawing the lines between sociology and anthropology of religion, due to areas that overlap between these two disciplines.¹⁹

What is important for the present study is that, as far as François Houtart is concerned, Weber and Marx to a greater extent and Levi-Strauss and P. Bourdieu to a lesser extent have made an impact on his thinking on the relationship of religion and society and how to determine their interaction. Equally he acknowledges similar inspiration derived from his encounter with Eastern, South American, and African cultures²⁰ on the development of his conceptual outlook on the sociology of religion. Geoculturally speaking, it is not surprising that both pioneering French and German sociological schools had a great impact on this Belgian thinker.²¹ These influences will be discussed according to the needs of the present chapter, as we try to explore François Houtart's engagement in the discourse on religion and society.

This chapter is designed to present an overview of François Houtart's understanding of the sociology of religion by way of a conceptual framework through which we shall survey and briefly explain his approach to the sociology of religion. The chapter will adopt an expository-descriptive style, as this serves as a basis of Houtart's concepts of religion.²² The chapter consists of three subtopics:

¹⁹*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Study of Religion."

²⁰To mention a few cultures: Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, Cuba, Panama, El Salvador, Brazil, and Tanzania.

²¹But Houtart himself acknowledges the influence of American Functionalism besides the influence of sociological schools of France and Germany on his early thought. François Houtart, interview by author, July 2005, in Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

²²Concepts used in relation to other areas of Houtart's thought are beyond the scope of this chapter but will be briefly discussed as necessary in the text.

1. *Religion as a part of the symbolic representation.* Under this topic, we will explore what “symbolic representation” means and how religion/religiosity becomes part of the symbolic representation of the culture in which it takes place. The concept of the symbolic representation is central to Houtart’s approach.

2. *Religion, ideology, and the political field.* This subtopic starts with an explanation of the concept of “ideology” as defined by Houtart, followed by a discussion of one of Houtart’s major emphases, namely, the relationship between religion and ideology within the wider discourse on religion and society. In this section, we will try to substantiate how Houtart deals with this problem, both theoretically and practically.

3. *Religions as institutions with social functions.* The third topic deals with the way Houtart characterizes religions as social institutions with different social functions in different social settings or different types of societies, and the different ways they can play a role in the process of social change in some societies. For illustration, we will touch on his specific contribution to the study of Asian religions and their social functions.

Religion as a Part of the Symbolic Representation

One cannot imagine a human community without symbols. Language, for example, is a powerful symbolic system for the smooth functioning of a society. If by some kind of imaginable collective amnesia the common words-symbols of a society suddenly cease to convey the commonly accepted meanings, then that society would collapse and disintegrate instantly, because the individuals that compose it will be unable to communicate with each other. That was the case of the mythical City of Babel, the city of confusion. The Sri Lankan intellectual Carlo Fonseka writes, “All human groups create and attach themselves to *symbols* which *represent* [emphasis added] for members of a

given group specific objects, ideas or processes.”²³ This definition affirms that symbols represent things, and that all things are represented by symbols. In fact, symbols are vehicles to represent all things, all reality, because reality is perceived and appropriated and then communicated by means of symbols. Without a systemic symbolic representation, there is no human society, no culture. According to Sebastian Kappen, a symbol is a category of sign, and in all signs a signifier points to a signified beyond it.²⁴ It is not surprising that communities and groups create and use symbols.²⁵ How we understand or interpret symbols needs to be considered, so our immediate discussion on this topic is an exploration of the symbolic representation with special reference to religion.

Houtart writes, “Every society produces its own symbolic system, which is the way of explaining and of expressing the collective life of the group.”²⁶ A symbolic system is a construction, and such constructions are functional in the social sphere. “The functions of such constructions are not always conscious, far from it, but they are essential for any human community.”²⁷ For example, “when clanic societies were producing *totems*²⁸ [emphasis added] or protective gods, they were not conscious of the fact that it was a human construction aimed at the cohesion of the group.”²⁹ In this particular case, religion with its symbols played a role in keeping and maintaining the solidarity of the group, even more, the very existence of the group.

For Houtart, religion is a part of the symbolic representation of any given society. For him human communities, no matter how small or large, spontaneously create symbols,

²³Fonseka, *Towards a Peaceful Sri Lanka*, 44.

²⁴S. Kappen, *Tradition Modernity Counterculture* (Bangalore: Visthar, 1998), 42-43.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶François Houtart, “Role of Western Religion in the Confucian Regions” (Seoul, Korea: Academic Conference for Asiatic Studies, 1975), 259.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸For a discussion on *totem/totemism*, cf. Sergei Tokarev, *History of Religion* (Moscow: Progress, 1986), 19-25. *Oxford Dictionary* defines the word *totem* as “natural object esp. animal adopted among N.Amer. Indians as emblem of clan or individual on ground of kinship.” Cf. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. 7th ed., s.v. “totem.”

²⁹Houtart, “Role of Western Religion,” 259.

organise them in systems, and understand their individual and collective existence by way of those symbols. These symbols with their attached meanings are shared by all the members of the group. We can even say that a culture is a symbolic construction of human reality. We create our symbols, and we live by the symbols we have created. We understand ourselves, the functions of our own societies, the modes of production, our relationships with nature (natural functions), with others (social functions), and with the deities (supernatural functions) by means of these symbolic constructions we have erected. Therefore, any social analysis must include the analysis of the symbolic systems of that society. We enter into the discussion by briefly describing Houtart's model of sociological analysis.

Houtart approaches the problem in the light of the sociology of religion, while recognising that the sociological method is not the only way to understand the social phenomena, that approaching the cultural phenomenon from an anthropological standpoint is an alternative possibility. He does not deny the validity of such pluralistic approaches, including that of cultural anthropology,³⁰ but his is a strictly sociological approach rather than that of an anthropologist or an ethnographer. This point is raised because, as Bryan S. Turner, Professor of Sociology at Cambridge, rightly points out, cultural studies are becoming more and more popular in the humanities and social sciences, something that he calls the phenomenon of "culturalism."³¹ Clearly, Houtart is far from this type of culturalism or absolutism of culture that leaves behind the sociopolitical elements of religion. Today, there is less emphasis on the sociopolitical aspects in many cultural studies and ethnographic descriptions, and Turner complains that the political and economic dimensions of Marx and Weber have been lost in most of this apolitical culturalism.³² Undoubtedly, Houtart's approach to the symbolic representation,

³⁰Ibid., 271.

³¹Bryan S. Turner, *Classical Sociology* (London: Sage, 1999), 282.

³²Ibid.

with its emphasis on the sociopolitical dimension, would please Turner, as Houtart gives due recognition to Marx and Weber.³³

We now turn to Houtart's conceptual framework of sociological analysis, in which the symbolic representation is presented as part of a wider conceptual analytical model.

A Conceptual Framework for Social Analysis

François Houtart's reflections on the topic, that is, the symbolic representation (as one of the main sections in a wider conceptual framework of social analysis), can be found in *Towards Understanding Indian Society*³⁴ by Gabriele Dietrich and Bastiaan Wielenga, two eminent scholars (theological educators) and social activists in South India.³⁵ Dietrich and Wielenga appreciate that Houtart—a Belgian social scientist and Roman Catholic priest in 1973 and 1974 in South India—introduced this framework, and a summary of this framework was published by Houtart himself in 1980.³⁶ Initially, the scheme was introduced to a limited audience.³⁷ Dietrich and Wielenga's writing served to share Houtart's model with a wider readership. On the whole, it presents the conceptual model of social analysis expeditied by Houtart in the first part, and then the two authors' own application of the model to the Indian context comes as the second and third parts respectively. The present section in this chapter is limited only to the conceptual aspect, but it carries also sufficient illustrations for our purposes. What Houtart initiated in the seventies has been carried forward in India through the Centre for Social Analysis of Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, which deserves great credit for its

³³Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka* (London: Sage, 1999). This work is a clear example of the use of Weber and Marx. For Turner, they are the twin founding fathers of sociology. Cf. Bryan S. Turner, *Classical Sociology*

³⁴Gabriele Dietrich and Bastiaan Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society* (Madurai: CSA, 1998), 17-18.

³⁵Ibid. [Cf. François Houtart, *Structural Analysis of Society* (Madurai: RCPED, 1980)].

³⁶Ibid., 14.

³⁷The first presentation of Houtart had taken place in 1973 at the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, Bangalore, and the second one was presented in a workshop organized by the Church of South India in 1974. Cf. François Houtart, *Church and Social Justice: Towards Understanding the Problem* (Bangalore: The Synod of the Church of South India, 1975).

promotion of social analysis and social praxis in the Indian context during the last two-and-a-half decades.

The Current Status of Houtart's Model of Social Analysis

On my visit to South India in July 2007, I went to the Centre for Social Analysis (hereafter referred to as CSA) at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, where Houtart's approach is being used for teaching and research in the field of societal analysis.³⁸ One of CSA's teachers, David Rajendran, comments, "As a department of Social Analysis, we are introducing a tool for analysis first taught by Fr. François Houtart."³⁹ The CSA was inaugurated in 1985 and gradually evolved into both a resource centre for conducting courses on social analysis at graduate (B.D)⁴⁰ and postgraduate (M.Th) levels, under the accreditation of the Senate of Serampore College in India, and a social analysis educational centre dealing with social movements. The most significant part of it is that recently the CSA has begun to offer a doctoral programme (D. Th) in social analysis. The impact of the Centre's more than twenty years⁴¹ of existence as an educational project, together with its influence on theologians and social activists, particularly in South India and beyond, cannot be underestimated if one is to judge Houtart's influence on the field of social analysis. It must be observed that the student body of the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary is not restricted to South India, but includes students from the rest of India as well as from some of its neighbouring countries, so we can guess, only guess that Houtart's method of social analysis reaches beyond the limits of South Asia.

This framework is relevant here because it makes it easier to see Houtart understands of religion and society in a broader perspective. Here, we encounter a

³⁸Gabriele Dietrich, interview by author, July 17, 2007.

³⁹David Rajendran, "Introduction of CSA and the Theme of Jubilee Seminar," *Arasara Journal of Theological Reflection* (Centre for Social Analysis anniversary issue) 18, no. 2 (2005): 2.

⁴⁰This course, designed by the CSA, has been approved by the Senate of Serampore College, India.

⁴¹Prof. Ulrich Duchrow has been at CSA as one of the keynote speakers contributing to the conference organized on globalisation to mark the anniversary of CSA.

synthesis of Houtart's sociology of religion. Dietrich and Wielenga focused our attention on the discourse of religion and society, which has a special relevance to the Indian and Asian context, pioneered by M. M. Thomas, François Houtart, G. Lemercinier, and Ajith Roy (Marxist theorist).⁴² Houtart's sociological approach should be understood in such a context of discourse on religion and society.

In other words, how to understand the nature and function of religion in its wider social context is the question in which Houtart, among others, is interested. Social ethicists generally show a keen interest in this discourse of religion and society.⁴³ Therefore, this framework is facilitative, helping us to grasp the interaction of religion with other areas of life, such as the political and economic dimensions. The several issues that have surfaced as a result of the encounter between religion and society will become a working ground for many other fields of study and knowledge. Finally, it particularly shows how the concept of symbolic representation has been used as a socioanalytical instrument to explain specific social realities, such as religion, in a theoretical way, not only for the sake of social analysis, but also for the academic study of religion itself.⁴⁴

Scheme of Social Analysis⁴⁵

To distinguish the different dimensions of the social reality, its different structures, and different factors, the framework of social analysis has been divided into three main parts, which should be understood as a theoretical framework for explaining the social organisation:

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³David Hollenbach, S. J., "The Common Good Revisited," *Theological Studies*, 50 (1989): 70-94. There has been great interest in the World Council of Churches on the issue of religion and society with special reference to Church and society. Cf. John Bennett, ed., *Christian Social Ethics in a Changing World*, (London: SCM, 1966). The influence of WCC's church and society discourse on Houtart cannot be underestimated, and this influence will be discussed in the chapter on ecclesiology.

⁴⁴Houtart's model of social analysis has been used in the courses meant for contextual theology, ethics, and understanding society in some theological academies of the Indian subcontinent. The Theological College of Lanka, Sri Lanka, is another institution using this model in theological education.

⁴⁵Theoretical discussion on all the topics in Houtart's scheme of sociological analysis is beyond the scope of this study, which will focus only on symbolic representation and refer to the other areas where necessary.

1. Organization of the material base.
2. Organization of the collective life.
3. Symbolic representation.

What we generally call social, economic, political and cultural aspects have been conceptually reorganized in this structure using sociological concepts. The social and economic aspects have been categorised under “Organization of the material base.”

Houtart writes,

The first requisite for any social group is to exist, this means to live. It is true for simple groups as tribes or villages as well as for more complex social units such as big cities or a nation. . . . Without a material basis no human group can survive and thus exist.⁴⁶

For Houtart every human group has some form of organisation that makes it coherent and gives it stability and its distinctive identity. The *collective life* denotes public-political activity. This concept is as old as Aristotle. However, there is a difference between the social structure and the social organisation. The social organisation has to do with collective responses to the needs of the common life in society, in a planned way. The social structure is a direct consequence of the material basis (social classes, for example) of a human collective. All cultural-social activity takes place within the encompassing frame that we have called symbolic construction and symbolic representation.

It is also important to note that the social analysis plays a central role in Houtart’s thinking. He is critical about any approaches to social ethics that do not take into account a social analysis.⁴⁷ This scheme is used as an entry point to the discussion on symbolic representation (See table 1). Thus, in the present chapter, we will focus primarily on the symbolic representation.

⁴⁶Houtart, *Structural Analysis of Society*, 7.

⁴⁷Houtart is of the view that the *common good approach* by the Church suffers a lack of critical social analysis that focuses on causes of the social problems with special reference to the global situation today. See Houtart, interview by author, in Sahabandhu, “Portraying.”

Symbolic Representation Revisited

All human groups have a representation of their own reality by means of symbols and understand their universe by those symbols they have created. *Representation* here means an image or an idea of reality as it is perceived. Through the representations of reality in symbols, humans are able to communicate with each other because they share the meanings of those symbols they have created. They express their understanding of reality through words, gestures, movements, and sounds: all those are symbols that convey particular meanings to others.

Language, art, music, customs, artefacts, and other expressions of culture are means of such communication or elements of a system of meanings. In a systematized way, we observe this in the form of a specific culture, philosophy, religion, or ideology.⁴⁸

Representations and Meanings

How are the symbolic systems being produced? Let us consider an explanation given by the Indian social scientist John Desrochers.⁴⁹ According to Desrochers, people often question the context in which they live or question the meaning of their very existence. This search for meaning and explanation is not new to humanity.⁵⁰

A helpful comment on the usage of models and schemes was given by an English Methodist theologian, George Lovell; in our opinion, this comment expresses the spirit in which Houtart uses models of social analysis. Models, says Lovell, are used in the natural sciences, in the social sciences, as well as in theology. They are aids to formulate hypotheses about the relation between variables and enable steps to be taken in the process of theory building. As such they are tentative devices and must be seen as not more than tentative. The fact that they may be shown to be faulty does not matter. What matters is that they enable people to understand things or to gain a better and deeper

⁴⁸Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 58f.

⁴⁹John Desrochers, *Methods of Societal Analysis* (Bangalore: Centre for Social Action, 1988), 4.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 65.

TABLE 1 Scheme of Social Analysis

(A) Organization of the Material Base: Economic and Social Structures	
1. Economic structure	2. Social structure
a. Interaction with nature	a. Clan and tribe
b. Tools of production	b. Family and patriarchy
c. Property relations	c. Caste
d. Division of labour	d. Class
e. Distribution	e. Urban rural divide
f. Market and money	f. Ethnic groups
(B) Organization of the Collective Life:	
1. The State	
2. Peoples' Organizations	
3. Civil Institutions	
(C) Symbolic Representations:	
1. Material, Mental, and Social Aspects of Communication	
2. Religion and Ideology	

Note: This scheme is a tentative model and should serve as an aid to understand how subsystems fit together in real life. The models, thus, help to clarify what a social system looks like and to make connections between variables and processes.⁵¹

understanding, to live and to work to better effect, and to become theologically and scientifically articulate.⁵²

Naturally, people look for meanings, which could be understood by way of a response to a questioning process. Some questions appear very philosophical and could be very important in philosophy or theology, but for a sociologist, they contribute to produce the meaning system, which is part of what Houtart calls the *social ensemble*.⁵³ Houtart defines the social ensemble as “the whole social complex, or the totality, formed by the social fields and their interrelations.”⁵⁴ What questions arise in the human search for meaning?⁵⁵ Why do I live? What is the goal—the purpose, the meaning, and direction—

⁵¹Models of social analysis are essential dimensions of Houtart’s work. Cf. George Lovell, *Diagrammatic Modelling: An Aid to Theological Reflection in Church and Community Development Work* (Chelsea: AVEC, 1991), 19.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³Cf. Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 10.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁵⁵Desrochers, *Methods of Societal Analysis*, 65.

of all this bustling activity? What is my ultimate destiny? Why do I suffer and die? These are ultimate questions, but people in their day-to-day life have to ask many immediate questions: What shall I eat; what shall I drink; what shall I wear? As people live in a given society, they also seek explanations of the social questions that are crucial to their existence: Why am I poor or rich? Why is our community powerful or powerless? Why do certain social customs, rituals, and festivities exist?⁵⁶ The institutions of symbolic representation—religion, culture, and ideology—provide the explanation and meaning as a way of response to many of these questions.

A question could be raised as to why the systems of representation and meaning are called symbolic systems. The reason is that they use the items and elements that exist to mean something else: a tree can be the symbol of life and of the unity of the clan, a certain stone can be the symbol of power, and so on. A new meaning could be represented by a new symbolic use of the symbolising material elements.⁵⁷

Dance, theatre, film, painting, decoration, and other forms of art are created and creative symbols or collections of symbols. They are means of expression for a variety of life experiences, such as happiness and suffering, joy and grief, hope and despair, celebration and mourning.⁵⁸ Stories, masks, sculpture, and other forms of media are used to express fears and hopes, courage and cowardice, joys and sorrows.⁵⁹ Folk legends, myths, songs, and rituals are used to give meaning to life.⁶⁰ The myths of a given society are collections of symbols in a discursive and narrative way that explain why things are the way they are. The flag in modern society is another symbol. It can represent various entities, such as a nation, an organization, a sports club, a union of workers, a parish

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 59.

⁵⁸Of course this is not to deny many other functions of different forms of art from an aesthetic point of view.

⁵⁹Guayasamin, an Ecuadorean painter of Amerindian descent. Guayasamin says, "Art is a prayer and a protest." <http://www.guayasamin.com/> (accessed on March 4, 2006). I am informed that Guayasamin was affiliated with the Communist Party.

⁶⁰Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 59.

congregation, and so on.⁶¹ Symbols such as flags and totems also give the community a visible gathering point: they are symbols of coherence and solidarity of all those for whom those symbols carry a profound meaning.⁶² For that reason, these symbols that evoke deep sentiments of belonging can be also manipulated for electoral purposes (to give only an example) through an ideological distortion of their meanings. In other words, the symbolic representations have a functional character that has the power to represent and give meaning to the external reality of nature and society, as well as the internal, personal, and unique reality of the self, on the one hand, and also, by appropriating, twisting, and distorting them, they have an equal power to manipulate the masses for purposes of domination of the whole ensemble by a fraction of it. An example of it can be the national flag of Sri Lanka, which contains in its composition an overwhelming dominance of Sinhalese and Buddhist symbolic elements, and neglects other sections of society to their detriment.

It is important to note that there are things in society that have double functions, being both symbolic and practical. Imagine a village in South India. Dietrich and Wielenga write, "The way in which the village is ordered is a material reality which at the same time symbolically conveys assumptions about caste hierarchy."⁶³ Similarly, the palaces, temples, city squares, and skyscrapers represent symbolically the relationship of power and values in a particular society. Dress is not just a piece of cloth to protect the body from cold and rain; it also represents symbolically social roles.

Whether the society is ancient or modern, Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern, its symbolic representation remains essential. On this essential nature of the symbolic representation, Houtart says,

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²It is observed, for example, that the very use of the flag by the Americans and the Europeans reveals vast differences due to historico-political and cultural reasons. I refer to the hesitancy of some of the European nations to use their flags and the pride of many Americans in using the national flag.

⁶³Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 60.

With more complex forms of society, the symbolic field evolved from myth to systematic construction, from group production to specialized agents (intellectuals, prophets, priests), from natural regulation of kinship's interrelationships to a social ethics. But anyway the symbolic field remains *essential* for any human society as a construction in the area of ideas and expressions which once produced has a certain autonomy in its reproduction and in its evolution.⁶⁴

Houtart's argument is that religion is part of the symbolic field, and he has a particular interest in how religion functions in that field.

There are two ways of looking at religion as a symbolic field. James Beckford helps us to understand two major approaches to religion, which were prevalent in the latter part of the twentieth century, namely, substantive and functionalist.⁶⁵ The substantive approach focuses on the content, such as the beliefs (the substance) of different faiths/religions. This is the subject of the theological study of that religion. The functionalist approach focuses on the functionality of religion in cultures, including its social functions. This is the subject of study for the sociology of religion. According to Johnstone, the substantive approach places more emphasis on what the phenomenon *is*, while the functionalist approach emphasizes what the phenomenon *does*.⁶⁶ There is no need to mention that Houtart does not take a "substantive approach" (that would make of him a theologian), but a "functionalist approach" (making him a sociologist), as his interest focuses on how a religion behaves or acts in a given context. Thus, for Houtart, the whole religious phenomenon is a social reality with multiple functions.

Of course, some functionalists, including Houtart, also use the beliefs and content of faiths, not in the sense of theological interest in the matter, but in the sense of sociological interest, including sociological applicability to understand the social causes,

⁶⁴Houtart, "Role of Western Religion," 259f. (emphasis added).

⁶⁵Beckford, "Religion," 556. The problem with Beckford is that, if a researcher wants to assess a role of specific religious concepts such as One God, a Chosen Nation, Shanthi, or Jihad in a given context, then that requires a combination of either substantive and functionalistic approaches or multidisciplinary methods.

⁶⁶Ronald L. Johnstone, *Religion in Society* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1988), 14.

even of theological concepts.⁶⁷ To illustrate this point, let us consider Houtart's comment on Edward Schillebeeckx's views on the Church as a sign. "Fr. Schillebeeckx writes, 'the Church is a sign, visible to the whole world, in which is revealed the mystery of the concrete life of this world. This sign is quite concrete.'"⁶⁸ Houtart then carries this substantive content of the theologian's insights into his own functionalist stance of a sociologist and states that

Its function, according to the same author, is to bring people together in a community of brothers and sisters founded on their union with God through Jesus Christ. However, if the Church is to merit this title of the sacrament of the world, it has to translate itself into the life of men and women in the very heart of the reality we live today.⁶⁹

In the article entitled "The Church and Developing Nations: Some Questions for the Theologians," Houtart asserts this idea and further argues that the word *sign* must be addressed in the light of the sociology of communication.⁷⁰ According to Houtart, a sociologist of religion would be able to look at theological concepts sociologically. Houtart places religion in a broader social context and confirms his sociological approach when he says, "What interests us is religion as a social reality."⁷¹

Houtart adopts the definition given by Bourdieu, who considers religion as a symbolic medium that is both structured and structuring, provided there is the possibility or actuality of a common agreement on the meaning of signs and of the world.⁷² However, Houtart assesses that Bourdieu does not sufficiently emphasize the specific quality of religion that distinguishes it from other symbolic systems that provide an ideological basis for social groups. Therefore, he agrees with Bourdieu only after adding a further element to the above understanding, that religion is a symbolic medium having

⁶⁷François Houtart, *The Church and the Developing Nations: Some Questions for Theologians*, vol. 2 of *Theology of Renewal*, (Montreal: Palm, 1968), 359.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

⁷¹Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 6.

⁷²Houtart, "Religion and Development," 7.

reference to what the believers are calling supernatural forces, personified or not.⁷³ The term *supernatural forces* can be problematic, as it tends to fall into a dualism of natural and supernatural. The natural, the social, and the supernatural are not three separate and independent dimensions or spheres of reality, but are in a continuum; they can be separated for the sake of study and analysis, but in fact they are three spheres and dimensions of the one entire reality. Ninian Smart, aware of the possible ambiguity and misunderstanding of this terminology, applies the term *sacred focus* (or foci) in defining religion, instead of *supernatural forces*.⁷⁴

Religion appears as an organized web of meanings, a frame of reference for all reality structured around meanings; it plays a reconciling role (not to be confused with the ministry of reconciliation in Christian theology and pastoral work) between structured oppositions and brings about harmony. Some examples of such oppositions are life and death, the transient and the permanent, the natural and the supernatural, liberty and constraint. Religion plays a role in reconciling opposites resulting from social interrelations and is notable for the degree to which it makes acceptable the tensions, contradictions, and conflicts that are inevitably involved in every relationship among the people and between the people and their social environment, especially with every kind of social organization.⁷⁵

On the level of the social function, religion is a *structured* symbolic medium, standing in a relationship of dependence towards other variables of the social ensemble, such as the economic, social, political, cultural, and familial variables. It is not, however, a sealed or fixed phenomenon; hence, it is also structuring. For this point, Houtart refers us to Albert Doutreloux, who argues that the fact of “sacralizing” the human order or putting the human order in direct connection with the supernatural confers this order with

⁷³Ibid., 8.

⁷⁴Ninian Smart, *Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 15.

⁷⁵Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 7.

an indisputable character. The mechanism by which this is accomplished is through the reduction of oppositions, either through subsystems of beliefs situated directly on the level of explanations, or by a myth that produces the link between two orders of reality, endogenous and exogenous to human society, or again by rituals that make it possible to act symbolically but efficaciously.⁷⁶

The symbolic representations, such as religion, could influence the organization of the material base and the collective life, that is, the socioeconomic and political life. Alternatively, the organization of the material base (the economic and political aspects) could influence the systems of meaning that include religion. When we speak of this influence or interaction, it does not always mean that religion influences the state or vice versa.⁷⁷ It actually explains the possibilities for mutual influence of the religious field and the sociopolitical spheres. This interaction may or may not include the State. The way people come to understand the world and also their imagining of a possible world or the way people give meaning to life or to their way of life, all these functions have been profoundly shaped by their socioeconomic positions and contexts in society: the worldview of a *goyigama* (a wealthy land owner in the farmers' caste) is significantly different from the worldview of a landless peasant. However, religions and other symbolic representations have the capacity to influence society and the body politic so that the landless peasant one day can be an equal to the former *goyigama*. The quality and quantity of this influence or interplay varies from context to context in different periods of history.

At this point, let us attend to three examples so that we may become aware of this interplay between religion and other spheres, even though these examples specifically speak of religion and politics. The first case considers Sri Lankan Buddhism and its link

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷The separation of church and state must be noted in Western polities, but history witnesses to the politicization of Christian religion in the West.

to the political sphere, while the second reflects on Portuguese colonialism and its interaction with Christian religion. Indeed, in Sri Lanka today the Buddhist *Sangha* (the monastic establishment of Buddhism) is strongly politicised and has a mighty influence on the State and many of the government's political decisions; paramount among the duties of the President of Sri Lanka is his or her obligation to protect the Buddhist establishment in the land. The second case is the attempt to destroy the *Sangha* and replace it by the Catholic Church. During the Portuguese *Padroado*, the King of Portugal had a papal directive to establish the "true faith" of formal Catholicism in all the societies conquered and colonised by the most Catholic kings of Portugal; the King selects, sends, and finances missionaries to achieve that goal; if the King is under God's authority, all the King's vassals should be worshippers of the King's God, the King in Heaven.⁷⁸ The evangelization of the discovered lands was the *sine qua non* condition imposed by the Church to legitimise and justify in the Name of God its conquest of many lands and deliver their inhabitants from the pestilence and darkness of the error of paganism. This is the ideology of the Portuguese *Padroado*, as well as of the Spanish *Patronato de Indias*. The *Padroado* mentality had reached into the Portuguese ecclesiastical hierarchies through the late twentieth century, as it became patent in the tenacious defence on the part of the Portuguese bishops of Portugal's retention of its colonies in Africa under the new name of "overseas provinces."

A third example could be the situation in Sri Lanka after its independence. This example is more complex because it is more concrete and nearer to our own skin. Writing in 1970, one year before the youth uprising led by the People's Liberation Front (JVP) and the immediate repression by the State's forces, Houtart prophetically anticipated some of the events that were coming and wrote in a conclusion to his survey on the Catholic Church in Ceylon:

⁷⁸See Martin Quéré, *Christianity in Sri Lanka under Portuguese Padroado 1597-1658*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: The Catholic Press, 1995.

We are facing an *irreversible process*. Of course political variations may take place. But a trend towards a profound and rapid social change is there. It means a change in social structure and a change in social aspirations. It goes in the direction of increasing awareness of the importance of secular goals and an increasing desire for democratic participation. If this trend is not followed and if problems are not solved a revolutionary change or transformation may be the only alternative.⁷⁹

In this instance, Houtart was addressing his warning (implicitly but evidently) to the Catholic Church of Ceylon, asking her about her stance in the national situation and on the coming upheavals of society. Was the Church legitimising the status quo by her accomplice silence, or was she on the side of the poor? There is no possible neutrality in cases like this. But the Church has a message much publicised after Vatican Council II. While anticipating what is coming, Houtart reminds the Church of her confessed role:

the promotion of social justice, the defence of the poor, the protest against the abuse of power exploiting the poor classes, backing initiatives to solve the social problems of the country, giving moral support to lay people engaged in social action, co-operation of the members of the Church with the transformation powers in society, initiating social projects wherever necessary.⁸⁰

The situation demands an answer.

Were these words mere publicity, rhetoric in the abstract, or a concrete declaration of intention? The Catholic Church of Ceylon answered by ignoring the Report and condemning it to oblivion. Silence itself betrays an ideological stance. Houtart states over and over again that political neutrality is an impossibility for the Church or for any other religious organisation.

Some years later, Houtart writes in 1987 on how religion became an important factor in the transition period from colonial rule to self-determination of many South Asian societies.

For example in Sri Lanka for quite some time the only way of publicly expressing nationalist tendencies was through religion. The *Temperance movement* at the end of the 19th century was a case in point. Buddhist

⁷⁹Houtart, *Catholic Church in Ceylon* ["The Houtart Survey"]. Published in a summary form by QUEST, No. 43, (1971): 43.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 50.

revival was a way of expressing the cultural revival of the country. Such revival was a necessary support for political action. In this period of transition, there was a real possibility for a social and political transformation to get support from cultural factors. This is why the first nationalist movement in Sri Lanka had close links with Buddhism.⁸¹

Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, and still today, 60 years later, the Buddhist religion plays an influential role in Sri Lankan politics.⁸² But Sri Lankan Buddhism⁸³ (Theravada), with the exception of a small number of Buddhists, has failed to recognize the rights of the minorities, especially of the Tamils in the country.⁸⁴ Even in 1987, Houtart was not critical enough of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Of course, we must grant that Houtart was a foreigner in Sri Lanka, allowed to study the political and social organization of the country; as such, he had to abstain from any public criticism of the ways the country was run, and he had that in mind while he was studying in the field of religion and politics in Sri Lanka. And yet, once he had finished his commission for which he had been allowed to stay in the country, he was free to express his thoughts about Sri Lanka when he was outside the country. After reading Houtart's contributions to the analysis of the relationship between Theravada Buddhism and Sri Lankan society, we immediately ask these questions: Was Sri Lankan Buddhism partially or significantly responsible for causing the violence that has torn the social fabric of the country today? If Buddhism has an "ideological role" to play in that society (as in any other society), does that role imply a legitimization of the brutal repression of the JVP (First Youth Uprising) with over 10,000 youth killed? Was Buddhism not only a legitimator but even an instigator of such a ruthless military repression? We have mentioned the response of the

⁸¹François Houtart, "Religion and the Transition to Capitalism in South Asia Religion," in *Ideology and Counter Culture, Essays in Honour of S. Kappen*, ed. Philip Mathew (Bangalore: Horizons, 1987), 87 (emphasis added).

⁸²For a discussion on Buddhism and the post-colonial period, Cf. Asanga Tilekaratne, "Fifty Years of Buddhism in Sri Lanka: 1948-1998," *Dialogue*, 25-26 (1998-1999): 228-247.

⁸³In contrast to Vietnamese Buddhism and Burmese Buddhism, Sri Lankan Buddhism is very conservative.

⁸⁴I tend to compare Sri Lankan Buddhism, for example, with Vietnamese and Burmese Buddhism.

Catholic Church of Ceylon: a complicit silence. What was the response of the Buddhist Sangha?

In 2003 Houtart was more explicit in his assessment, especially writing on the religious identity and the obstacles to interfaith dialogue. Houtart says,

In other words, can we observe specific situations in which conflict is directly related to religious belonging or where an essential aspect of a specific struggle is motivated by religious identity? A good example in this respect is the Sri Lankan conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils, where an important part of the Sinhala Buddhists claim to be defending the national identity of the country through cultural fidelity to Buddhism. After independence the same group strove towards recognition of Buddhism as the State religion.⁸⁵

The State religion has to defend the State, and, in its own turn, the State has to defend and promote that religion. The Constitution of Sri Lanka affirms that the Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place, and accordingly, it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana, while assuring basic rights to all religions.⁸⁶ Houtart has gone to the extent of saying that a part of the Buddhist Sangha even considers the defence of the Sinhala Buddhist identity as a religious mission, even to the pursuit of a merciless war.⁸⁷ The main thesis, however, remains the same—that there is a dialectical interaction of religion and society, in this case Buddhism and Sinhalese society.

Let us look back at the case of the Portuguese colonialism, as a model valid for applying to all other cases of European colonialism. It is the one that Houtart has studied most thoroughly, and that is the reason we include it in this study. According to Houtart,⁸⁸

⁸⁵François Houtart, "Religious Identity," in *How to Conquer the Barriers to Intercultural Dialogue*, ed. Christiane Timmerman and Barbara Segart (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2006), 105.

⁸⁶Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, "Constitution of the Republic," Official Legal Information Centre of Sri Lanka (Government of Sri Lanka, 1978).

⁸⁷Houtart, "Religious Identity," 106. Sri Lanka's 25-year conflict has caused nearly 70,000 deaths as well as widespread displacement of people (with figures of Internally Displaced People (IDP) due to the conflict reaching more than 500,000, of which more than 200,000 since April 2006) and destruction, physical as well as environmental.

⁸⁸Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 102-103. [Each European empire had their own 'messianic vocation' (almost a divine mandate); The French-reason and ideals of French revolution, The British-commerce and so-called civilisation, The Dutch-chosen race and mercantilism, The Spaniards and the Portuguese-true faith (Catholicism)].

there were three general objectives that established the grandeur of the political power of Portugal: First, through the destruction of the Arab and Turkish influence; second, through economics that were used to dominate the East-West trade; and finally, through religion that was used to maintain and expand Christendom against Islam and other faiths.

Writing on justice in South Africa and the Portuguese colonies, Houtart shows how Portugal, as a colonial power, used the Christian religion as an ideological tool to justify its domination.⁸⁹ He writes,

The Portuguese church hierarchy has taken sides with the government policy. A number of texts could be quoted to demonstrate this fact. It should suffice to cite the bishops' statement of January 13, 1961, commenting on the Portuguese decision to make her colonies an integral part of the national territory; the expansion of the Portuguese nation in various parts of the world has been faithful to . . . the ideal within the Christian civilization of human brotherly communion. In this hour, when the West seems to have lost its self-awareness . . . Portugal is conscious of its evangelical and civilizing mission.⁹⁰

Returning to the Sri Lankan context, Houtart's sociological approach to history shows that the Portuguese rulers destroyed Buddhism in a three-pronged attack by 1) the suppression of links with the political system at the highest level; 2) the destruction of symbols, so as to weaken the system of its meaning; and 3) the suppression of the religious organisation.⁹¹ In turn, the same steps were used by the Portuguese to impose Christianity by 1) the establishment of the link with the political field; 2) the introduction of a new system of symbols; and (3) the establishment of a new religious organisation.

In view of Houtart's vigorous negative appraisal of the Portuguese colonialism, some critics would observe that he has not made any evaluation of the role Belgium (Houtart's home country) played in the Congo during colonialism. To this we can only say that, for some mysterious, unplanned, and unpredictable events in his life, the

⁸⁹François Houtart, "Demand for Economic Justice," in *Towards a Discipline of Social Ethics: Essays in Honour of Walter G. Muelder*, ed. Paul Deats (Boston: n.p., 1972), 194-217.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 209.

⁹¹François Houtart and Geneviève Lemercinier, *The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions*, 3rd ed. (Louvain-la-Neuve: CRSR, 1985), 175.

promising young Catholic sociologist began his in-depth analysis of the interaction of religion and society in a non-Catholic setting, in Sri Lanka, sufficiently small yet large enough to serve as a showcase for analogous studies in other societies. He has no animosity against the Portuguese. These examples are given only to show how Houtart's work explores the interactive nature of religion and society with special reference to the political sphere, though at times the fields have been intermingled. We have avoided judging the role of religion in society in this section, but it remains for us to understand the social functionality of religion in different epochs of history. What is important here is the possibility of a dialectical interaction between religion and the sociopolitical field.

In conclusion of this section, according to Houtart, we assert that religion is part of the symbolic representation of any given society and that it does not exist in isolation but in constant interaction with the socioeconomic, political, and other spheres of human order. The next topic of our discussion will lead us further in an exploration of religion, ideology, and politics.

Religion, Ideology, and the Political Field

Before the discussion of Houtart's reflections on religion, ideology, and politics, a brief overview of the concept of ideology is needed.

The Concept of Ideology

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines *ideology*, first, as the science of ideas or visionary speculations; second, as the manner of thinking characteristic of a class or an individual; and third, as the ideas at the basis of some economic or political theory or system.⁹²

⁹²*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 7th ed., s.v. "ideology."

The term was first used in the context of the French Revolution in 1797 by Antonie Destut (Claude) de Tracy, who was interested in developing a model called the “science of ideas.” De Tracy saw the irrationality of the feudal system based on the divine right of kings. He realized the need for a new set of ideas for the new democratic republican State that could replace the irrationality of the traditional system.⁹³ De Tracy’s interest lay in the new values of freedom, equality, and democracy; these values have had a great impact on the evolution of modern democracy. However, the original meaning of *ideology* has gradually evolved and changed.

Marx understood the concept of ideology very differently. For him, ideology was not a scientific explanation of reality, but a biased and distorted or historically conditioned and ready-made explanation and justification of things as they are. For Marx, ideology was an encompassing explanation that included morality, religion, metaphysics, law, political thought, worldview, and language.⁹⁴ In response to the French Revolution, Marx showed that the capitalistic ideology defended the existing order. Two issues were in Marx’s mind: first, the new rising class of the bourgeoisie, commercialists, and industrialists, who wanted the abolition of feudal privileges granted to the landed aristocracy and the development of free trade based on private property; second, the consequent deprivation of workers. For Marx, ideology belonged to the false consciousness and alienated thought of the capitalist society, and so ideology was an instrument of exploitation in the hands of the dominant class.⁹⁵

Alternatively, Lenin in *What Is to Be Done* ([1902] 1988) emphasized that the workers needed a class theory that provided both an explanation of the social reality and an orientation for action to inspire their struggles (socialist ideology). For him, this theory

⁹³Desrochers, *Methods of Societal Analysis*, 76.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 77.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

was a “scientific ideology.”⁹⁶ In contrast to Marx, Lenin gave a positive meaning to the concept of ideology, indicating that the later meanings try to apply ideology for all classes and for different purposes: either for the legitimation or for the transformation of the status quo.

For the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, ideology is the hegemony of bourgeois ideas (cultural leadership of the ruling class). Thus, he put forward the idea of an antithesis of ideologies: the ideology of domination and the ideology of the dominated.⁹⁷ The dominant ideology is reactionary and must be challenged by the proletarian hegemony with a counter-ideology, the ideology of the dominated, which is a revolutionary ideology. For Gramsci, however, ideology is to be found at all levels of the social fabric: in education, art, popular culture, the mass media, and everyday language demonstrating a higher interest in culture. Like Paul Ricœur,⁹⁸ Gramsci never negates the power of religion for social praxis. Later, we will see how Houtart’s use of the ideological role of religion has been significantly influenced by Gramsci, who called socialist thinkers to present a leadership for a revolutionary counter-culture against the “hegemony” of the bourgeoisie.

Another German thinker, W. F. Haug, promoted a theory of ideology (in *Elemente einer Theorie des Ideologischen*)⁹⁹ that was attractive in its consistency, but had problems as its conceptualisation differed from a more generally accepted use of the term. His conception of ideology was based on Marx’s critique of ideology and differed from the neutral use by which later Marxists would speak of reactionary and socialist ideologies. Haug reserved the term *ideology* for the mental socialization from above through the state

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷George Ritzer and Douglas J. Goodman, *Sociological Theory*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2003), 270.

⁹⁸Paul Ricœur is one of the philosophers who affirmed the positive social agency of religion: “And if religion, if religions have a meaning, it is to liberate that core of goodness in human beings, to go looking for it where it has been completely buried.” See Paul Ricœur, “Liberating the Core of Goodness,” (from a conversation with Paul Ricœur, Taizé, Holy Week 2000) http://www.taize.fr/en_article102.html (accessed July 12, 2007).

⁹⁹Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Elemente Einer Theorie Des Ideologischen* (Hamburg: Argument, 1993).

and the powers that be. This implied various forms of alienation and manipulation. The opposite was then also possible, meaning non-alienated socialization from below, in which people expressed their own common identity.¹⁰⁰

In *Ideology and Utopia*,¹⁰¹ Karl Mannheim distinguished the ideologies of the oppressors from the utopias of the oppressed. B. S. Turner writes on Mannheim's position, "The dominant class embraces ideology which blinds it to the possibility of social change, especially social change of a revolutionary character. The subordinate class, by contrast, is motivated by a desire for change."¹⁰² So the subordinate class had a utopian orientation towards a future dispensation.

This brief survey shows that the term *ideology* has a variety of meanings. However, Houtart's definition and analysis of ideology can help to answer the question of the relationship between religion and ideology.

Houtart starts by referring to Adam Schaff, a Polish Marxist philosopher. Schaff defines ideology as a system of opinions founded on an accepted system of values that determines the people's attitudes and behaviour with regard to the goals hoped for by the development of the society, the social group, or the individual.¹⁰³ Houtart goes a step further in *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*. For Houtart, ideology is

a system of explanations bearing on the existence of the social group, its history and its projection into the future, and rationalizing a particular type of power relationship. It is therefore that part of the symbolic system which furnishes the meanings for the political field.¹⁰⁴

Thus, it is clear that Houtart necessarily links ideology with politics. On the role of ideology, Houtart writes, in *The Church and Revolution*,¹⁰⁵

Ideology consists of a system which enables the members of any given society to legitimate the norms and values of that society. This

¹⁰⁰Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 66.

¹⁰¹Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1955).

¹⁰²Turner, *Classical Sociology*, 119.

¹⁰³François Houtart and André Rousseau, *Church and Revolution*, (New York: Orbis, 1971), 333.

¹⁰⁴Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 11.

¹⁰⁵Houtart and Rousseau, *Church and Revolution*, 333.

legitimation is never absolutely logical, but contains emotional elements which are capable of motivating men and giving them a feeling of security, simply because they contain a summary of the past, explain the present and foresee the future.¹⁰⁶

Let us consider how we will understand this further in the Houtartian sense.

The term *ideology* has been further analysed in the presentation of Houtart's scheme of sociological analysis.¹⁰⁷ According to the Houtartian scheme, there are four basic elements that constitute the ideological processes. They are as follows:

1. Any ideology is a system of signs, meanings, beliefs, values, and judgments related to the construction of society (for example, between its structures and conflicts).
2. Ideology then reflects and expresses the interests and outlook of particular social groups or classes.
3. It gives the members of such a group a sense of identity and an orientation to political action.
4. It works not only with rational concepts, but appeals also to the unconscious through symbols and myths.

Houtart's scheme of social analysis distinguishes between two types of ideologies: dominant ideologies and emancipatory ideologies. In this regard, he is indebted to Antonio Gramsci.

Dominant ideologies give reasons, both intellectually and psychologically, in support of the existing system and its dominant groups. For example, the rule of kings in the feudal systems was justified by the theory of the divine right of kings. Another example would be the religious justification of the caste system in India.¹⁰⁸

Emancipatory ideologies start from a critique of the existing situation. While the dominant ideologies tend to focus on what holds society together in a hierarchical system,

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 66.

¹⁰⁸Ibid. Cf. Houtart, "Religion and the Transition to Capitalism," 80.

the emancipatory ideologies highlight what divides people and in what ways people face discrimination and exploitation. The dominant ideology tends to be dogmatic and explanatory, while the emancipatory ideologies are always dialectical and transformative. The emancipatory ideologies project the vision of a better future and try to motivate people to become active in the struggle for the transformation of the present structures in order to make that vision a tangible reality. However, the same ideology can have a double function. For example, nationalism motivates people against colonialism, but at the same time after independence, it can catalyse the oppression of ethnic minorities within the country, as is currently happening in Sri Lanka.¹⁰⁹ Then, we must be always aware of the potentialities that ideologies have for the construction of justice and peace and also of the dangers of turning them to the service of the given unjust structures and wars to maintain them.

The Relationship between the Political and the Religious Fields

To bring the political realities to the surface, Houtart employs the concept of “ideological construct.” The ideological construct is a system of explanations referring to the existence of the social group, its history, and its future destiny, which presents as rational a particular type of social relationship.¹¹⁰ The political field means the political system as the institutionalisation of the power relationships between groups, institutions, and social actors in their pursuit of their political objectives.¹¹¹

The interrelationship between the political field and the religious field is one important aspect of the discourse on religion and society. The French structural anthropologist Lévi-Strauss’s conception of society has been influential on Houtart in this

¹⁰⁹The case of Sri Lanka has been interpreted as such. Cf. A. J. V. Chandrakanthan, “Catholic Revival in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka,” (Colombo: SEDEC, 1995), 42-70.

¹¹⁰Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 13.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*

regard.¹¹² For Lévi-Strauss, society consists of a set of interlocking systems, expressing each other.¹¹³ Societies do not exist in isolation. No social system exists alone like a satellite or meteor in space. Rather, the systems have such close relationships among themselves that they express each other. In other words, in every given social ensemble,¹¹⁴ there is a correspondence between systems. For Lévi-Strauss, however, the social structures are more invisible and hidden; that is, what is visible is a reality representing another. Houtart paraphrases another structural Marxist of French origin, Maurice Godelier, highlighting the two concepts of *correspondence* and *torsion* and their interrelation:

We could envisage a strict correspondence, a real homology between systems. Well, this is impossible. . . . No system expresses another exactly, on account of the specific nature of their codes, but also because of *torsion*, expression may be deformed or even reversed.¹¹⁵

The correspondence is further explained from a Weberian perspective. In his famous work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,¹¹⁶ Weber tried to show the influence of a religious system on an economic system through a social ethic, without assuming that the consequences so produced were actually willed.¹¹⁷ Even though Weber was a proponent of a theory of *causality*, he did not conclude that the Protestant religion was the sole cause of capitalism.¹¹⁸ However, in contrast to Marx, Weber is more linear.¹¹⁹ There is a complex relationship with one system influencing the other. Hence, in a given theoretical framework, one of the systems should be taken as a starting point, with others being considered as dependent variables, but one can never exclude the

¹¹²Ibid., 14.

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴Houtart defines the term *ensemble* as the whole social complex or totality formed by the social fields and their interrelations. See Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 10.

¹¹⁵Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 14 (emphasis added).

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁸Ritzer and Goodman, *Sociological Theory*, 115.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

relationship in the other direction.¹²⁰ For example, we could start with production or the market and relate them to religion, or else start with religion and relate it to ethnicity. This relationship, says Houtart, is not linear but dialectical.

Now, let us look at the word *torsion*. A correspondence exists between systems, but any system can undergo change as new elements are added and old ones dropped. Such a change, according to Houtart, does not ipso facto entail parallel changes in the corresponding system; consequently, gaps appear because each system enjoys a measure of autonomy.¹²¹ Each element operates within its own scope. For example, an economic change resulting from a technological advancement depends on a decision that may be taken with very little delay; but a legal change requires a long procedure, and a cultural mutation—such as in religious beliefs, representations, and practices—follows at an even slower pace.¹²²

Houtart further asserts on *torsion* that

The gaps of which we have spoken are movers in social dynamics. For the relative autonomy of the systems gives rise to the possibility of divergence between them, and the strain resulting from inadequation must be eased in order to preserve the cohesion of the social ensemble.¹²³

However, there is no absolute determinism by which the social ensemble functions mechanically. It is the social actors who unleash the process within the limits imposed by the social and physical conditioning and are subject to the orientation given by the functional character of the decisions to be made.¹²⁴

The discussion on correspondence and torsion further illustrates the situation of the interaction of religion and society in a wider perspective, showing the dynamism and vitality of religion. Let us consider two cases from Houtart's reflections to illustrate this

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹Ibid., 16.

¹²²Houtart, "Religion and Development," 14.

¹²³Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 17.

¹²⁴Ibid.

perspective. One is selected from the comments he made on the Portuguese colonialism and ideology, and the second concerns Sri Lankan Buddhism and the State ideology.

In the first case, the leading powers in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were Portugal and Spain, and Pope Alexander VI made the division of the non-Christian world between them in 1493. Not only was Catholicism the predominant religion in those countries, but it also provided the ideology of the political enterprise. For both Portugal and Spain, the economic, political, and religious objectives, even if they were specific, were quite mixed; and the religious mission of conquering the world for Christ was fundamentally an aspect of political ideology, so much so that the evangelisation and conversion of the newly discovered lands were often termed as “the spiritual conquest,” and nowadays the expression is translated by some historians as “the religious side of the conquest.” When authority is supposed to be derived directly from God and when the social order is considered the result of the divine will, politics become sacred, and their ideology is religious.¹²⁵

In the second case, let us consider the example from Houtart’s reflections on Sinhalese Buddhism in the Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka. In this section I will follow Houtart very closely. King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe¹²⁶ built a new religious sanctuary, the temple of the Sacred Relic of Buddha’s Tooth.¹²⁷ The symbolism used in the temple reveals the belief in a pantheon and the existence of *Bodhisattvas*, an idea bound up with that of merit. This pantheon forms the structural framework of the system. It constitutes a pyramid whose apex is occupied by the Buddha. Below the Buddha, we find deities: Sakra, first, the protector of the Buddhist universe (the *sasana*) who delegates his powers to Saman. The latter, and Vishnu, Skandha, Nata, and Pattini constitute the *hatarawaran deviyo* (pantheon of the national deities) charged with defending the faith and protecting

¹²⁵Houtart, “Role of Western Religion in the Confucian Regions,” 5.

¹²⁶Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 78-83.

¹²⁷In Sinhalese, *Dalanda Maligawa*. Cf. <http://www.sridaladamaligawa.lk/english/index.html> (accessed on July 27, 2007).

the kingdom. These are gods in the conventional sense of the word; they can grant favours and punish faults; but they are inferior to the Buddha, for they have not yet achieved salvation, even though they have reached the last stage preceding it. They are regarded as *Bodhisattvas*, beings who have renounced the last incarnation with the aim of helping human beings in their journey towards *nirvana*. At the bottom of the ladder are demons, the *prethas*, the malevolent spirits of sinful ancestors reduced to this low state owing to their bad karma. What is important here is to see how closely homologous this heavenly hierarchy was with that which existed on the sociopolitical level, how it reproduced the earthly power structure. Every deity possessed his own area of jurisdiction. Minor deities depended on major deities. At the summit of all was the Buddha.

This pantheon reflected the social reality and the religious production of the Kandy feudal-tributary system. The most important element that constituted the framework for the religious understanding of political power and made it appear reasonable to the masses was the fact that the King was always seen as a future *Bodhisattva*. This was not a mere matter of title but constituted the essential reality of kingship, for in the very nature of things, the person who assumed royal functions could do so only by virtue of his previous *karma*, which placed him in apposition in the moral scale, intermediate between gods and men. This is how the charismatic power, which is bound up with royalty, should be understood. The royal function for this reason constituted the exceptional place in which the social hierarchy of men interlocked with the heavenly hierarchy. This structure was built on the exchange of land and the service of the king; it was the whole power structure, of which everyone formed a part, and it was sacralised in this way by religion and consequently legitimated.

Houtart concludes,

We have noticed in our study on Sri Lanka that the religious production of Kandy feudality resulted in a pantheon reflecting perfectly the existing

social reality and because of the divinisation of the king, ending with the divinisation of The Buddha. But this pantheon being elaborated became the symbolic model of what society should be and the ideological justification of maintenance of the feudal system.¹²⁸

This tributary system also absorbs the greatest part of the economic surplus.

These two cases are compared in table 2. Though the contexts are very different, what is important here is that the cases demonstrate the relationship between religion and ideology.

TABLE 2 Summary of the Relation between Religion and Ideology

Case	Political Context	Religion Involved	Relationship Level
1.A colonial system, related to religion and ideology	Sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Portuguese and Spanish empires	Christianity	West and the so-called New World (<i>between</i> two geocultural spaces)
2.A tributary system, related to religion and ideology	Seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sinhalese kingdoms in Sri Lanka (specifically the Kingdom of Kandy)	Buddhism and popular religions	Interaction <i>within</i> Sinhalese society

The Relationship of Religion and Ideology Further Clarified Conceptually

For the purpose of further clarification, we again turn to Houtart’s scheme of social analysis. In traditional societies, religion often fulfilled and largely still fulfils the need for guidance and orientation in matters of social and political life.¹²⁹ Religion explained and justified the authority of kings and the hierarchy of the castes, or it criticized the rulers and the prevailing set-up and promoted reforms; in this manner, it played an ideological role. However, this does not mean that religion was a mere political ideology. The political function was one among many, but not unique. Religion in traditional societies had other functions related to questions of ultimate meaning and of daily life and basic human relations, but along with them, it could also have a political function, for example, in some modern approaches to religion and ideology.

¹²⁸Houtart, “Role of Western Religion in the Confucian Regions,” 2.

¹²⁹Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 68.

Some secular ideologies have denied any political ideological role to religions. They make their own concepts part of their program. For example, we could consider dialectical materialism as part of State philosophy in the socialist countries.¹³⁰ Having rejected religion as an entity that gives meaning to society, the secular ideologies tend to take over the functions that religions fulfilled before. We could even interpret this as the secular ideologies acting as State religions, or more accurately, “civil religions.” Other political ideologies, such as nationalism, may not include concepts like dialectical materialism, but introduce what Dietrich and Wielenga named quasi-religious rituals, symbols, and appeals.¹³¹ When a nation and its borders are declared to be sacred, when dying for one’s nation is glorified, when flags and national hymns are treated as sacrosanct, we see a secular ideology employing symbolic means and demanding a type of whole-hearted devotion.¹³²

In some societies, an effort has been made to prevent religion from playing an ideological role by declaring religion to be just a private affair. This is a direct result of the ascent of the secular order to hegemonic power: the *saeculum* with its corollaries of secularity and secularism.¹³³ With the separation of Church and State, this has been the case for many modern Western countries. This separation was part of the secularisation¹³⁴ process in which this area was freed from religious control, in the economic field as well as politics and morality. The priests and the churches in this system look after only the spiritual matters because they are supposed to be private and individual matters. Religion, then, is a private affair of the individual and the family. Some communist countries took this approach in their legislation, which deprived the religious institutions of any public

¹³⁰For example, former Eastern European countries.

¹³¹Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 68.

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³Fernando, *In Spirit and in Truth*, 118.

¹³⁴Of course, the theological responses to the secularisation process demonstrate the Church’s efforts to be relevant to the situation. Cf. J. A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM, 1963). Houtart’s early thoughts on ecclesiology take a similar approach and are dealt with later in the present study.

functions other than worship, catechism, and the administration of the sacraments.¹³⁵ Religion, then, is in charge of “spiritual” affairs and had nothing to do with the material realities: those are left to the State.

Recalling the main elements in Houtart’s scheme of social analysis (see table 3), religion functions as a part of the symbolic representation in correspondence with the collective life and the material base. The levels of function are not permanently fixed but kept open because of torsion, change, and autonomy. According to Houtart, religion exists as a socially flexible phenomenon.¹³⁶ Religion is not an ideology, but religion could play an *ideological role* among other important roles in society. Thus, the issue can be raised that, if religion could be mobilized for the support of the dominant ideologies, as we have seen in our examples and cases, why could it not also be mobilized for the support of the progressive forces that strive for the transformation of society, acting as an agent of peace, justice, and the common good?

TABLE 3. Main Elements in Houtart’s Scheme of Social Analysis

Organization of the material base
Organization of the collective life
Symbolic Representation

Religions as Institutions with Social Functions: Their Nature and Dynamics

In the preceding sections, we have explored the theme of religion as part of the symbolic representation, as well as the theme of religion and ideology. Through this study, we have arrived at an understanding that religion is a social phenomenon, which exists, functions, behaves, and affirms its space and identity in society co-relationally with social, economic, political, cultural, and other spheres of life. In other words, religion permeates the whole human life and is not reduced to the realm of the spirit or soul or any other immaterial element of the individual and collective life. The present

¹³⁵Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 69.

¹³⁶Mansueto, *Religion and Dialectics*, 206.

subtopic aims at presenting the nature of the social functions of religion in different types of society as modelled by Houtart, with special reference to Asian religions. We will approach three models of social type that Houtart has crafted,¹³⁷ in which the social functions of religion have been explained hypothetically: 1) The model of a feudal society; 2) the capitalist model; 3) the socialist model. These models can be applied to explain the social functions of religion; at the end of this chapter, we will consider the place of religion among the Kurava clan of India (a hunting clan of South India)¹³⁸ as an example of how religion has analogous functions also in a traditional society which does not fall in any of the three mentioned models; we shall also study the function of Confucianism in a feudal Chinese social setting. These discussions will enable us to ground Houtart's thought in specific social settings.

Models of Social Types

Houtart has developed a general theory to explain the function of religion in different types of societies. We can call it a general theory with some reservations, as it is a loose pattern to understand the function of religion in different social types, applicable to all with due consideration of their circumstantial variations and peculiarities; Houtart himself introduced minor modifications into this "general theory" many times accordingly and applied it to differing changing contexts, with a keen awareness of their correspondence and torsion, which was discussed in the preceding subtopic.¹³⁹

The interpretation of the type of modern society is problematic. Is there a pure socialist society existing today? Is there a totally capitalist society in the world? Perhaps we have to use totally different languages in modelling societies. Can such phrases as

¹³⁷Houtart acknowledges the use of Weberian and Marxist conceptual raw materials (influence) in formulating this theory. Houtart, "Religion and Development," 16.

¹³⁸François Houtart and Geneviève Lemercinier, *The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions* (Louvain-la-Neuve: CRSR, 1985), 20.

¹³⁹Referring to the section on ideology.

“postmodern¹⁴⁰ society” and “postcolonial society” be of help? Such phrases may be misleading and hide the true reality. Perhaps we still experience a neofeudalistic and neocolonialist social organisation in this so-called globalized world. Is there a common agreement over the term “democratic society”? What approaches do social theorists take today in categorizing the present societies in the world? These interpretations remain problematic and complex, and still we have to understand the problem more thoroughly, although that debate is beyond the scope of this work.¹⁴¹

This problem of defining the present society, with all its shades and variations, also implies that the understanding of the functions of religion has become also more complex and difficult. Acknowledging all this, sociologists of religion have tried to explain the function of religion in modern societies, and in this, Houtart is no exception. What is important to note is that Houtart has broken some ground, which was prepared in the 1970s and developed in the 1980s, by using a sociolinguistic vocabulary relevant to the time, allowing the possibility of starting a discussion on religion in different social settings. This dynamic avoids the potential of speaking only in vague or in over-generalised terms about the social functions of religion.

In other words, this theory works only as a starting point that explains the interaction between religion and society. Houtart affirms my contention that this is only a start and acknowledges the limitations of the models. It is necessary to start with something, however, even though it may not yet be completely adequate. We must keep in mind, for example, that the present models have been developed in the specific geographical and historical context of the experience of social transition and change in a

¹⁴⁰Not to be confused with postmodernism.

¹⁴¹For a critical discussion on interpreting the modern society, see David Tracy, “On Naming the Present,” *Concilium* 1990, no. 1: 66-85.

number of Asian nations in the 1970s, as was presented in Baguio, Philippines, in 1975.

Houtart writes in his *Baguio Report*,¹⁴²

The work done in Baguio concentrated on the use of some tools of analysis to understand better the social and cultural problems of Asian Societies. Of course this is *only a beginning*, because such complex realities need more sophisticated theoretical and practical tools of analysis. However it is necessary to start with something even though not yet completely adequate.

It is in this spirit that we investigate this theory of societies and the place of religion in each type of society.

What are the social types Houtart shows in his social analysis? For a schematic exposition, we refer to table 5. To begin with, society has been divided into three main types.

1. Feudal Society.
2. Capitalist Society.
 - a. Initial phase.
 - b. Developed phase.
3. Socialist Society.

As we begin with the model of the Feudal Society,¹⁴³ let me again show an accepted standard definition of feudalism taken from the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*; it defines the feudal system as a “medieval European form of government based on the relation of vassal and superior arising from holding of lands on condition of homage and service.”¹⁴⁴ This is a very limited definition or arguably even misleading, as feudalism existed in many other parts of the world, not only in Europe. As Fonseka noted, “The ancient history of Sri Lanka is perhaps easily understood in terms of a state that consisted

¹⁴²Cf. Houtart, “Religion and Development,” x (emphasis added).

¹⁴³Houtart, “Religion and Development,” 23.

¹⁴⁴*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 7th ed., s.v. “feudal system.”

of several loosely structured caste-based *feudal* polities.”¹⁴⁵ It is easy to see, then, that feudalism was not an exclusive European medieval phenomenon.

In a feudal society, the mode of production is largely agricultural, which is very different from the modern approach to agriculture based on technology, the so-called “agro-business.” Under the feudal system, agriculture is dependent on the climatologic rhythms of nature that demand a large labour force at well-defined practical seasons and periods.¹⁴⁶

Houtart says,

It is an economy of scarcity. The available technology sets a limit to what can be grown and harvest depends on the whims of the weather, is determined principally by possession of the *land* and hence of the labour force, and lies between possessors and non-possessors. The socially and politically *dominant* group consists of those who have appropriated the monopoly of land property and so, indirectly, of production. This right based on force or on birth is entirely arbitrary because economically not necessary. The result is the ideological demand which will be met by a system of legitimisation.¹⁴⁷

In a traditional agro-economic social context, religion plays a key role, which in most cases is the submissive function of legitimisation. Consequently, religion is very significant in this context.

As a symbolic system, religion affirms the social position and the political power of the dominant group, whereas for the dominated group it functions as consolation and compensation by offering them the benefits of an otherworldly salvation.¹⁴⁸ When religion supports the status quo, the function is known as legitimisation, and when religion promises the reward of an afterlife, it is known as compensation. The Indian

¹⁴⁵Fonseka, *Towards a Peaceful Sri Lanka*, 124. (Fonseka is a Sri Lankan.)

¹⁴⁶Houtart, “Religion and Development,” 22-23.

¹⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 23 (emphasis added).

¹⁴⁸Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 21.

sociologist John Desrochers, by adding two more functions, has presented four submissive functions of religion as shown in table 4:¹⁴⁹

TABLE 4 Submissive Functions of Religion

1.Legitimation	Religion supports the status quo.
2.Rationalization	It explains the status quo.
3.Compensation	It offers other worldly rewards for the oppressed.
4.Social Control	It influences the social behaviour by promise of after life rewards and punishments.

In such a type of feudal society, the co-existence of several religious systems is considered impossible, except on the basis of geopolitical divisions. In the feudal society, the religious systems bear the monopoly of symbolic meanings, resulting in the ideology being religious.

The capitalist model has been divided into two phases: (a) initial phase and (b) developed phase. In capitalist societies during the initial phase, sometimes called the precapitalist phase,¹⁵⁰ the development of the productive forces is independent of the natural forces, unlike the feudal pattern. This independence results in breaking up the dominant group. Houtart divides the dominant group into two:¹⁵¹

- 1. Dominant Group A—Class of landed proprietors.
- 2. Dominant Group B—Class of producers.

The social elites continue to reproduce themselves in the same manner as in the feudal society, but a second group develops by virtue of its capacity to master the new techniques of production, resulting in a division of the elites. The two subgroups of elites (Dominant A and B) enter into competition, with meanings offered by existing religious systems. They search for other systems of understanding (even possibly in another religious system) to provide a religious recognition of work as the foundation of their

¹⁴⁹Bourdieu's summary of Weber's position quoted by Houtart. Cf. Houtart, "Religion and Development," 16. John Desrochers, by adding two other functions, has presented four types of submissive function of religions. Desrochers, *Methods of Societal Analysis*, 73.

¹⁵⁰Houtart, "Religion and Development," 23-24.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 18-19.

social position or social status.¹⁵² As far as the dominated groups are concerned, even if they are separated into rural and urban subgroups, their relationships with other elements of the social system barely alter, and the functions of religion remain very much the same.

The possibility exists that a dominated group might develop a social revolt that may be expressed in religious terms, such as in the messianic or millenarian movements.¹⁵³ The religious institutions diversify their supply, and the religious organisation becomes very complex, especially within the urban context. Conflicts develop between the religious systems to the extent that, in some cases, the elite groups in political competition with each other adopt different religious systems to justify their positions. This was the case, for instance, in Germany during the Lutheran revolt, when some Princes Electors sided with the Lutheran Reformation, while others sided with the Catholic Emperor Charles V.

The doctrinal justification varies according to the groups.¹⁵⁴ What are these justifications? Dominant group A tends to defend the traditional belief system. Dominant group B adapts doctrine to justify the functions it fulfils with the group (Calvinism, for example). The dominant group marginalizes the dominated group or forms a new religious system if the revolt of the dominated is read in religious terms.

The capitalist societies (during the developed stage)¹⁵⁵ are characterised by a predominantly industrial form of economic production and give rise progressively to what has been called an economy of abundance.¹⁵⁶ The system of production develops the phenomenon of class and introduces among the dominated a new consciousness of the

¹⁵²Ibid., 23.

¹⁵³For sociological insights, inquiry, and analysis on the subject, cf. Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religion of the Oppressed* (New York: Mentor Books, 1963) and, though somewhat different in outlook, José Ortega y Gasset, *Revolt of the Masses* (New York: North, 1957) also provides a good contrast.

¹⁵⁴Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 21-22.

¹⁵⁵Houtart, "Religion and Development," 24.

¹⁵⁶For Houtart's recent critique of globalisation and capitalism, see François Houtart, "Social Development and Alternatives to Contemporary Globalisation" in *Globalisation and Alternatives* (Geneva: CETIM/AAJ/LIDLIP/WILPF, 2000), 11-19. Houtart's recent thesis on de-legitimization of capitalism will be discussed in the chapter devoted to alter-globalisation discourse.

relationships between social forces. From this comes the development of social movements, either reformist or revolutionary, but the organisation of power is established through the domination of Dominant group B by private appropriation and accumulation of capital and of the means of production. The ideologies no longer have recourse to elements outside their social reality to justify their social positions or desire to change them.¹⁵⁷

What is the place of religion in this context? Generally religion has been given a diminished position in social life by both the dominant and the dominated. The dominant groups either reject religion or make it a purely private affair, and often religion takes an individualistic form. The dominated groups are no longer satisfied with the traditional religious meanings, structures, and practices; more often than not, they see in the religious systems nothing but an obstacle to the transformation of the social relationships. Generally, the dominated groups either reject religion or demand from religion a kind of motivation or backing for their social struggle, as was the case with the Anabaptist and peasants' revolts or in the eruption of the poor in Latin America in the 1970s and beyond. In the new industrial capitalist mode of production, religion loses both the monopoly of social meanings and its capacity to reduce social oppositions.¹⁵⁸ Faced with new demands, it produces new meanings (generally as criteria for action). Religion clearly no longer provides the basic ideology¹⁵⁹ for the entire society.

Houtart further comments on the situation in the industrial capitalist model, arguing that

Religious pluralism becomes a possibility and certain systems (or parts of systems) place the accent on traditional demands and others on new requirements. The institutions and roles defined in terms of the preceding situations are sometimes maintained in existence simply because whatever is institutionalised tends to become autonomous—but they begin to lose their consistency. A peaceful co-existence may be established between

¹⁵⁷Houtart, "Religion and Development," 24.

¹⁵⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹*Ibid.*

different religious systems, as well as a solidarity to build up, in the face of competition, a religion or an anti-religious ideology, while at the same time internal conflicts develop between groups with varying ideologies.¹⁶⁰

In the socialist model, the economic system is based on the collective appropriation of the means of production, whether agricultural or industrial. Such appropriation may happen in capitalist or feudal societies or even in a combination of various types. The social system gears towards a classless society in the sense that the appropriation of the means of production is no longer private. The rapidity of transformation depends not only on the steps of economic change but also on deep cultural factors often more difficult to transform.¹⁶¹ In this model, the economy is in the hands of the constructed political elite.

The religious system in most of the cases of the socialist model is accepted only if it does not mix with the public sphere. Religion is tolerated as long as it remains passive in society. In this model, religion remains a private affair but in a different sense than in the capitalist model. Generally, the reaction of the religious group is to gather itself in a defensive posture, and as a result, conservative theologies and a ghetto type of organisation begin to emerge, as has happened, for instance, in the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchates of the former Soviet Union. This reaction also tends to justify and reinforce the private character of religion. Many members of the lower clergy also joined the Communist Party and its programs, but these popes were considered and sometimes openly called "useful idiots." However, it does not mean that all participants in the religious sphere are non-active. It is possible that a small but dynamic group begin to establish a bridge between religious belonging and a socialist practice.¹⁶²

These three models have been schematised at a theoretical level. However, two things must be noted:

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁶¹Ibid., 25.

¹⁶²Ibid.

1. When we speak about the interaction between religion and society in a given reality, the situation is far more complex than it looks at first sight, but the theoretical models, which are meant for study and debate for sociological analysis, present the religious realities structurally and objectively, so are useful for the study of that interaction. For the students of religion, it remains to understand the day-to-day variations of the models presented.

2. These models must not act as fossilised patterns but only as a guide or as an entry to the analysis. There is a relative autonomy¹⁶³ in the elements discussed in the models, allowing for a certain flexibility of the models. However, Houtart had to take a methodological option so that he could begin explaining the dynamics of religion in societies in a reasonably sociological manner. The analysis has been summarised in a chart by Houtart himself (see table 4).

Houtart himself has used this model for application in particular religious situations. In fact, we have already mentioned Houtart's reflections on some particular contexts, such as the Portuguese colonialism and Sinhalese; there we checked on the interaction between religion and the political field that has taken place in some contexts.

We can observe now three major studies of Houtart¹⁶⁴ (and his collaborators) in which we are able to observe the mode of application of these models and an adaptation of these methods, thereby giving a brief answer to the question just raised:

1. *The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions* (1985)¹⁶⁵
2. *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka* (1974)
3. *Hai Van: Life in a Vietnamese Commune* (1984)

¹⁶³Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 23.

¹⁶⁴Of the three books that shall only be mentioned, *The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions* (1985) and *Hai Van: Life in a Vietnamese Commune* (1984) have been written in collaboration with Houtart's colleague, the late Dr. G. Lemercinier, who worked first as an assistant in the projects of the center for socioreligious research in Catholic University of Louvain and then as a partner in many projects with Houtart. She was a specialist in pre-capitalist societies in Asia and in Latin America, and her own works also reflect the same orientation as Houtart. (Geneviève Lemercinier, *Religion and Ideology in Kerala* (1949; Trivandrum: ISDA, 1974).

¹⁶⁵Houtart and Lemercinier, *The Great Asiatic Religions*.

The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions (1985)

This study exhibits certain flexibility in the application of the theory of social types, as has been discussed. Here, it takes a historical analytical approach, but Houtart's and Lemercinier's historical approach should be distinguished from other evolutionary approaches to religion. Houtart and Lemercinier's intention is to demonstrate how societies go through a transition and experience of social change. Further, they acknowledge that, even in our own times, some of the lineage behaviour, lifestyles, and traditional religions are still prevalent in Asia¹⁶⁶ and are even being revived in the midst of modern industrialism.¹⁶⁷

TABLE 5 Religious System Scheme¹⁶⁸

	SOCIAL DEMAND ON RELATIONSHIPS	RELIGIOUS MEANINGS	RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS	DOCTRINAL JUSTIFICATION
1. Feudal Society				
	<u>Dominant:</u> Legitimation of Arbitrary power. <u>Dominated:</u> Compensation for deprivation and powerlessness.	Religious meaning with ideological functions. <u>Dominant:</u> Sacralisation of their social position. <u>Dominated:</u> benefits of salvation in after life.	The religious actors have central and arbitrary positions in the social ensemble: The higher clergy (dominant) and the lower clergy (dominated). Exclusiveness of religious system.	Divine delegation of religious authority to legitimate the historically existing power of the dominant and to guarantee salvation in the after life to the dominated (myth or religious ideology)
2.a. Capitalist Societies (first step or primitive accumulation ¹⁶⁹)				
	Dominant A: See model 1. Dominant B: Religious recognition of work as the foundation of social position. Dominated: Religious legitimation of revolts.	Diversified according to type of demand.	New producers of urban clergy: religious struggle between systems being used as instruments by conflicting groups.	Production of apologetics in face of the erosion of the traditional doctrinal system and (or) adaptation to legitimate Dominant B and revolting dominated.

¹⁶⁶Ibid., 26-31.

¹⁶⁷Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 76.

¹⁶⁸Houtart, "Religion and Development," 20-21.

¹⁶⁹Houtart used the term *primitive accumulation* to explain the situation of early capitalist societies.

	SOCIAL DEMAND ON RELATIONSHIPS	RELIGIOUS MEANINGS	RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS	DOCTRINAL JUSTIFICATION
2.b. Capitalist Societies (second step)				
	<u>Dominant:</u> Absence under the form of rejection (atheism) or of privatisation; similar tendencies in intermediate groups. <u>Dominated:</u> Rejection of religion as opposed to class interests or search for motivation for class struggle.	Diversified according to the type of demand. Various ethics	Internal or external pluralism for a diversified supply; Conjoined possibility of internal struggles and external solidarity.	Diverse “Theologies” concerning social relationship.
3.Socialist Society				
	Rejection of the religious as of negative social significance. Toleration if socially meaningless. Beginning of new attitude	Privatised.	Internal monolithism for the defence of the religious institutions	Affirmation of non-existence of the social dimension of religion.

A division of the study clearly demonstrates the adaptation of the social-type method.

The study has been divided into three main parts:

1. “The Religion in Lineage Based Societies” covers the nature of the lineage-based societies in Asia and the place of animism in them.

2. “The Religion in Asia in the Pre-Capitalist Societies” covers the study of how the Asiatic religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Islam—were constructed and evolved symbiotically, developing amidst social changes in history. The section also touches on the link between popular religion and founded religions.

3. “Buddhism in Colonial and Post-Colonial Context” discusses the loss of the traditional functions with the introduction of the colonial capitalist mode of production; this section covers the Portuguese colonization and its impact on Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

There are countless studies on the doctrinal aspects (teachings) of great religions in Asia but very few rigorous studies on sociological approaches to the social functions of Asian religions. *The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions* is one of such works on the Asian sociology of religion and particularly attempts to study the functions and torsion of Asian religions in traditional, precapitalist, and capitalist societies.

Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka (1974).¹⁷⁰ We have already encountered this study in our previous sections, but it is important to make a comment on the work as a whole. Its purpose was to show the relationship between the religious field and the political field in the following periods of Sri Lankan history:

1. The Sinhalese Kingdoms.
2. The Kingdom of Kandy.
3. The Colonial Period (1505-1948).
4. The Postcolonial Period. (since 1948).

The interaction between religion and ideology in the historical contexts of Sri Lankan society, with special reference to the Sinhalese community, was the main focus of the study. In this study, Houtart's strength lies in the analysis of the Kandyan Kingdom and the appraisal of the Portuguese colonisation.

Hai Van: *Life in a Vietnamese Commune* (1984)¹⁷¹

This work is an example of a study on a socialist model of a society in transition from rural-feudal to a collective-communist mode of production and distribution of the products of common labour. Houtart not only addresses the subject of religion, but he deals also with other areas such as family, daily life, health, women, culture, and so on. Based on meticulous fieldwork, the study has been a great contribution by Houtart and Lemercinier to the Vietnamese sociology.

¹⁷⁰Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*.

¹⁷¹Houtart and Lemercinier, *Hai Van*.

For the purpose of the present research, we have limited ourselves to two selected examples. The first is from the Indian setting of lineage societies, and the second is from the Chinese setting. These choices have been made not only to further illustrate the interaction of religion and society but also to mark the intercultural interest of Houtart, as well as our own.

Hunting Clans of South India

The nature of the earliest society in Asia was lineage based. That is, the whole society has been organised in extended or lineage-based families in clans and in tribes.¹⁷² The kinship system plays a central role in all material, collective, and symbolic aspects of life.¹⁷³ The elders of the clan take a primal place in authority and decision-making, especially related to production. Religion in lineage-based societies is essentially connected with nature. The initial domain in which religion intervenes is that of the representation of the relations between man and nature.¹⁷⁴ Generally, religion plays a role in harmonising the community and maintaining the solidarity (togetherness) of the group, largely for the purpose of survival.

About the Kurava clans, Houtart says,

Their symbolic construction made the divine appear as the catalyst for the cosmic life, which thus is transmitted through its mediation to the group and to nature. This life (cosmic life) is communicated through the medium of a symbol, *the totem*, which is the meeting point between the cosmos, the social order and nature. One sees how, in the case of Kuravas, the global meaning and the question of finalities are grafted on to the interpretation of social relations.¹⁷⁵

This structure has been outlined in table 6.

Two of the principal values of this society are fertility and solidarity. Religion maintains those values for the stability of the social order. On the social aspect of the

¹⁷²Houtart and Lemercinier, *The Great Asiatic Religions*, 8.

¹⁷³Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 34.

¹⁷⁴Houtart and Lemercinier, *The Great Asiatic Religion*, 2.

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 19.

clanic social system, Houtart further asserts,

In effect the weak development of the productive forces renders the group extremely vulnerable to the hazards of nature and its biological reproduction is constantly in peril. Thus no one can shirk the duty of reproduction. But the latter is carried out only through practices from which the structure of kinship emerges. Whence, the necessary harmony of the group and the need to assure the reproduction in this case of social relations of lineage based societies.

Thus, this is a case that shows the functional nature of popular religion in ancient societies.

TABLE 6 Structure of the Religious Sequences' Link to Social Relations Among the Kuravas, a Hunting Clan of South India in the First Millennium of Our Era¹⁷⁶

BELIEFS	Objective foundation:	Life and its maintenance
	Mediated causality of cosmic order:	Through Cheyon, <i>masculine</i> divinity, source of all life and all good, including the life of the group.
	Medium in the communication of life:	The totem tree (vangai) considered the place where the divinity dwells and the symbol of the vital unity of the group (place of the political assembly = organ of social and religious survival = organ of cosmic survival).
	Social foundation:	The clan as a social entity identified with the totem (each village reproduces the same practices).
RITUAL PRACTICES	The ritual life is feminine. Ritual dance in honour of the divinity to assure feminine fertility, source of physical life of the group, and to obtain rain, source of the life of the forest. The girls perform a particular ritual of protecting to assure marriages.	
OTHER SYMBOLS	The God is personified in the form of a young man, armed with a spear that the hunters use for the elephant hunt. He always carries a garland of flowers from the totem tree, as do the heads of families when they lead a hunting expedition.	

Animism

One point in this case must be mentioned. To explain the religion in lineage-based societies, Houtart adopts the conventional term *animism*, which in my opinion should be rejected. I prefer terms such as *popular religiosity*, *indigenous religion*, or even *natural religion* or *religion of nature* in place of the term *animism*. Many Easterners think that the

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 20.

term *animism* carries colonial connotations or is at the very bottom of the hierarchical typology of the religions of the world, a term also loaded with pejorative connotations and defined against the background of the superiority of Christianity, though it has been used in eminent religious studies in the West for quite some time. Houtart does not show any disrespect or any negative judgment towards this type of religiosity. Even though Houtart's interest is purely sociological in his use of the term, it is important to be aware of the ideological implications of certain terms used in the study of religion.

John D'Arcy May uses the concept of "primal traditions" in a positive approach. Further May's preference of *biocosmic religion* is a helpful counter-action to "animism" and "tribal religion."¹⁷⁷ Houtart observes about animists,

They respond to the immediate social and psychological needs of human groups depending almost totally on natural forces and having little control of the social mechanisms (natural societies).¹⁷⁸

There is no institutionalisation in the sense of founded religions. "There is no need for organisation because in such a system religion is an immediate response to the social and psychological needs. So it follows the general pattern of institutionalisation of the group."¹⁷⁹ This kind of religion is very flexible, is always in correspondence with the existing social system, and is always prepared to adapt whenever change occurs in the society. For that reason, many cultures' various forms of tribal-popular religiosity exist symbiotically with organised religions.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷John D'Arcy May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 57.

¹⁷⁸Houtart, "Religion and Development," 29.

¹⁷⁹Ibid., 29-30.

¹⁸⁰Sri Lanka would be one of the best examples for the symbiotic existence between Buddhism and popular religion. Cf. Lyn A. De Silva, *Buddhism: Beliefs and Practices in Sri Lanka*, 2nd ed. (Colombo: EISD, 1980).

Confucianism

For Ninian Smart, China was one of the great fertile, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual areas of human culture.¹⁸¹ For Houtart, China is also one of the two great poles of Asia, the other being India.¹⁸² Of course, Confucianism has contributed much to this greatness. B. V. Rao, a historian, narrates the social and cultural impact of Confucianism on Chinese society.

1. After the spread of Confucianism, there was a marked change in the society. Family life became more secure and stable because of the attachment between children and parents. It was the social custom to divide the ancestral land equally among all sons.

2. It is no exaggeration to say that Confucius dominated the minds of the learned for centuries, and he was finally deified.¹⁸³

According to Houtart, the system proposed by K'ong Fuzi was not, strictly speaking, a religion.¹⁸⁴ This sage, who lived between 551 and 479 BCE in the state of Lu (now in Shandong province) in eastern China, was born into a family related to the local aristocratic rulers. Orphaned in childhood, he experienced poverty and was later employed in menial jobs.¹⁸⁵ Later, his fidelity to those in power brought him a ministership, but he resigned from the ministerial post and went into voluntary exile in Wei.

Houtart observed the social context that led to K'ong Fuzi's philosophy and so comments,

The sole objective of his teaching was to help overcome the existing political chaos and to restore peace. He was always practical rather than metaphysical in his views. He emphasised the ethical aspects for the transformation of the society in the light of good conduct.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹Smart, *World Philosophies*, 2.

¹⁸²Houtart and Lemerminier, *The Great Asiatic Religions*, 8.

¹⁸³B. V. Rao, *World History* (Bangalore: Sterling, 1991), 72.

¹⁸⁴Houtart and Lemerminier, *The Great Asiatic Religions*, 54.

¹⁸⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 55.

The basic characteristics¹⁸⁷ of his teaching were as follows: 1) Looking to a golden age in the past; 2) Respect for the ancestors, revived ancestor worship; 3). Sacrificial ceremonies carried out by the king; 4) Conformity to the will of heaven (T'ien)—the only condition required for man to raise himself above himself.

Confucius taught that it was only the patriarchal family with the strengths of its lineage bonds that could guarantee the stability of the social order. He saw the present order as dominated, as in the past, by a king who was simultaneously a sage. In short, it is the model of social organisation existing at the beginning of the Tcheu dynasty that he presents as a model. The social well-being does not depend on the construction of new orders, but on returning to the past. Thus, in his teachings, the basic thought pattern is cyclical, and hopes for a life after death are absent from his teachings.¹⁸⁸

It is not difficult to observe why the groups in power rapidly adopted the system of socioreligious meanings proposed by Confucius. However, 150 years later, his teaching was somewhat liberalised by Meng Zi or Mencius,¹⁸⁹ one of the most faithful followers of this school of thought, at a time when the country was divided into several kingdoms and when the problem of the basis of power was being posed again more acutely. How was Confucianism linked to the State rule? Houtart states, describing Confucianism as revised by Meng Zi,

The concept of ruler with a mandate from Heaven reappeared but there was a divergence of opinions concerning the criteria, which authenticated this mandate. This was different from the Divine right concept of later European monarchs. This is rather of an individual charism. For Mencius the guarantee of the charismatic authority of the sovereign was its acceptance by public opinion. In other words, when the people lived in peace and accepted their king, one could see in this that the sovereign was also accepted by the supreme deity. *But if this was not the case, it was a sure sign that a change was necessary* and willed by heaven—hence the monarch ought to be dethroned. The introduction of this possibility of control over the supreme authority demonstrated the development of rational thinking, and was the expression of the ideas of bourgeois class of

¹⁸⁷Ibid.

¹⁸⁸Ibid.

¹⁸⁹Rao, *World History*, 73.

officials; it provided a safely-valve, which in its turn contributed to the stability of the social order.¹⁹⁰

By this example Houtart shows how Confucianism¹⁹¹ enabled the establishment of a sociopolitical stability in China in the feudal era.

In this section, we have worked through a mind map, which was drawn by Houtart himself, to enable us to find our way to promote the sociological understanding of how religions or religiosities function in diverse social settings.

Conclusion

So far the exposition has been on the processes of the dialectical interaction of religion and society. The underlying assumption of Houtart's structural-functional approach is that religions are institutions with social functions. In the Houtartian sense, religion is a social agent, and Houtart's social agent approach is a contextual one in the sense that the functions of religions depend on the social type and social contexts. However, if the function of religion is determined or destined by the given historical social context, then the immediate question arises as to whether religion itself is a neutral phenomenon. If the function of religion is contextual, how can religion claim to have universal values and application, (e.g., global ethics)? Can we apply Houtart's conceptual frameworks in a new era of Globalisation?

The final chapter of this study will attempt an application of this theoretical consideration to the debate on the relationship between religion and society in our own times and, especially, in the mega trend of globalisation with its pretended universality of meanings and values. Can religion play a positive role in social change and transformation in the new global context we are facing today, with the threat of

¹⁹⁰Houtart and Lemercinier, *The Great Asiatic Religions*, 56 (emphasis added).

¹⁹¹For a good analytical account of Confucian ethics, see: Philippe Thiébault, "Research on the Contribution of Confucian Ethics," in *IIIS Seminars* (unpublished paper, Trinity College, Dublin: Institute for International Intergration Studies, 2007). Thiébault's original contributions (perhaps one of the best and most original to South Asian religion studies) are in French.

unprecedented totalitarianism of planetary dimensions, which we could rightly call “totalism”? Before addressing that issue, however, let us turn or attention to Houtart’s contribution to the study of the relationship between the Christian religion (consistently called “the Church” and generally meaning the Roman Catholic Church) and the societies of the world.

CHAPTER FOUR
SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR ECCLESIOLOGY:
TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

We have been following François Houtart's intellectual and professional itinerary and discovered, thus far, two main transitions : 1) From religious sociology to sociology of religion; 2) From sociology of religion to the sociology of the Church. The first transition he made in two steps: First, from "religious" sociology to empirical sociology and, then, from empirical sociology to the specific field of his research and thinking, namely, the religious phenomenon. Houtart early realised that empirical sociology usually ended up in presenting accurate statistics, but he was always convinced that to understand the religious phenomenon one needed much more than statistics, however important statistics might be.

In the first period, he studied society with a religious interest; in the second period, he studied religion with a social interest. In this chapter we centre our focus on Houtart's directing his attention to the specific form of religion called the Roman Catholic Church, placing the RC Church within the wider "sacred canopy" (Peter Berger) of the whole field of religion and not outside or above the religious field. In this line, we have been engaged in a discussion on the dynamics of the relationship between religion and society. Now we shall do likewise studying the dynamics of the relationship between Roman Catholicism and society. Let us now first recall the conceptual framework we have been using:

1. Religion as part of symbolic representation and culture.
2. Nature of the relationship between religion and ideology.

3. Religions as institutions with social functions.

This framework has helped us to get a picture of the dynamics between religion and society in the Houtartian sense. The same framework is applicable to the Church as one of the many manifestations of religion vis-à-vis society. There is no reason, of course, to place the Christian religion outside the above framework and discourse. What distinguishes Houtart is that he goes a step beyond and reaches a site that we may call “Church and society,” where he could not only explain the ecclesiastical structures as they exist (*to see*), but also make a critique of them (*to judge*) from the perspective of the social milieu in which they are set, and challenge them (*to act*) to change in order to be more relevant, significant, and meaningful in the social ensemble. We could even say that Houtart begins with the scientific and detached study of “Church and Society” as though he were an outsider and concludes with a prophetic appeal for the mission of “the Church at the service of society,” as a fervent insider. To put it another way, Houtart wants the Church not simply to be functional (or less dysfunctional) but to affirm that it has a social function and to voice that the Church’s social function should be carried out effectively and efficiently in a changing society. This process helps us to unlock and discover how Houtart has been developing the discourse on Church and Society, especially in the early phase of his social thought (1960s-1970s). Thus, the whole discussion bears not only a sociological relevance but a theological relevance as well.

Therefore, the task of Houtart as a rigorous sociologist of religion is *to see*—to describe and to explain—in a good scientific phenomenological approach. The second and third movements of the method Houtart learned in his youthful involvement with the YCW (*to judge* and *to act*) are the functions of the prophet-theologian and the pastor respectively. In short, the scientific sociologist should be descriptive and not prescriptive. However, Houtart is also a believer and a priest, not alien and indifferent to the religious

phenomenon under his scrutiny; he cannot be totally detached from reality as an outsider because he is existentially attached to it as an insider, as a believer and a pastor.

The question addressed in this section will be how Houtart looks at the Church, at “the Holy Mother Church,” from a detached sociological point of view. Is it possible or desirable? The theologian and philosopher of religion Paul Tillich may provide the answer to this question with his well-known methodological postulate that, given the subject matter under study, a theologian, in order to have a scientific stance, should have one foot inside the subject of his study as a believer and the other foot outside as a scientist, in order to preserve his phenomenological distance and thus be impartial in his treatment (the method of co-relation). Though not a professional theologian, but a professional sociologist, Houtart cannot separate the Church from society, and we cannot separate Houtart from the Church!

Having this in mind, we consider Houtart’s ecclesiological studies and limit our discussion to the following topics, which are some key areas in Houtart on the Church:

1. Vatican II.
2. Some questions Houtart has been raising for ecclesiology from the point of view of sociology.
3. The Church as an institution and how it changes.
4. Communications and the Church.
5. The social sciences and ecclesiology.

Houtart’s ecclesiological insights must be understood in the context of the Second Vatican Council.¹ Being caught between the currents of the Vatican Council II as an attached believer and the professionalism of sociology of religion as a detached scientist, Houtart has raised a number of relevant questions for the Church by the inspiration of

¹François Houtart, *Challenge to Change* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964). (Title has been written in the context of the Vatican II.)

both disciplines: theology and sociology.² Not only has he raised them, but also he has tried his best to contribute by pointing to the way towards the right formulation and possible solution of some of them. He has brought some sociological insights to evaluate the Church as an institution among other institutions in the societies in which she has to carry on her mission. These questions are of utmost value for theologians and pastors alike.

Vatican Council II

Houtart's ecclesiology, as we have already noted, should be placed, understood, and interpreted in the spirit of the ecclesiology of Vatican II.³ The Sri Lankan author D. R. S. Fernando writes in connection with Vatican II about a paradigm shift in ecclesiology:

Aggiornamento was the key notion introduced by Pope John XXIII when he convoked the Ecumenical Council. It is a reformation that is self induced, a change in ecclesiastical life that tends to dislodge the old ways of life. It is a coming to terms with the modern world. Therefore, it is not a mere adjusting or retooling the machinery, but a radical change and reform.⁴

The majority of the former ecumenical councils were occupied with orthodoxy and heresy, but the focus of Vatican II was on the world and the exercise of faith and of the Church's mission in the world.⁵ This has been a paradigm shift from a church-centred world to a world-centred church,⁶ implying an attitudinal change in the church's relationship with the world. The Church is a witnessing community in the world and exists in a dialogical relationship with the world that involves communication with the world, including both speaking to the world and learning from the world.⁷ As Karl Rahner

²For an overview of the dialectical relationship of theology and sociology see Gregory Baum, "Sociology and Theology," *Concilium* 1971, no. 1: 22-31

³In the time of announcement of Vatican II, Houtart has been slowly developing the concept of Church as a social institution.

⁴Fernando, *Contextual Theology in Sri Lanka*, 85.

⁵Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, 7-8.

⁶Fernando, *Contextual Theology in Sri Lanka*, 86.

⁷*Ibid.*, 100.

insisted, the Church is not only the speaker of the Word but also and mainly “the hearer of the Word.” However, most theologians tend to interpret the Vatican Council II as a renewal movement.⁸

The role that Houtart played at Vatican II is worth noting here. Houtart was one of the key facilitators in the group that drafted the introduction of *Gaudium et Spes*. In the process of preparation of the document there was a sub-commission called “The Signs of the Times” to work for the introduction of *Gaudium et Spes*, for which Houtart acted as the secretary as confirmed by some historians of the Vatican Council II, such as Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak.⁹ In a personal letter in response to my inquiries, Prof. C. Soetens of the University of Louvain la Neuve also confirms the role Houtart played at the Vatican II; Soetens further writes in his résumé on the convergence and compilation of the Vatican II documents:

Well-prepared by his studies on the links between the Church and the contemporary world, Canon Houtart actively participated in the work of the special commission on “Signs of the Times” and in the drafting of the preface and the preliminary outline of *Gaudium et Spes*. Professor Houtart, who was a pioneer in the study of religious sociology, also played a leading role within many initiatives, groups and meetings organised at the time of the Council, but independently of it. I believe that these manifold activities must be taken into account in order to understand the evolution of people’s minds and the general atmosphere during the Council. One of these initiatives was the creation of the Centrum Orientationis et Coordinationis pastoralis (Centre of Pastoral Orientation and Coordination), which enjoyed a brief existence. Some documentation provided by Professor Houtart himself gives an insight into the *Centrum*, the congresses it held, the investigations it carried out into pastoral training in seminaries, and also the obstacles which led to its dissolution.¹⁰

For Houtart, as for many other students of the Vatican Council II, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church

⁸Aloysius Pieris, *Crisigenic Council with Unwritten Agenda* (2005) <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr005/pieris2.htm> (accessed November 7, 2007).

⁹Alberigo and Komonchak, 415.

¹⁰Cl. Soetens, “Les Archives Vatican II a Louvain-La-Neuve,” in *Sources Locales De Vatican II*, eds. Cl. Soetens and J.Grootaers (Louvain-La-Neuve: Leuven, Bibliotheek van de Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid, 1990). Dr. Jose Luis Lana of the Theological College of Lanka, Kandy, Sri Lanka has translated this for the author. I have also personally inquired from Prof. Soetens of Louvain-la-Neuve University in June 2007 about this work and of the Lumen Gentium Center of the same university, which keeps some invaluable journal records and correspondence of Prof. Houtart in this regard.

in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) are the two pillars of Vatican II.¹¹ The overwhelming stress of *Gaudium et Spes* was on understanding and assessing the role of the Church in the context of the wider world of today. It is not a sociological document but a pastoral document, as the title itself states. In order to operate in the world, the Church needs to understand the ways of the world, and this function of understanding corresponds to the task of sociologists, not of theologians. According to Houtart, a substantial part of *Gaudium et Spes* has been devoted to describing what the world is. The approach of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World has not been the traditional deductive, but an inductive approach.¹² The inductive approach starts with the world and then comes to the Word of God. The direction is not the verticalist coming down from above to below, but from below to above. What we are interested in the present chapter is getting an overview of his approach to ecclesiology.

Undoubtedly Houtart's ecclesiological approach represents the currents that paved the way to the Council, which, according to both Fernando and Chenu, was a Copernican revolution in ecclesiology.¹³ Yet Houtart worries about how this revolution will take place in the life of the Church; and in the context of Vatican II, he writes:

Almost all revolutions are provoked by a cultural lag between *new values and old institutions*. The Catholic Church, in this period of transition from the pre-conciliar to the post-conciliar church, is being described by many analysts as existing in a pre-revolutionary situation. The new values of participation, collegiality, freedom, and personal responsibility set forth in the documents of Vatican II are meeting with resistance from structures within the Church that have become rigid with age and tradition; and many are questioning whether these new values can become a part of the institutional Church in time to avoid a crisis of open revolution or of quiet defection.

Adaptation is made more difficult within the institutional Church because of the rapid social change which is affecting all of secular society and, since "the world" is the field of Christian activity, the Church as well.¹⁴

¹¹Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

¹²Marie-Dominique Chenu, "The Church's 'Social Doctrine,'" *Concilium* 1980, no. 10: 71-75.

¹³Fernando, *Contextual Theology in Sri Lanka*, 86.

¹⁴Houtart, *The Eleventh Hour*, 15 (emphasis added).

We are not interested here in debating whether the Vatican II has been a revolution or a reformation. Houtart's spirit, however, has been summarised by Pieris, in this regard taking Rahner's advice to the young theologians at the time of the council, "do not waste time on the Vatican II":

It was not, therefore, Vatican II as the "end-product" of a process, but Vatican II as "the process itself," that Rahner invited us to master. For, the task of our generation was to proceed from where the Council would leave us. Vatican II, he insisted, was not a point of arrival, but "a point of departure" (*punctum a quo proficiendum est*, to quote his own words!). In other words, our mission was to complete its *unwritten agenda* by means of a theo-praxis that is commensurate with its new orientation.¹⁵

Response is an important word in understanding Houtart's ecclesiological interests. Houtart is interested in why the Church must respond and how it should respond to the various issues and to the different phenomena that emerge in the world. Response is a relational term, implying that Houtart expects the Church to communicate with the wider society and give a response in different forms, affirming the relevancy and significance of the Church in the world. Every meaningful response demands a change in structures, values, and attitudes. It was in this context that Houtart began to raise issues for the Church while being in the Church. He uses the sociology of religion as a tool in his endeavour, turning his professional specialty into a "sociology of the Church."

Some Questions and Issues

It is relevant to observe how the dialogue between sociology and theology bears fruit in Houtart's thinking on the Church. In what type of questions has Houtart been interested in relation to the Church? A sample of questions/issues would enable us to grasp Houtart's "ecclesiological psyche."

1. Why and how should the Church respond to such phenomena as industrialisation, the secularisation process,¹⁶ globalisation,¹⁷ and others?

¹⁵Pieris, *Crisigenic Council* (emphasis added).

¹⁶Houtart, *Challenge To Change*, 15.

2. What is the response of the Church to the social changes in the different geopolitical contexts in the world?¹⁸
3. How does the Church behave and interpret its mission in societies in transition, mainly from colonialism to new sovereign nations?¹⁹
4. What are the means of the encounter with the social movements in various cultural contexts, such as with Marxists, revolutionary movements, and Christian beliefs of different traditions?²⁰
5. Does the Church have any contribution to make to the solution of the problems of poverty, underdevelopment, and economic and social injustice in the world? If so, how?
6. Why should and how can the Church employ the tools of the social sciences in her evaluations of self-understanding, pastoral planning, and mission in the world?
7. Can the Church dig into its own structures²¹ of ministry using sociology? How do these approaches help the promotion of life and mission of the Church: for example, sociology of liturgy, sociology of pastoral ministry, sociology of Christian communications, sociology of theological education and reflection?
8. Why is social analysis a crucial element for social ethics?²²

These are only a few among the many questions on ecclesiology that Houtart has been raising and struggling with throughout his career, parallel to his other areas of interests. They are not the theoretical questions of a theologian saturated with the knowledge of Sacred Scripture, ecclesiastical tradition, the study of the ancient Fathers,

¹⁷Amin and Houtart, eds., *Globalisation and Alternatives* (Geneva: CETIM/AAJ/LIDLIP/WILPF, 2000), 3.

¹⁸Houtart, "The Roman Catholic Church and Social Change," 113-133.

¹⁹Houtart, "Religion and Development," 2-25.

²⁰Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, 24-25.

²¹François Houtart, "The Point of View of a Sociologist: The Crisis of Authority in the Church," *Convergence*, no. 5 (1969): 7.

²²François Houtart, "Traditional Christian Ethics and the Social Reality: A Critique," *Dialogue*, n.s., 30 (2003).

and so on. They are all practical questions on how the Church should carry on her ministry to the ever-changing world with fidelity to her own tradition, on the one hand, and in solidarity with the world to which her message is addressed, on the other. The quantity of material, which has addressed these questions and issues, witnesses to his tenacity in approaching these questions and perspectives over and over again.

Table 7 outlines in three columns the correlated 1) questions or issues, 2) contexts, and 3) references, as a way of example. We will attempt to flesh out such an outline, but the limitations of space do not allow us to go into all of Houtart's insights on ecclesiology, which will be examined in a later work by the present author. At least one example of some of these questions or issues might be helpful in supporting our conviction that Houtart, among others, has initiated a debate that no student or researcher can ignore, whether in ecclesiological and missiological studies or in the study of the social aspects of religion.²³ In table 7, we offer some bibliographical items as samples; they are far from a complete list of Houtart's writings on the mentioned issues. The outline shown in table 7 should be considered and used only for an initial impression of Houtart's ecclesiological insights, and it is hoped that such an introduction will be of some hermeneutical value to the sociologist of religion as well as to the theologian.

What are some basic sociological concepts Houtart uses in his analysis of the Church? The outline of Houtart's ecclesiological interests leads us to uncover some of his preoccupations, in terms of the concept of the Church, from the perspective of a sociologist of religion. By placing the analysis in the light of the discussions that have been conducted in the preceding sections (religion as part of the symbolic representation and religion as an institution with social functions), it is possible to highlight some specific perspectives of Houtart on ecclesiology from the viewpoint of sociology.

²³Some issues that Houtart studied can serve as models for other religions as well, for example, how some specific popular Buddhist practices could be approached sociologically, how Hinduism faces secularization in India, how Buddhism faces Marxism. The point I wish to make is that some of Houtart's studies bear a kind of hermeneutical value for intercultural studies.

TABLE 7 Some Issues for Ecclesiology

QUESTION/ISSUE	PARTICULAR CONTEXT	REFERENCE
1. Secularisation	The Church's response to the secularisation and industrialisation in the Euro-American context: a sociological approach, written in the context of Vatican II.	<i>Challenge to Change: The Church Confronts the Future</i> , (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964).
2. Social change	The Church amidst social changes in Latin America	"Roman Catholic Church and Social Change in Latin America" in <i>The Church and Social Change in Latin America</i> , ed. Henry A. Landsberger (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 112-133.
3. New nations in transition	The developing countries and a response of theology: as a sociologist Houtart raises some issues for the theologian.	"Church and Developing Nations: Some Questions for the Theologians," in <i>Theology of Renewal</i> , vol.2, <i>Renewal of Religious Structures</i> (Montreal: Palm, 1968), 358-383.
4. Secular movements	Christian faith and Marxism.	<i>Marxist Analysis and Christian Belief</i> , Faith and Ideology (n.p.: Socio-pastoral Institute, 1975).
5. Economic injustice	The case of South Africa: a response of the Catholic Church.	"Demand for Economic Justice: Southern Africa and Portuguese Colonies" in <i>Towards a Discipline of Social Ethics, Essays in honour of Walter G. Muelder</i> , ed. Paul Deats (Boston: n.p., 1972), 194-217.
6. The use of empirical social sciences in the work of the Church.	The response of Indian Catholicism towards transition: self-understanding.	<i>Size and Structures of the Catholic Church in India: The Indigenization of an exogenous Religious Institution in a Society in Transition</i> , (Louvain-la-Neuve: CRSR, 1982).
7. Sociology of ministry	Pastoral care: how can we look at the pastoral ministry sociologically for better ministry?	<i>Sociology of Pastoral Care</i> (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1965).
8. Socio-ethical issues	Violence and religions	"The Cult of Violence in the Name of Religion: A Panorama," <i>Concilium</i> 1997, no. 4, 1-9.

We will limit ourselves here only to two of those perspectives:

1. The Church as an institution.²⁴

2. The Church as a sign.

The use of both theological and sociological concepts is helpful in such an approach. As an authentic insider of the Catholic tradition and as a sociologist of religion, Houtart uses both theological and sociological language in this task.

The Church as an Institution²⁵

We begin with the concept of institution and the question of how an institution changes. Houtart argues, “The Church is an institution with its own values and norms, its own system of legitimation and its organisation.”²⁶ Houtart, then, begins with the affirmation that the Church is an institution.²⁷ Like any other institution, the Church has her aims and an institutional framework to carry out her objectives. She has a leadership and a membership; that is, people are involved in it, people of flesh and blood, bracketing out all transcendent beings not subject to empirical analysis. Additionally, she has also a financial system, a communication system, a certain type of pedagogical pattern, and the like; all these systems or subsystems within the encompassing institution are definite parts in the organisation. Like any other social institution, the Church is subject to sociological investigation and evaluation and is not an exception. Of course, from a purely theological perspective, the Church should be considered as a living organism; from a purely sociological perspective, on the other hand, the Church must be considered as an organisation, alongside many other social, political, economic, and cultural organisations. Every living organism requires some kind of organisation, of course. Houtart is consistently a sociologist when describing the Church as an institution and the like.

²⁴In an interview with the author on June 27, 2005, at CETRI, Louvain-la-Neuve, one of Houtart’s students Bruno Kervyn of Louvain, mentioned that the very presentation of the “Church as an Institution” was quite a revolutionary idea at that time.

²⁵Houtart, “The Church and the Developing Nations,” 382.

²⁶Houtart and Rousseau, *Church and Revolution*, 325.

²⁷*Ibid.*

The Church is situated as one among many in the web of human institutions. The Church is an institution in the religious domain that exists in relation to other social institutions, although this does not intend to deny the other dimensions of the Church (as “living organism”), such as mystical, doctrinal, and mythical. The Church’s self-understanding is that she has a divine mission, but she still exists within the human community. Houtart justifies this methodological position stating that “Christ founded his *Church within humankind*, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but as an institution, subject to the normal laws of human growth and development.”²⁸ This statement also implies that the institution should not be static but dynamic in relation to other spheres of the social life and in communication with the world around it. It is inevitable that, to be significant and functional in this relational social order, the institution must undergo changes in a changing world. These changes, which include crisis and tension, are healthy signs of growth if they are managed positively and creatively.

We mean by *positively* what Houtart called a “prospective” attitude. Houtart writes, “The prospective is a new word for a new science, a science of the future which, by assessing facts of the past and trends in the present, will try to predict future developments in human situation.”²⁹ (Futurology, or the science of future planning, is a new branch of sociology that does not concern us directly here. A cursory mention of it is sufficient.) The prospective attitude directs the institution to seek for wisdom and discernment in choosing the mechanisms for change because change is part of growth. This attitude enables her to see conflicts and tensions positively.

Houtart concedes that the Church, like any other institution with its organization, has a tendency to inertia, conservatism and even immobilism. If we move forward—the “immobilists” seem to say—we have to change, and if we change, we may lose our identity. But Houtart is not afraid of change. Even tension could be a healthy sign of

²⁸Houtart, *The Eleventh Hour*, 16 (emphasis added; inclusive language mine).

²⁹Houtart, *Challenge To Change*, 6 (inclusive language mine).

change, and so of life. Harvey Cox, writing an introduction to *Challenge to Change* (1964), sums up the Houtartian attitude, which is even applicable for today's Church and her social thought and praxis:

Perhaps the single most important insight Houtart offers is that tension in an organisation is not a curse to be avoided but a sign of health. Tension indicates that the organisation, in this case the Church, is undergoing the pain and distress, which are necessary by-products of genuine change. An institution in which there is no tension is dead or dying. An institution, which is able not only to funnel and accommodate tension but also even to generate it, is truly alive. For Houtart, who welcomes the tension we all notice in the church today, the question therefore is not just how to manage it but how to make it continue to appear.³⁰

Thus, Houtart approaches crisis and tension not only positively but also and largely creatively. Institutions can generate crises proactively by making some decisions that will alter their direction and role when they become too sclerotic and fossilised, in order to make them dynamic and “evolutive,” at the risk of strong dissension from the more traditionalist, conservative, and even “immobilist” segments of the institutions. He proposes the transformation (not only “reformation”) of the Church herself to become another kind of institution:

This is why we must develop a new type of institution, an evolutive institution, one which is not defined once and for all but is capable of development, one within which we can “institutionalise” change.³¹

Houtart calls those decisions that can generate crises that lead to change “*crisigenic* decisions.” Recollecting Houtart's words in a conference held in Colombo on the subject of institutional change in the Church, Aloysius Pieris writes,

A *crisigenic* decision, without which no renewal is possible, cannot achieve its objective save by forcing the institution to pass through a dark corridor of dissension and confusion thanks to the efforts of renewalists to redefine the roles and functions of its members, even at the cost of departures . . . from its membership.³²

³⁰Houtart, *The Eleventh Hour*, 12.

³¹Houtart, *The Challenge to Change*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964, 82.

³²Aloysius Pieris, “Vatican II: A *crisigenic* Council with an Unwritten Agenda,” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 42 (2005): 7-24.

Thus, for Houtart, to an ever-changing world should correspond an ever-changing Church, in correlation. For him the main question is not only “to interpret the signs of the times” (Matt. 16. 3), but also to act according to what we have interpreted in those signs: there is no right action without a true interpretation, but the interpretation will not be true if it does not lead to a corresponding right action. The interpretation of the “signs of the times” is a socioanalytic task, necessary for the Church to involve herself in the changing world; the practical involvement in a changing world cannot be effective without corresponding changes in the Church herself; and that is the reason Houtart proposes not only to introduce some changes into the institution but also to institutionalise change in the dynamics of the Church. Otherwise, the Church will be present and active in the world, but not in the world of today but in the world of yesterday, like “a *museum*, a relic of the past which could not attract the younger generation, the people living vital, developing society.”³³

Changing Institutions and Institutionalising Change

The Church as an institution undergoes change within the changing society, which is a challenge to be welcomed, according to Houtart. He called this process *adaptation*³⁴ and defined it as the ability to change as well as the ability to institutionalise changes to meet new challenges. This process demands redefining aims and goals, re-visioning roles and positions, restructuring processes, and reinterpreting faith together with a proper interpretation of the signs of the times.³⁵ Houtart writes in *The Eleventh Hour*,

The old ways of doing things may not be easily adapted to the new interpretation. This means that they will have to be changed or abandoned completely and new ways will have to be developed to accomplish the redefined aims.³⁶

³³Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, 25.

³⁴Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, 24.

³⁵Houtart, *The Eleventh Hour*, 30.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 148 (emphasis added).

It is extremely important to understand some social lags in this process; we mention only two, sufficiently all embracing:

1. The lag between the development of facts and the organisation.
2. The lag between the real-life situation and the level or stage of thinking.

The lag between the development of facts and of the organisation. The Church is running after the facts without being able to catch up to them.³⁷ This points to the structures that are not capable of catering to new situations any more. Houtart writes,

There is great need for a bringing-up-to-date as Pope John³⁸ said, because the Church has become so set in its institutions, yet must find new ways to meet new problems. Thus the development of facts and the adaptation of the institution becomes one of the primary concerns. The Church as an institution will always be a little late with the facts but should not be too late.³⁹

The Lag between the Social Reality and Ecclesiastical Thought

A lag occurs not only between the development of facts and organisations but also between the social reality and the ecclesiastical thought (level of reality and level of thinking). On occasions, old theories and old theologies are not only unable to explain the realities but are also irrelevant for facing the challenges posed by the social reality.⁴⁰ Houtart's message is that the current information and up-to-date knowledge at all levels, plus a fresh thinking are crucial for change to happen.⁴¹ It is this process that helps the Church to institutionalise changes. The leadership in an institution is of paramount importance for changes to take place.

What are the qualities of a leader? How Houtart grapples with this issue is central to the discussion of our understanding the Church as an institution in the world.

³⁷Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, 73.

³⁸Houtart refers to Pope John XXIII.

³⁹Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, 81.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 84.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

Leadership and Institution

According to Houtart, leadership at all levels is crucial in the institution to bring about changes. There is a shift in the concept of leadership. Houtart says,

In order to meet the problems of our rapidly changing world we must come to a new type of organisation. . . . The role of a true leader is no longer administration, but rather one of *provision and of planning*. This is a great function of a leader: *to lead in a prospective type of attitude*. A leader in any kind of institution who is just administering the institution to secure that things are going well, that everyone is at his proper place, that the organisation is running smoothly is no leader in our present civilisation.⁴²

Houtart coins a new term—*evolutive*—using his sociological knowledge. He continues,

Leadership in our very changing world requires the ability to see what must be done today for tomorrow, what provisions we have to make now to be ready for the work that must be done tomorrow. And really we are now in a difficult stage of transition to a new type of institution, the *evolutive institution*.⁴³

Evolutive Quality

What does Houtart mean by *evolutive* institution and *evolutive quality*? Houtart answers,

Because we are living in a society where organisations are a necessity, we cannot function without them. But we are also very much aware of the inflexibility of many of our institutions and the organisational detail that often delays action past the point where it can be effective. This is why we must develop a new type of institution, an *evolutive institution* [italics added], one which is not defined once and for all, but is capable of development, one within which we can institutionalise change.⁴⁴

Thus, the Church must have an evolutive leadership and should be an evolutive institution. In fact, Houtart relates this new concept to all aspects of the life of the Church.

The application of the evolutive quality in the life of the Church (as an institution) requires new roles, new relations, and new types of action, new organisations, new sub-structures within the structure, and new thought. Let us consider only two examples. The

⁴²Ibid., 81 (emphasis added).

⁴³Ibid., 82 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴Ibid.

first example is specifically from a Roman Catholic context, though indirectly the idea is relevant to all churches, and the second is directly applicable in an ecumenical context.

Taking a pastoral context as the first example, Houtart suggests a change in the deaneries, developing from administrative jurisdictions to pastoral jurisdictions that create new roles. In this new attitude, a diocese not only would have ministers for their own parishes but would even have ministers separated and specialised for working on national and international issues.⁴⁵ These new roles and attitudes also should be subject to constant evaluation and appropriation before they become irrelevant.⁴⁶

In the second example, on the intellectual level, Houtart suggests that the Church must have *engaged intellectuals* together with researchers. Engaged intellectuals⁴⁷ direct their thought to the actual progress of humanity, as the academy should be in touch with real-life situations.⁴⁸ Antonio Gramsci called them “organic intellectuals” referring to the importance of intellectuals being part of everyday life.⁴⁹ This is a very serious concern amidst the enormous social problems of our day.

Our next question will be on communication. In nurturing the evolutive quality in an institution, in this case the Church, she must consider the field of communication seriously. The Church communicates with the world in word and action/praxis and by being just herself in the world.

The Church as a Sign

We shall recall Houtart’s use of the word *sign* here. *Lumen Gentium* declares, “The Church is by her relationship with Christ a kind of sacrament or *sign* of intimate

⁴⁵Ibid., 189. Houtart continues to argue that every diocese must have at least two clergy (ministers) working on international issues. (Interview with the author on the July 27, 2006 in Louvain-la-Neuve.)

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷We find Gramscian undertones here in this concept.

⁴⁸Ibid., 84-85.

⁴⁹Burke, B. *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*, s.v. “Antonio Gramsci, schooling and education,” (1999, 2005) <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-gram.htm> (accessed December 27, 2007).

union with God and of the unity of all humankind.”⁵⁰ So *sign* is related to the field of communications.⁵¹ Sociologically speaking, the question should be addressed from the point of view of the sociology of communication. Thus, Houtart develops this aspect. Every communication requires three elements:

1. The transmitter.
2. The receiver.
3. The sign (which serves as bearer of communication).

How does Houtart connect these three aspects?

The sign is a sensible manifestation of a reality, which can only be grasped indirectly. When we speak of manifestation, we mean that the receiver should perceive what the transmitter wishes to transmit to him. If the sign is incomprehensible because the receiver does not understand the language of the transmitter, for example, there is no communication, and consequently no manifestation. But the manifestation can be expressed in a variety of ways—words, gestures, and symbols. And so there is a verbal and non-verbal communication. According to the reality to be grasped, communication can be of various kinds.⁵²

Houtart applies this concept to ecclesiology in the following ways:

1. As a social being, as an institution within the wider society, the Church uses communications; in other words, the Church speaks as a social being.
2. The Church herself bears a communicative character by her own nature because she is a *sign*. The whole organisation is a medium of communication. This means the very institution itself speaks by the very fact of “being there.”
3. The Church ought to be expressed in a way perceptible by the people of our time. Otherwise, she could become a non-significative sign or a non-sign.

⁵⁰Houtart, “The Church and the Developing Nations,” 358f. (emphasis added; inclusive language mine).

⁵¹Ibid., 359.

⁵²Ibid.

4. This concept requires a degree of sensitisation to the wider world, with special reference to the modern values, attitudes, behaviour, culture, and context. To put it another way, it demands skill to read and interpret the signs of the times.⁵³

Communication is not limited only to words, but requires action, that is, a praxis. For Houtart, action or praxis essentially is connected to the mission of the Church. In other words, the mission of the Church is the mission to the world and in the world. The challenge of *Gaudium et Spes* is for a mission in the wider community, and it calls for a ministry of social witness in the world.⁵⁴ The Church is a community of witness within the social order.

The social sciences, to a great extent, can enable the Church for a meaningful preparation in the process of her praxis. Thus, one of the major concerns of Houtart is to discover and explain how the social sciences are enabling and facilitative instruments in the fruitful exercise of the ministry and the mission of the Church in the world. We shall highlight a few areas of concern.

First, we begin with the inside story. Introducing Houtart's scheme of social analysis, Dietrich and Wielenga question why the social analysis should be necessary for the Church.⁵⁵ We must begin by granting that the Church is part of the existing social ensemble; then, it is of the utmost importance to look inside the Church as an institution for a positive self-critique and evaluation of the Church herself. This is applicable, of course, not only to the Church, but also to all religious institutions that function in society.⁵⁶

The religious institutions are part of the economic structure and engage in a number of economic activities. They own land, have budgets, pay salaries, rent buildings,

⁵³Ibid., 361.

⁵⁴Denis Turner, "Christian Activity in the World," in *The Church in the World*, ed. Denis Turner (Dublin: Scepter Books, 1968), 56-71.

⁵⁵Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 9.

⁵⁶Ibid.

and run schools, hospitals, and projects. The Church is also part of the social system of caste, class, education, and income; these are some areas that help us to determine her internal social status.⁵⁷ The religious institutions are also part of the political system. Whether they support rulers or keep away from politics or support the opposition, in all cases the Church is taking a political position. The Church is not free from the ideological realities, as her economic and political activity implies certain ideological choices. Any work of development run by the Church has its own ideological underpinnings.⁵⁸

The social sciences could also enable the Church to evaluate her own pastoral and other ministerial structures and to integrate the results of surveys in her pastoral forecast and planning in order to create new structures. For example, the Church could test the attitudes of her members and substructures towards issues such as development.⁵⁹ Alternatively, the Church could conduct a survey on the orientation of the priests, seminarians, nuns, and the lay elite from the point of view of their social ideology⁶⁰ or make use of empirical-social research in new pastoral or frontier ministries. This survey could address uprooted peoples, underdevelopment, and even the areas of leisure and play.⁶¹

The use of the social analysis by the Church and by the theological disciplines on the issues involved helps to promote a creative theological reflection. Some examples of topics suitable for this type of reflection include the study of violence,⁶² ethnic conflict, poverty, ecology, the population explosion, and so forth. This field would be very useful for the ethicist and will be considered further in our final section on application of some Houtartian concepts in social ethics.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹François Houtart, "Attitude toward Development among Catholics in Sri Lanka," *World Development* 8 (1980): 603-612.

⁶⁰François Houtart with others, *A Socio-Religious Analysis of the East Ramnad District, Tamilnadu* (Louvain: KUL, n.d.), 487-495.

⁶¹Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, 118.

⁶²Houtart, "The Cult of Violence," 3-9.

However, the general reading of the *signs of the times* involves a skill in collaborating positively and critically with others who are also working in the same areas of development and progress of the world. The consideration whether these other people are Christians or not is not a question anymore in this qualitative attitude toward mission. Houtart calls this a participatory attitude and leadership.⁶³ However, when we talk about partnership and collaboration in praxis, it requires a use of language that is understandable and acceptable to the collaborators, irrespective of their creed or ideological affiliation, calling for the ability to use a kind of common socio-ethical language, which is a part of this problem of communication.

To sum up Houtart's contribution in this field, we start with the Vatican Council II and show a great awareness of the fact that the Church exists in the world, not in isolation but in connection with the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres of life. Houtart himself has contributed to this new understanding of the Church in the modern world by way of research on many of the important issues. Houtart challenges us to change the conceptions of the institutional organisation and of the leadership of the church, which will be conducive, if put into operation, to a change of the structures themselves. Both the institution and its leadership must nurture the *evolutive* character of the structures of the Church.

To this process, the social sciences have a great contribution to make, so that the thought, word, and action of the Church as a sign may be significative and significant. Arguably one may even interpret that Houtart has been engaged in a dialogue between sociology and ecclesiology while involved in the wider discourse of religion and society. Karl Rahner writes, "There are realities which we understand only when we love them. The church is one of these."⁶⁴ Undoubtedly, François Houtart is one who loves that reality, of course a social reality, called "The Church." In brief, Houtart's thesis has been

⁶³Houtart, *The Eleventh Hour*, 183.

⁶⁴Richard Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), x.

that the social commitment is part of Christian commitment, and sociology and social analysis help as tools in the church's social commitment.

Variations on the Theme of Houtart's Ecclesiology

While His Holiness Pope John Paul II was in Cuba at Fidel Castro's invitation in January 1997, Monsignor François Houtart was also present in the Caribbean Island, at the invitation of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. He was certainly not in the Pope's entourage but in the capacity of a special guest from the other partner of the encounter. Later, he wrote a rather mild and benevolent article, tongue in cheek, on the outcome of the encounter: "The Pope in Cuba: A Visit Which Aimed at Being a Turning Point and May Have Been But a Parenthesis."⁶⁵

This episode in Houtart's life is not only of anecdotal value but is also a significant symbolical event that illustrates Houtart's stand in the social and historical divide between the Church as an institution of power and the people down below, the virtual recipients of the Church's utterances.

The reader may have developed a growing awareness of two facts about the relationship of François Houtart with the institutional Roman Catholic Church, his own Church, and her hierarchical figures (whom he calls "leaders"). On the one hand, we detect in Houtart an unfailing fidelity and loyalty to the Church and corresponding respect for her hierarchies; on the other, we see a thorough and sometimes impatient criticism of their failure to exercise their authority to implement what they have so vigorously stated in their official documents. From some of Houtart's most vigorous and impatient criticisms of the Church for failing to put into effect her teachings in *Gaudium et Spes*, one even gets the impression that, for Houtart, there is an abysmal gap between her solemn declarations and her conspicuous inactivity; in other words, to borrow the

⁶⁵COELI – Centre Oecumenique de Liaisons Internationales, No. 82-83 (1997): 29-32.

witticism of some Latin American theologians, that the Church is “zealotist in words and Herodian in action.”

We may wonder what kind of relationships with the power structures and decision making institutions of his own Church he developed or had to endure along his many years of research.

Since the beginning of his career François Houtart has been in the “bad” company of scholars like Chenu, Congar, and later, people like Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, Tissa Balasuriya, and the Latin American liberation theologians, prominent among them Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and his former fellow seminarian and good friend, Joseph Comblin. They all had two things in common: 1) their solidarity with the grass roots, and 2) at one point or other in their lives, each one of them has been warned of dangerous doctrines, ostracised, or openly censured and condemned. Houtart himself has consistently been looked upon with suspicion by the official Roman Catholic hierarchies and, on some occasions, openly prohibited from attending some important gatherings, such as CELAM’s gathering in Medellin. His relationship with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has been complex and ambiguous to say the least, and perhaps it was a love-hate relationship. From his writings, we do not get much information on his relationships with the official institutions of non-Roman churches that are equally Christian. Houtart is consistently discreet in this respect.

It is difficult to assess Houtart’s contribution to the ecumenical dialogue because he is not a theologian by profession and his contacts with the World Council of Churches and other international, national, and local Christian organizations have been of a practical nature, of what is sometimes called “applied ecumenism.”⁶⁶ Perhaps this is the reason for his seeming lack of ecumenical sensitivity when writing constantly about “the Church,” meaning the Roman Catholic Church, and more specifically her decision-

⁶⁶Houtart has specifically mentioned his collaboration on the WCC’s programme to combat racism. (Telephone conversation with the author on October 26, 2006).

making structures and institutions. This usage baffles me sometimes. (In his later years of fervent militancy calling to churches, movements, and groups of all sorts to combat globalisation, Houtart is much more inclusive in his language.)

Reading Houtart, I also perceive that his own stance is at odds with the official Roman Catholic positions on the social issues that he shares with most Latin American theologians of liberation. One of the main criticisms one perceives in reading Houtart's socioreligious studies calling the Church truly to understand the environing society and engage in social action to transform its unjust structures is his very frequent criticism of the Catholic Church's failure to respond effectively to the changing nature of contemporary society. On this issue, Houtart puts his voice at the disposal of the voiceless, and the professional sociologist in him turns into a prophet. With equal frequency and fervour, Houtart makes vibrant appeals to the Church (i.e., the Roman Catholic power structures) to listen to the voice of the victims of injustice and join in the process of their liberation. In such instances, we have "Father Houtart" the pastor in action. Again, we see in his professional and vocational life the threefold dimension of the method of analysis the critique and action of the Young Christian Workers movement: the sociologist who *sees*, the prophet who *judges*, and the pastor who *acts*.

In order to analyse different aspects of Houtart's opinions of the role of Church in society and in so doing illustrate the complexity of his analyses, it is necessary to look again at the events and people that influenced his adoption of a pluralistic dimensional approach in analysing the Church from theological and sociological perspectives.

Houtart himself recalls his engagement with the Young Christian Workers (YCW) in the late 1940s as a period that marked the origins of his preoccupation with the sociology of religion as a tool to analyse society and, thus, to serve the Church better. In other words, he wanted to understand the modern world and put his findings in this field at the service of the hierarchical Church. From the beginning, we perceive that his

undeclared intention was thoroughly apostolic, though not in the least detached from the subject of his study. He deepened his theoretical knowledge of sociology during his postgraduate studies in Chicago, where he applied this knowledge in conducting a study into the relationship between the Church and the working class.

Houtart's ecclesiology also has to be understood and interpreted in the spirit of the vigorous and dynamic ecclesiology of the Vatican Council II.⁶⁷ His involvement and later disappointment with the rich theoretical outcome and the poor practical implementation of Vatican II, together with his connections with the most conspicuous theologians of liberation in Latin America, is of utmost importance in understanding his shift of attention and intention from the top of the pyramid to the bottom, from the centre to the periphery, from theoretical formulations to practical action and implementation.

In his youthful apostolic enthusiasm of his Chicago period, Houtart focused his attention on the de-Christianised working masses in the cities and looked up to the Church hierarchies to come down with the Church's effective message of salvation to bring those masses back to the Christian fold. In other words, while he is studying this world with its social structures of sin-oppression, he has in mind the ecclesial structures of salvation, but salvation in the motherly bosom of the Church. Following the current ideology of the Catholic Action at that time, salvation is to be found in the Church, and so people must enter the Church in order to be saved. Incidentally, we see the same sort of orientation in the known missionary appeal of The International Missionary Conference, meeting at Edinburgh in 1910 with its urgent call "to evangelise the whole world in our own generation."⁶⁸

⁶⁷Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society." Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

⁶⁸For the proceedings of this Conference, see the standard work: Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill, eds., *History of the Ecumenical Movement: 1517-1968* and Harold E. Fey, ed., *History of the Ecumenical Movement: 1948-1968* (one-volume edition; Geneva: WCC, 1993).

Later on, he discovered the character of the Church as a sacrament of salvation that is and needs to be a sign and an instrument⁶⁹ of the Gospel of salvation-liberation that she has been entrusted to hand over to the world. The Church must enter the world if she wants to be an effective sign and instrument of salvation. Salvation must be realised and found in the world, and the Church needs to be in the world. Soon, Houtart had to discover that the Church cannot be nor act from outside or from above the world, but only from below, inside the world, in solidarity with the world, with its “joys and hopes.”

Houtart progresses beyond mere criticism of the Church and reaches a stage where he not only describes and explains the ecclesiastical structures as a sociologist but also challenges them to change so that they may become more relevant, significant, and meaningful to the contemporary social structures. In other words, Houtart does not simply want the Church to be functional (or to cease being dysfunctional), but he puts great emphasis on her social function and how this function can and has to be adapted to a changing society.⁷⁰ Thus, when Houtart refers to the relationship between the Church and the world, he means more specifically, the Church as an institution getting involved with the struggles and efforts of an increasingly technical society.

The heart of the Vatican Council II, as seen by Catholics themselves, was a deliberate attempt on the part of the Church to come to terms with the rapidly changing modern world. A never-changing Church in an ever-changing world could not achieve this. During the early stages of Vatican II, while the document “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” was being elaborated, the Church was seen by many both inside and outside the Council as verticalist in her orientation, pyramidal in her structures, centralist in her administration, and immobilist in her general outlook. From this perspective arose the

⁶⁹ For a definition of the Church as a sacrament, see the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, I, 1, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (1964; New York: Costello, 1996), 350. After this timorous attempt, the same definition appears in several other documents of Vat. II. See also Avery Cardinal Dulles, “The Church as Sacrament,” *Models of the Church*, (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 2002), 55-67.

⁷⁰ François Houtart, *The Challenge to Change: The Church Confronts the Future*, ed. Anne Chouteau (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 24.

fourfold need and task of coming down to the horizontal reality of the world, flattening the pyramid to make it co-extensive with the world, de-centralising authority to introduce a system of collegiality, and unburdening her dogmatic, legalistic, and ritualistic baggage to make her a more agile and dynamic fellow traveller. All these needs, and much more, are implied in the programme of *aggiornamento*.

These tasks are precisely what the more conservative Catholics rejected in the programme of *aggiornamento*, regarding it as an abandonment of the essentials of the faith.⁷¹ This reaction was made all the worse when the Church seemed to tolerate the concepts of the Theology of Liberation, which was put forward most charismatically and with the greatest effect in Latin America, with the consent of and even under the inspiration of the entire CELAM. The Theology of Liberation created an environment in which members of the Church and theologians alike advocated for a deep, committed, and sustained involvement in radical political movements, seeking earthly justice, and therefore entering into an acute opposition with the authorities of the State.⁷²

When John Paul II came to the papacy, he sought to rectify what he believed to have been too great an abandonment of the traditional doctrine and practice of the Church.⁷³ He reemphasised the centrality of the Pope's authority, thus weakening the principle of collegiality of bishops. He reiterated, in the strongest possible way and with unfailing frequency in his many travels, the Church's traditional views on sexuality—condemning the use of artificial means of contraception to regulate the unmanageable demographic growth of society, opposing the ideas of married priests and of women entering into the ordained priesthood, denouncing abortion and all other kinds of “interference” with the natural exercise of the sexual functions.⁷⁴ In the political arena, he

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Catholic Church and the World* (2005). <http://www.binghamton.edu/fbc/159en-corrected.htm> (accessed May 27, 2007).

⁷³Sahabandhu, “Portraying.”

⁷⁴Wallerstein, *Catholic Church and the World*.

made some equivocal and ambiguous symbolic gestures that some have interpreted as an embracing of tyrannical persons and regimes, such as Reagan in the USA, Videla in Argentina, and Pinochet in Chile,⁷⁵ while openly and unambiguously condemning Sandinismo in Nicaragua.

The Church has always been associated with politics and the State and, at one time, reached almost an absolute power in doctrine and morals (ideological power) in the European Christian lands; however, the Protestant Reformation, the scientific discoveries of the Renaissance, and later the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, the progress of secularization, and the democratic republican revolts with their insistence on the autonomy of the secular world and consequent separation of Church and State, effectively diminished its monopoly on the doctrinal and moral guidance and also the political life in many western societies. Moreover, with the emergence of the ecumenical movement, a new self-understanding of the Church's role in society has been emerging. Houtart welcomes these movements and supports the reform that they entail and, consequently, advocates for a new role for the Church in society. He actively collaborates with those involved in the Theology of Liberation. Eventually, he co-founded the World Social Forum (WSF), a meeting place for those involved with the anti-capitalist movement, and passionately believes in social action on the part of the Church as the only means to spread the Gospel. As far as he is concerned, the main "task of the Church is to spread the Gospel, and this is the world's most basic need."⁷⁶ This task is best expressed through social action. Houtart considers that the social dynamism of the Christians, both priests and laity, can be the sign of the Gospel for humanity in a changing world, just as Christ's solicitude for the sick and the poor was the sign of his mission to the people in his earthly sojourn and of the presence of the Kingdom of Heaven in the kingdom of this world.

⁷⁵For a sketchy chronicle of John Paul II in Chile, see the carefully worded article by Roberto Suro, "John Paul Calls for Chileans to Move towards Democracy," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1987.

⁷⁶François Houtart and Emile Pin, *The Church and the Latin American Revolution* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 207.

One crucial aspect of Houtart's conviction that social action is the most effective means of spreading the Gospel is his persuasion that men and women are convinced not by reasoning, but by acts.⁷⁷ Within this belief, the first sign of evangelisation is to approach people through their fundamental day-to-day occupations because humans accomplish their divine mission only by performing their daily tasks. This being the case, a principal task of the laity (the people of God) is to get involved in every part of human evolution, from scientific research to its technical applications, and especially the organisation of the world on bases that are functional to its present development.

As a direct consequence of his philosophy and praxis, Houtart invites all those who follow Christ to enter into direct conflict with capitalist governments, and this type of engagement by a priest is something that the Catholic Church usually opposes. As previously mentioned, Houtart's ecclesiological insights are more clearly understood in the context of the Vatican Council II⁷⁸ and of his professional study of the sociology of religion. Inspired by his experience with the working-class youth in Belgium and Latin America, Houtart embraced sociology as the most effective tool with which to study and gain a meaningful understanding of society.⁷⁹ From there, he turned to a corresponding understanding of the Church. During his direct involvement in the proceedings of the Vatican Council II, Houtart raised a number of pertinent and searching relevant questions for the Church and her changing place and role in society. Moreover, not only did he raise questions, he also added very valuable sociological insights to the evaluation of the Church as an institution among other institutions in society.

In the Houtartian paradigm, all the societal, technological, and political changes—in industrially developed as well as in the underdeveloped countries and regions of the world—are bringing about, for the Church, new ways of viewing many activities, which

⁷⁷Ibid., 208

⁷⁸Houtart, *The Challenge to Change: The Church Confronts the Future*, 7.

⁷⁹Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

have existed since the beginning of the Church but now have to be seen in entirely new perspectives in the light of the present-day developments. Correspondingly, if the Church is to accompany the world in its pilgrimage (a *populus viatorum*)⁸⁰ and become a partner in dialogue and action, she has to undergo radical changes in orientation, structures, and language.

The Church also has to change her language to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the world. She has to make a thorough revision of her theological orientation and the formulation of its contents, of her liturgy, her catechesis, and her general teaching ministry. First of all, a liturgical renewal in an urban, mobile society has to take place on a much more practical approach and has to reflect the day-to-day needs of the Christian and of the wider communities. In addition, her catechetical work has to undergo a tremendous renewal.⁸¹ The same could be said of her teaching ministry in the formation of priests and religious agents. Some advancement has been made in all these fields, it is true, but they must not be taken as a final goal but as stations in an ongoing journey of the Church as a community accompanying the world as a society. Thanks to these advancements, the Church has acquired a new dimension for the transmission of religious values in the technologically advanced and postindustrial societies. It goes without saying that the Church has always performed these activities, but with the new challenges to face and in view of the dramatic changes in culture, her catechetical work, priestly formation, and theological education have acquired even greater significance as the means for transmitting the faith.

Additionally, the development of ecumenism is also related to the growth of a technical society. Today we witness a much deeper contact with other Christian churches and religious groups, as well as other religions, and an increasing emphasis has to be

⁸⁰For the concept of the "Pilgrim Church," officially sanctioned by Vat. II, see especially the *Dogmatic Constitution (Lumen Gentium)*, C. VII, §§ 48-51, Austin Flannery, ed., 407-413.

⁸¹Houtart, *The Challenge to Change: The Church Confronts the Future*, 186.

placed on convergence and cooperation rather than on apologetics and confrontation.⁸² In order to achieve all of this, a sound sociological research is necessary, not only research in the sociology of religion, but an accurate knowledge in the sociological field at large, to enable the Church to better understand all the changes taking place in society and the resulting consequences for the Church.⁸³

In his insistence on the lay participation in the overall apostolate of the Church (and not only of the Church's hierarchies) Houtart is, no doubt, indebted to Yves Marie Congar in his seminal ideas of the "theology of the laity."⁸⁴ Both Congar and Houtart served as consulting experts (*periti*) at the Vatican Council II. However, Houtart mentions Congar only once in his *Challenge to Change* (p. 204), acknowledging Congar's influence on some aspects of his thought.

Houtart and the YCW Movement as a Starting Point

A retrospective look at Houtart's formative years may be appropriate in understanding his later development and understanding that, for him, the Church's involvement in the problems of the world, and especially the poor of the world, is of paramount importance for the Church to be faithful to her divine imperative and mission. During this study, we see that this is precisely the connecting thread that gives unity and coherence to Houtart's career.

As we have mentioned often—perhaps too often—Houtart situates his involvement with the Belgium YCW movement as the first important stage in his intellectual development and his first encounter with the institutional Church's role in the modern industrial society. He worked closely with Cardinal Josef Cardijn, the founder of the movement, and describes the situation faced by the European working class during

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Yves J.-M Congar, *Lay People in the Church. A Study on the Theology of Laity* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1957).

and after the 1939-1945 conflict as extremely appalling and, therefore, challenging for the Church to do something about it.⁸⁵ After his ordination in 1949, Houtart conducted some research into the religious malaise in urban areas, aiming at determining why the working class had adopted an attitude that was very hostile not only to the Church but to religion in general. This negative reaction of the working class, according to Houtart, happened in contrast to the Gospel's teaching of social justice and identification with the poor. The reasons were as much practical as historical. Thus, contrasting view of the demands of the Gospel, on the one hand, and the absence of the institutional Church from the sphere of the poor, on the other, will never abandon Houtart's long career as a social scientist, as a prophetic voice and as an activist.

In societies marked by a secular approach to the social and political realities, as was the case throughout much of nineteenth century Europe, religion may no longer fulfil its direct ideological functions. Nevertheless, even though religion and the Church are for them no longer necessary as an explanation for and legitimatisation of the social relations and political power, it does not mean that they have no significance at all for the Church. When in the Europe of the nineteenth century, part of the bourgeoisie decided to renew its damaged ties with the Catholic Church, it did not do so for theological or altruistic reasons but as a political manoeuvre because the Church had previously acted as an ally against the so-called "radical" social disturbances and as a staunch defender of the status quo.⁸⁶ Thus, part of the reason for the hostility of the working class was an emerging class struggle that also caused the workers' opposition to the Church as a traditional ally of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, in his study, Houtart identified more practical reasons for why, in Brussels in the late 1940s, the working-class areas had less than 10 percent regular

⁸⁵Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

⁸⁶Houtart, "Religious Identity."

church attendance or religious observance in contrast with the middle-class neighbourhoods, where it was more than 50 percent.⁸⁷

During the high point of the nineteenth century industrialisation, the Church associated itself with the bourgeoisie and, throughout the entire nineteenth century, was literally absent from big cities in general and working-class neighbourhoods in particular. Even at the time when Houtart conducted his research, the pastoral services were much more readily available in the middle-class neighbourhoods than in the working-class urban districts. During his postgraduate studies in Chicago, Houtart conducted a similar study in the cities of the US and observed just the opposite situation. In the USA, he saw that large Catholic migrant groups had travelled from Europe accompanied by their local priests, who were meant to keep an eye on them.⁸⁸ The solicitous pastoral care of the Church was, thus, present among the immigrants, and in their respective parishes people had something familiar they could relate to. In the parish enclosure, the Catholic immigrants could have a feeling of “back home.” The parishes created a strong affective link with their societies they had left behind in their emigration. This created a situation wherein people took advantage of the services offered by the Church and, in return, allowed priests to identify with their parishes and the cause of the working class. These studies were the basis for Houtart’s belief that, for the Church to remain relevant, she cannot adopt a merely theoretical approach; she has to become actively involved in the challenges and problems faced by the working-class majority of her fellowship. This early conclusion of his early work will coincide with the final conclusion of his life, as we shall see later in this study.

⁸⁷Sahabandhu, “Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society.”

⁸⁸Sahabandhu, “Portraying.”

The Sociology of Religion Is Not a Theological Discipline

It is also relevant to observe how the dialogue between sociology and theology influences Houtart's thinking on the Church and the type of questions he asks in relation to her. Houtart's first formal encounter with sociology proper (and not only "sociology of religion") occurred during his postgraduate studies in urban sociology at the University of Chicago. His early sociological study was influenced by Jacques Leclercq, professor at the Catholic University in Louvain (CUL) and a leading figure both in sociology and in Natural Law; Houtart also fell under the influence of Emile Durkheim and Aron Gurwitsch.⁸⁹ In those early years of his career, Houtart had to defend the autonomy of sociology of religion vis-à-vis the theological disciplines. Sociology of religion, he insisted, is not, in itself, an ancillary discipline of theology, though its findings can be and should be of the utmost help for theological formulations in the present times.

His decision to treat sociology of religion as a social rather than a theological discipline became a practical problem for Houtart after he founded the Centre for Socio-Religious Research (CSRR) and in the same year became the secretary general of the International Conference of Sociology of Religion. The CUL administration argued that the CSRR should be included in the Faculty of Theology, whereupon Houtart made it clear that sociology of religion is *not* an ecclesiastical, but a sociological discipline.⁹⁰ He granted that sociology of religion doubtlessly can and has to be used for pastoral purposes, but firmly stated that it is not the purpose of sociology as such. Sociology of religion is not part of theology, though it can be taken as an ancillary tool for theological education and priestly formation. As the Church recognises the autonomy of the political social realities, she has also to acknowledge the autonomy of social and political studies. The sociology of religion is a part of sociology and, thus, an autonomous social science;

⁸⁹Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

⁹⁰Ibid.

in order to be a useful tool for the Church, in its project of societal analysis, such study should be as independent as possible from any kind of institutional control.⁹¹

A further reason why the Church, and more specifically, the administration of CUL resisted Houtart's approach to sociology in general and sociology of religion in particular was his adoption of, first, Weberian and, subsequently, Marxist principles and methodologies. The three main themes of Weber's sociology of religion are the effect of religious ideas on economic activities, the relation between social stratification and religious ideas, and the distinguishable characteristics of Western civilization.⁹² His goal was to find reasons for the differing paths of development taken by the Occidental and Oriental cultures, without judging or valuing them, as some of his contemporary thinkers following the social Darwinist paradigm were doing. Weber wanted to explain the distinctive elements of Western civilization and, in so doing, introduced the concept of culture to his sociological analysis; however, for Houtart, this scientific stand, on its own, did not go far enough. Consequently, although, he started his PhD thesis on the sociology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka with a Weberian approach, Houtart arrived at the conclusion that the exclusively Weberian approach was not totally satisfactory to answer the main theoretical questions concerning the ways in which human groups organise their material life; hence, his coterminous engagement with Marxism led to his incorporating and increasingly making use of a Marxist methodological approach in his sociological research. Houtart has to insist, over and over again, that the Marxist analysis, however, has to be a tool for looking more deeply into the social phenomenon and not a dogmatic system, with fixed presuppositions.⁹³ This sociological approach, together with the fact that he was closely involved in developing a Marxist methodology of social analysis⁹⁴ in Asia, placed him once again outside the mainstream intellectual currents of the Catholic

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ritzer and Goodman.

⁹³Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

⁹⁴For security reasons, it was then called "structural analysis."

Church. Nevertheless, Houtart argues that this kind of analysis is the best instrument to help us understand the major social problems of capitalist societies and, therefore, is in no contradiction with Christian teachings.

Houtart and Latin America, Africa and Asia

This commitment to cultural analysis, together with the social struggle, deepened and developed when Houtart travelled to Latin America in the 1950s. His visit was necessitated by his work on an article about the situation of the Church in Latin America, dealing with many of the social issues that the countries in the region were confronted with at the time. The research concerned all Latin American countries from both sociological and religious perspectives and was published between 1958 and 1962 in the run up to the second Vatican Council.

It was during this highly influential period of his intellectual, vocational, and spiritual development that Houtart's thinking crystallised in the progressive formulation of his aforementioned philosophy of the Gospel as social action. Like Las Casas half a millennium before him, it was with the dispossessed peoples of the South that it became clear to Houtart that Christianity is best practised through identification with and in the service of the discriminated, disadvantaged, and dispossessed. We could say of François Houtart what Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero said of himself: "It is the poor that have taught me how to read the Gospel." Or to put it another way, preaching the Good News from a position of relative comfort, safety, and privilege to those facing discomfort, danger, and destitution was neither an indication of Christian love nor an efficient or effective means of evangelisation. Effective evangelisation is, in Houtart's opinion, achieved only by demonstrable actions, not pious rhetoric, no matter how well meaning.

Thus, from a Houtartian perspective, the Church has to discard the conservative, straight, and reductive outlook, which considers the problems of humanity from a strictly

ecclesiastical point of view and, instead of attempting to mould the world into the Church's beliefs, organisations, and internal preoccupations, should proactively engage with and support the people in their daily lives. This attitude is reflected by Msgr. Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife, who, pondering the number one problem of Latin America concluded that it was not the number or lack of priests but the development and the involvement of the Church in improving social conditions.⁹⁵ The Church can be nowhere near the beginning of evangelisation until it ventures into the world and meets its fellow men and women in the context of their individual and collective preoccupations.

From Houtart's perspective, the Church is a community of faith, worship, and charity; however, to be perceived in the first two aspects, it must express itself in the third. Faith and hope, for Houtart, must be fecundated and made fruitful by love, and Christian love must be exercised in the social and political fields; otherwise, it is mere assistentialism. Furthermore, for Christian love to be a sign in and to the contemporary world, it must be directed to the true problems and with appropriate means, which are collective in nature. "It is no longer enough to build schools and hospitals, we must understand the new forms of human—community development"⁹⁶ and actively plan future actions. According to Houtart, this is necessary to "break through our 'parochialism' and our congregationalism, work out unheard-of collaborations with Christians of other faiths or with non-Christians, and promote social transformations which can fearlessly be called revolutionary."⁹⁷ Houtart will heartily agree with the statement that,

The most perceptible sign of the Church of Christ for the poor in Latin America and everywhere else will be her participation in the "social revolution," that is, in the profound transformation of the structures of a

⁹⁵Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

⁹⁶Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

⁹⁷Houtart and Pin, *The Church and the Latin American Revolution*, 209.

society that is unjust, because it does not assure the existence and well being of its members.⁹⁸

For the first time in recorded Catholic historiography, a conciliar document, *Gaudium et Spes*, deals directly with the issue of culture, a topic that, as a sociologist, Houtart is particularly interested in. The chapter on culture had the most long-lasting consequences of all in *Gaudium et Spes*. Most important of all, for the first time, the Church used the word “culture”⁹⁹ instead of civilisation. Years later, Pope John Paul II established the Pontifical Commission of Culture in 1982, as a new department of the papal Curia. Of all Vatican II documents, *Gaudium et Spes* addresses the situation in the world most directly. The document made sustained attempts both to engage in dialogue with the “world”—namely with its own fellowship, with members of other religions and movements, as well as with communities outside its direct influence—so as to open up further opportunities for such dialogue in the future.

The implementation of the chapters on the socioeconomic life and the political community are much more in line with the social teaching brought forward from the time of Leo XIII onwards and have differing impacts in diverse regions around the world. In Africa for instance, the social, economic, and political circumstances have, in many respects, deteriorated rather than improved since the 1960s. Christianity plays a major role in Africa, especially south of the Sahara, where the Catholic Church is prominent in several countries; consequently, *Gaudium et Spes* has been particularly influential there. These two chapters of the conciliar document emphasise the interdependence of countries and continents; the importance of mutual help and cooperation; the recognition of imbalances in the world economy; the recognition too that the world’s goods belong to

⁹⁸Michael McCabe, “The Role of the Church in Civil Society: Some Theological Orientations,” http://www.africamission-mafr.org/mccabe_gb.doc (accessed May 12, 2007).

⁹⁹Norman Tanner, *The Church and the World: Gaudium Et Spes, Inter Mirifica* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005).

all; “that the good things of creation should be available equally to all,”¹⁰⁰ the legitimate diversity of social and political structures; and the importance of loyalty to one’s country. The latter is indicative of the Church’s adherence to the maintenance of the political status quo.

The Second Vatican Council occurred in the middle of the era when the peoples of Africa were moving from being colonies of European countries towards titular independence. However, the Council in general and *Gaudium et Spes* more particularly had little to say about this change in the world order, save for a passing reference to “nations on the road to progress and recently becoming independent.”¹⁰¹ The Council seemed unwilling to take sides openly regarding the realities of the African struggles for national independence from European colonialism. The document tries hard to address the whole world, yet the model for much of what it says is clearly Europe, and the documents are redolent of Eurocentrism. In retrospect, there appears to be an almost simplistic assumption, either naïve optimism or Eurocentric arrogance, that the remedies for Europe can be exported to other continents, including Africa, and that all will be well.

One aspect that Houtart identified as affecting the global role of the Church is the new relations of the Catholic Church with Africa and Asia, the two continents where Christianity is not the religion of the majority. For Houtart, the Catholic Church cannot make significant progress in the nation-states born out of struggles for independence because not only is Catholicism too closely identified with the Western powers and culture, but also it has no connection with the cultural practices of the peoples of Africa and Asia. Therefore, Houtart posits that the Catholic Church has to adapt and adopt a cultural, rather than a “Roman Canon Law,” approach to engaging and working with the peoples of the world’s two most populous continents. This type of postcolonial

¹⁰⁰Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New York: Costello, 1984), 175.

¹⁰¹Tanner, 39

Catholicism still identifies itself, more or less, with the cultures, customs, and traditions of the West. Houtart wholeheartedly supported the indigenisation (Houtart uses the term “indianisation” in the context of India) of the entire liturgy, not only rubrics, vestments, and adornments, but also of the language with all the symbolic richness of the liturgy: not as a translation from the Latin Mass, but as a true enculturation. Thus, writing on “The Indianization of Catholicism,”¹⁰² Houtart presents the Indian bishops something like a programmatic shopping list:

Consequently, Indianization has other aspects than those which we shall treat here—in the liturgy and ritual, for instance, in the introduction of local languages into religious acts, in a closer approach to the forms of oriental thought in the manner of elaborating theology, in a dialogue with representatives of other religious groups, not to speak of a Christian mode of thought relating to the concrete situations of the Indian people, their social and economic problems, their internal structures of injustice and their struggles for liberation.

Houtart proposes for the Church not only an internal reformation of the ornamental exteriority but also and largely a greater emphasis on social action, a more hands-on approach to the daily concerns of the people, and a closer collaboration between different Christian churches and other religions, and a real solidarity with the aspirations of the victims of oppression in their struggles for liberation, a very concrete liberation!

The struggle against continuing colonialism, especially in the Portuguese colonies, was one issue that brought Houtart into conflict with the established Portuguese Catholic Church, which was fully allied with the Portuguese government in supporting colonialism under the guise of incorporating the African colonies into the nation of Portugal as “overseas provinces,” and all as a part of the pretended struggle against communism in Africa.

¹⁰²François Houtart, *Size and Structures of the Catholic Church in India: The Indianization of an Exogeneous Religious Institution in a Society in Transition*. (Louvain la Neuve: C.R.S.R. Université Catholique de Louvain, 1982), 94.

Theology of Liberation

The most dramatic development in the few years after the Council was the emergence of the Theology of Liberation in Latin America that swept like a wildfire through the Church and society all over the subcontinent. Undoubtedly, *Gaudium et Spes* influenced the movement. Almost all the leading thinkers of the movement were Catholics, were cognisant of the proceedings of the Council, and were intimately familiar with *Gaudium et Spes*. This view of the relationship between the absolute future (God),¹⁰³ for which Christians hope, and the human efforts to transform the world into one that is more socially just are echoed in the following statements from Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.¹⁰⁴

Far from diminishing our concern to develop this earth, the expectation of a new earth should spur us on, for it is here that the body of a new human family grows, foreshadowing in some way the age that is to come. That is why, although we must be careful to distinguish earthly progress clearly from the increase of the kingdom of Christ, such progress is of vital concern to the kingdom of God, insofar as it can contribute to the better ordering of human society. When we have spread on earth the fruits of our nature and our enterprise—human dignity, sisterly and brotherly communion, and freedom—according to the command of the Lord and in His Spirit, we will find them once again, cleansed this time from the stain of sin, illuminated and transfigured, when Christ presents to his Father an eternal and universal kingdom “of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace.” Here on earth the kingdom is mysteriously present; when the Lord comes it will enter its perfection.¹⁰⁵

. . . Furthermore, God is bringing about this transformed world now, far beyond the frontiers of the Church. Our task is to get in tune with what God is doing. We have to find out where the Kingdom is already present in an initial and germinal way. We have to discern and nourish such *seeds of the Kingdom* by putting our resources and energies there. In discerning and nourishing these seeds of the Kingdom, contemplative prayer and presence will have to balance active social and political involvement.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³Dennis Edwards, *Resurrection of the Body and Transformation of the Universe in the Theology of Karl Rahner*, [http://www.krs.stjohnsem.edu/Edwards Dennis 2005.pdf](http://www.krs.stjohnsem.edu/Edwards%20Dennis%202005.pdf) (accessed May 27, 2007).

¹⁰⁴McCabe, “The Role of the Church in Civil Society.”

¹⁰⁵Flannery.(Chapter III,39).

¹⁰⁶McCabe, “The Role of the Church in Civil Society,” (emphasis added).

This statement is supported by Karl Rahner's assertion that "the Reign of God for which Christians hope is the absolute future which is God himself. God himself . . . wills to be the infinite future of humanity, infinitely transcending all that human beings could ever plan or fashion for themselves."¹⁰⁷ This hope in God as *the* absolute future challenges the Church to adopt a critical stance towards the historically given state of any society. As Rahner further observes,

Such a critical stance can be radical, patient and courageous; it implies neither a conservative glorification of the present situation, underpinned by ideology, nor a destructive impatience which seeks violent means to force a new world into existence by sacrificing the men of today.¹⁰⁸

On the contrary, so this Houtartian perspective, as articulated by Rahner, posits that the Christian affirmation of God as the absolute future, far from undermining the value of sociopolitical commitments throughout history to the present times, which seek to transform the world characterised by injustice and inequality, provides a perspective that can imbue these transformative efforts with enduring significance and true value.

This it does in three ways: firstly, by offering a framework of meaning profound enough to do justice to the complexity of life and to support human efforts to transform the world; secondly, by functioning as a critical perspective which de-absolutises all human achievements of justice; and thirdly, by providing a positive incentive to humans in their efforts to transform human life in history.¹⁰⁹

The link between *Gaudium et Spes* and the Theology of Liberation seems to have been that of an inspiration and a catalyst rather than of a simple literal application of the Pastoral Constitution to the situation in Latin America. The Theology of Liberation can be seen as a faithful reinterpretation of the outcomes of the Vatican Council II in the light of Latin America's own social, cultural, economic, political, and religious experience. Whereas the European Church, which had the greatest influence on the conceptualisation and formulation of *Gaudium et Spes*, may have felt that Christianity had drifted too far

¹⁰⁷Dennis Edwards, *Resurrection of the Body*.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*

away from the modern world and so sought a reconciliation between the two, the Latin American Church, by contrast, felt that Christendom had become too identified with the modern world and its structural injustices and, therefore, sought rather to break away from it.¹¹⁰ However, many, especially in Rome, felt that Liberation Theology was a deviation from the Church's *magisterium*, a distortion of *Gaudium et Spes* rather than an application or faithful interpretation of the Pastoral Constitution. Most notably, under Pope John Paul II, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by the "watchdog" of orthodoxy Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in its "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation" (1984), made a most severe criticism about 1) its many ambiguities, 2) the apparent reduction of the Gospel to mere activism, and 3) the danger of equating Christian liberation with the Marxist revolution.¹¹¹ There was an overwhelming sympathy and solidarity of the Roman Catholic theological centres with the Latin American theologians of liberation (though the "Instruction" did not mention any of them by name); perhaps this deluge of published letters of sympathy moved the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to publish two years later a milder document with softer tones: "Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation" (1986).

We do not know if Houtart published any response to the two documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, but this instance of the publication of the two documents is a clear expression of the dramatic extent of the ideological, theological, and methodological chasm between Houtart and the orthodoxy of the established Catholic Church; both present antagonistic positions on the issue: the total embrace of Liberation Theology on the one hand (Houtart's position) and an equally emphatic repudiation of the movement on the other (the official Vatican position). From Houtart's perspective, no fundamental theological objections exist to the complementary and collaborative co-existence of the Christian social teachings with a Marxist social analysis approach and

¹¹⁰Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

¹¹¹John Bowden, ed., *Christianity: The Complete Guide* (London: Continuum, 2005), 703-5.

social action because the social reality, the social struggle, and the struggle for liberation are never totally pure and unambiguous. Houtart regards action as more important and beneficial for the role of the Church than any amount of theorising. To this effect, in a personal interview, Houtart told the author of this research,

Christians agree in general with revolutions for social justice, but with one condition, that is that the angels make them! But angels make no revolution, and so we tend to object to revolution. Of course, there are always ambiguities. Can we wait for an unambiguous situation? No! The problem is whether to choose the ambiguities of the rich or the ambiguities of the poor. We have to choose, and the Gospel tells us to embrace the ambiguities of the poor. This means a critical commitment: critical in fruition of the values of the Gospel and commitment because we live in history, not beyond history.¹¹²

After Vatican II and the great social encyclicals from Pope John XIII to Paul VI, the Church now has a clear mandate to be involved in the promotion of justice in civil society. However, much ambivalence still exists. On the one hand, the Church's official teaching at the highest level calls for a restructuring of the international economic order;¹¹³ it proclaims that working for justice and the transformation of society is "a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel."¹¹⁴ On the other hand, there is a glaring gap between the official teaching and the actual practice of the Church as represented in the pronouncements and activities of its official leaders. What is done in practice tends to become the acceptable teaching, and the official teaching becomes more and more like rhetoric, honourable in theory, but unrealistic and idealistic in the absence of practical application. In the words of Michael McCabe, "To be loyal to the Church almost seems to demand an acceptance of the unjust status quo, keep your head down and don't rock the boat or cause too much disturbance."¹¹⁵

¹¹²Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

¹¹³Vatican *Populorum Progressio*, [Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the development of people, March 26, 1967], 57-60. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html (accessed May 15, 2007).

¹¹⁴"Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Peace in the World: Dialogue among Christians and Other Religions," 6. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20020107_peace-kasper_en.html (accessed May 12, 2007).

¹¹⁵McCabe, "The Role of the Church in Civil Society."

The official statements support McCabe's thesis. For example, there is the official document warning against the danger of reducing evangelisation to the economic, political, social, and cultural spheres, warning of the dangers of the excessive politicisation of the role of the Church.¹¹⁶ Priests are admonished to leave politics to the politicians. Every so often, articles appear, in the secular and religious newspapers alike, with sensationalist headlines, such as "Pope warns Church to keep out of politics" and "Church condemns Liberation Theology" and "Priest/Bishop told to preach the Gospel and stay out of politics."¹¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI's first Encyclical Letter, *God is Love*, echoes this ambivalence. While insisting on the inseparability of love and justice, the encyclical nonetheless also insists that it is the task of the State to ensure justice and that the Church "cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible."¹¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI seems to be saying that, while the Church must educate and seek to appeal to the consciences of people about the demands of justice, the "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world"¹¹⁹ is not really part of the Church's mission.¹²⁰ The Church's policy of non-engagement means that Houtart, with his active involvement in the social struggles, especially in the global South, operates, at best, on the furthest extremities of the mainstream Catholic teaching and does not enjoy a high regard or reputation in the Catholic Church's European heartland.

¹¹⁶Vatican, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 33 – 35. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html (accessed May 12, 2007).

¹¹⁷MCCabe, "The Role of the Church in Civil Society."

¹¹⁸Vatican, *Deus Caritas Est*, 28. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html (accessed May 12, 2007).

¹¹⁹MCCabe, "The Role of the Church in Civil Society."

¹²⁰Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin, interprets this differently: "Many were surprised by a comment of Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, which affirms 'that the just ordering of society and the State is a primary responsibility of politics' and adds later that 'the Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible.' Some have seen this as a recipe for the retreat of the Church from commenting on the public arena. I look on this as a remarkably strong emphasis on the importance of politics and on the real purpose of politics," see the article on "Companion To The Compendium Of The Social Doctrine Of The Church," http://www.dublindiocese.ie/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=745&Itemid=372.

However, in spite of his deep disappointment with the lack of a consistent implementation of *Gaudium et Spes* on the part of the official hierarchical Church, not forgetting the fundamental difference between his and the official Church's positions vis-à-vis the level and tone of engagement with society in general and with Liberation Theology in particular, Houtart chooses to remain within the Church. He observes that the structures can best be analysed and changed from within.¹²¹ Houtart states vigorously and repeatedly that the social sciences are important for the Church and that a sound social analysis is a prerequisite for sound social ethics. For Houtart, the social commitment in the kingdom of this world is the way of expressing the values of the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus, social ethics is one of the main tasks of the religious institutions and has to be expressed through analysis of society because, without knowledge of how a society functions and where and how unequal relations are constructed, a merely passive and ineffectual condemnation of the effects of unjust structures is possible but barren, devoid of an accurate, scientific, and meaningful assessment of the causes, much less of a proactive strategy towards committed engagement in social action. To condemn the abuses of the structures is to deplore the effects without touching the causes, to trim the sick tree without touching its roots. That, according to Houtart, is one of the main weaknesses of the social doctrines of Christianity and other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

For Houtart, the Theology of Liberation is precisely the theology and theological thinking that does not ask itself whether God exists, but where he is. The main questions are the following: In what kind of society do we live? What is the meaning of the love of God in a society which is so unequal and unjust and where so much injustice exists? The problems of the Theology of Liberation are to see precisely where social groups are struggling for justice, to determine the main values of the "Kingdom" as a mirror of the

¹²¹ Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

human society as willed by God, and to have a theological reading of those events. In that respect, the kind of ecclesiology Houtart subscribes to is very much related to the history of the Liberation Theology and Third World Theologies. Social ethics is one of the specific tasks of the religious institutions, but it cannot be expressed except through an accurate analysis of society. Houtart claims that,

You cannot make a judgement on society if you do not know how the society is built and what the mechanisms are that build unequal relations. This would be just to condemn the effects, but never to understand the causes. In the Christian churches, the social doctrine is based on a hidden type of analysis. It is only recognised in terms of social stratification but not in terms of social classes.¹²²

Making judgements without analysing the social structures, for Houtart, is the weakness of the Christian social teaching. In the main documents of the Holy See, for example the social Encyclicals, there is little analysis of the causes of the problem. The reason for that lack of analysis, Houtart concludes, is the Catholic Church's fear that if it deals with the causes it would have to mediate the social and political sciences and, thus, have to adopt a Marxist analysis herself.¹²³ Because of the amalgam between atheism and Marxism, the immediate reaction is to condemn those deploying a Marxist analysis, saying that it is linked with an atheist movement and if one uses those instruments, his methodological choice will invariably lead to atheism, from a "methodological atheism" to a real "ontological atheism." The Theology of Liberation has accepted the mediation of a class-oriented analysis, and ethics is a major aspect of this form of ecclesiology. Houtart regards this mediation as extremely important for the social teachings and definitions of ethics. The Theology of Liberation adopts a class analysis in the sense that society is seen not just as a superposition of social strata, but also as a structure itself with people at the top and people at the bottom.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid.

For Houtart, the problem for a Christian or religious institution is how to avoid the institution becoming an end in itself rather than an instrument to bring certain values to humans and society. Houtart espouses the idea that theology in general needs more rationality and more institutionalisation and that the Church, as an institution, needs to be sensitive to the suffering of the masses in order to be able to achieve its primary objective of transmitting values in society. Despite his heavy involvement in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Vatican Council II and its implementation remain a disappointment for Houtart:

I would say, during the time surrounding Vatican II we had such hope that a fundamental transformation [in the Church] would happen. We were thinking that the institutional Church, as a world institution, would be able to exercise a more moral power than it had in the past. We were thinking that with *Gaudium et Spes* and with the whole work of the Council we would have a more prophetic Church and in a sense more radical, not only speaking for justice in an abstract way.¹²⁴

On the contrary, after the Council, a return to and a real work of restoration of the old Church was undertaken, partly out of fear of the consequences of the Vatican Council II. On the practical side, Houtart argues:

I felt we spent so much time and energy with the Vatican Council II to try to change the structure of the Church, in order to have another Church and we had to realise that the result was negative.¹²⁵

He did not abandon the idea laid down by the Vatican Council II completely, for as he explains, he would have had to leave the Church. Moreover, as a Christian, rather than representing the Church as an institution in an official capacity, his approach was to act as

one of the people struggling in the field of international work, international issues or local issues and showing that it is possible for a Christian and a member of the Church to be there and that's all.¹²⁶

Part of this commitment was CETRI, which Houtart founded in 1976 as an instrument with a sociological approach and the objective of realising solidarity with the

¹²⁴Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

¹²⁵Ibid.

¹²⁶Ibid.

Third World.¹²⁷ Working with numerous and heterogeneous societies, he nevertheless stuck to his approach in attempting to explain the role of religion in society and the extent to which it contributed to building cultures, thus orienting the general shape of societies.

Conclusion

In general, it can be argued that Houtart with his sociological analysis of the Catholic Church remains outside of the mainstream currents of the Church. He and his work remain almost unappreciated and sometimes unknown in Europe, even though he enjoys some popularity in the global South, especially among the Protestants and people of other faiths and ideologies. Though he has published an enormous number of papers and books discussing the Church's role in society, his sociological approach, though commendable, appears at times almost naïve, as though the Church would only have to take the class and social struggle into serious consideration for a wholehearted reform of the Church to be possible. For Houtart, it is exactly at this conjunction in the relations between the Church and the World wherein lie the fundamental hopes and tests for success or failure of the Council and, thus, of the reformation and transformation of the Church. If the Church loses its concern for the world, he seems to say, then the world will lose its concern for the Church, and the Vatican Council II will have failed conclusively, and the Church will be meaningless in and for the world.¹²⁸

Today, there are several new challenges that the members of the Church, together with sociologists of religion, have to take into consideration. For instance, Houtart argues that, with the rapid spread of secularisation in western societies, the religious phenomenon of life has taken on a new dimension. Houtart is persuaded that, especially since 1968, a basic cultural crisis has appeared in western societies resulting in, among

¹²⁷About the same time, Houtart began to be interested in Asia and the Asian religions, especially Buddhism, so much so that in 1974, he published his PhD dissertation on the sociology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

¹²⁸Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

other things, a general disaffection with religious practices. Even among committed Christians and the middle classes traditionally allied to the Church, there are those who are separating themselves from the Church, and many churches are empty during Sunday religious services. This phenomenon, even if in a different form, is also apparent in other continents. In Latin America, as a case in point, many people consider themselves culturally and nationally Catholic and equate their Catholicism with their national belonging, not with the Church. Nevertheless, instead of adapting, instead of changing, the clergy appear to become increasingly conservative. These, according to Houtart, are two interconnected phenomena for sociologists of religion, as well as being the wrong approach if the Church does not want to become increasingly meaningless.¹²⁹

According to Houtart, the growing Pentecostal communities, with their emphasis on an emotional expression of their religiousness, are havens that provide an answer to this dislocation of social links.¹³⁰ Here, he argues, the Church should learn because it remains remote from people within society, paying too much attention to protocol and not enough to pastoral care and social action.

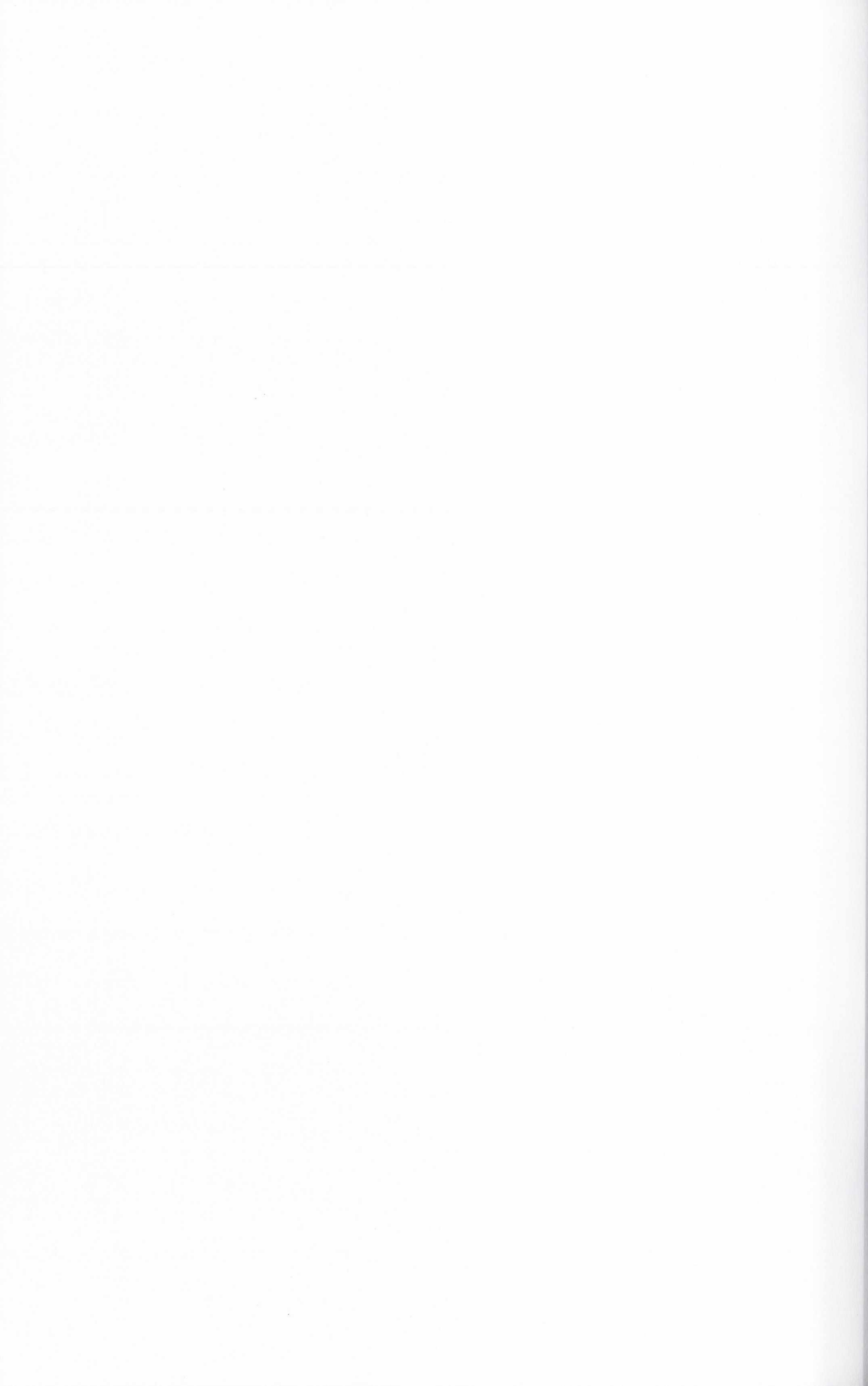
Generally, an emphasis on and commitment to social action, a greater consideration of class issues, and a social science approach to the analysis of society are needed for the Church to become or remain relevant. Houtart himself has, after the disappointment of the Vatican Council II (during which and shortly after, he still believed in the possibility and feasibility of a complete reformation and transformation of the Church as an institution), turned his focus away from an ecclesiological approach and concentrated his thought and energies on an active involvement in the Church as an institution, in an action-led approach wherein he uses his sociological analytical skills for his involvement, as in the World Social Forum and the *alter* globalisation movements. He

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Ibid.

now considers himself, as a professional, involved in transnational *alter* globalisation movements: a professional who happens to be a priest.¹³¹

¹³¹Ibid.



CHAPTER FIVE

RELIGION AND SOCIETY IN DIALECTICAL INTERACTION

Introduction

In this chapter, we will consider more deeply Houtart's examination of religion as such and not specifically the Christian religion or the Catholic Church; the reader will not find frequent mentions of the Church, meaning the hierarchical structure, but of Christian and Catholic *groups*, a more neutral and value-free term. This chapter is focused on religions and societies (in the plural) of the vast region of South East Asia, though not exclusively, as fields of exploration and experimentation. Presented in this chapter is an ecumenical Houtart, attaching to the word *ecumenical* both its etymological meaning of related to the whole inhabited world and its more recent conventional meaning¹ of a dialogical encounter with other Christian churches and with believers of other religions. Everything human is essentially social, and nothing social is alien to Houtart's interests in his expanding field of study. In his direct encounter with the societies, cultures, and religions of the world, it is no wonder that Houtart himself underwent some important transformations in his own person and his personal orientation to the social world as a human construction and, consequently, had to adapt and readapt his methods according to the unique nature of each of the cultures that became the fields of his social research.

It is becoming customary in Asian theological circles nowadays to distinguish between the *humanum* and the *Christianum* and then to ask the pertinent missiological

¹ It must be noted that in Roman Catholic circles the term "ecumenical" is normally used for the relationship with other Christian Churches, whereas for encounter with the members of other religions the term "interreligious" is used. The Protestant churches which are associated with the World Council of Churches use the term "ecumenical" to cover both inter-church and inter-faith encounters.

questions²: Did the Son of God come to the world to make it *Christianum*, or did he rather come to make it *humanum*, “fully human”? Though Houtart never makes such a theological distinction, we are entitled to look at his work also from a theological perspective and see three stages in his development. 1) In his first stage (the Belgium and Chicago period), he aimed his efforts at making the working masses Christian, and so fully human; if that is the case, the *Christianum* in Houtart had precedence (not necessarily primacy) over the *humanum*. 2) In the Latin American stage, Houtart learned from his colleagues in liberation theology that we cannot be fully Christian and also subhuman; we must be fully human to be fully Christian; consequently, the *humanum* has precedence over the *Christianum*.³ 3) After his encounter with Asian societies, cultures and religions, Houtart came to the conclusion that, in order to be *humanum*, one does not need to be, necessarily, *Christianum*.

Houtart came to Sri Lanka with some preconceived theories of religion and of “non-Christian” religions. In Sri Lanka, he put those theories to the test in his first non-Catholic field of experimentation, and as a result of his research, he had to modify some theories and aspects of his approach. He also had to sharpen his methodological tools. He himself declared to me in a long interview:

It was in Sri Lanka that I discovered Karl Marx. When I was doing my thesis I had begun to work with the theories of Max Weber. Then I gradually discovered that the Weberian approach was not enough, though Weber was interesting.⁴

² For a general discussion see, Josef Fuchs, *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1983); for a discussion in an Asian context in particular see, Emerito P. Nacpil and Douglas J. Elwood, *The Human and the Holy: Asian Perspectives in Christian Theology*, (New York: Maryknoll, Orbis. 1980), for similar echoes also see EATWOT: Wennappuwa Declaration of the Asian Conference of Third World Theologians, Wennappuwa, 1979 (Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research, July 1979). Aloysius Pieris also has worked in similar lines on Basic Christian Communities and Basic Human Communities. (see: A. Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian publications, 1988) 112; [chapter on the Place of Non-Christian Religions and Cultures in the Evolution of the Third World Theology, 87-126].

³ In the 1960s there was a widespread controversy on the relationship of “evangelization and human promotion.” All liberation theologians would affirm that evangelization without human promotion is void and contrary to God’s purpose to make us fully human in his Kingdom upon this our earth. From it comes the Christian vocation to engage in the construction of a just society as an imperative of the Gospel. Perhaps the Asian theologians are indebted to their Latin American colleagues for this important distinction.

⁴ Sahabandhu, “Portraying.”

It was something to be expected from a non-dogmatic, honest and prospective scholar. We choose this concentration of the focus of Houtart's work for two reasons: 1) It is the area nearest to my heart; 2) Houtart himself has made intensive and extensive studies of religion and society in some parts of this area, namely, Sri Lanka, Viet Nam, India, the Philippines, and up to Korea. The readers will detect some conceptual overlapping and repetition, for which I apologise and beg their indulgence, while recognising that my gradual deepening in the presentation of Houtart's thought is not rigorously chronological and biographical in nature.

A brief retrospective reminder may be of some use here. The relationship of religion to society and, especially, to politics and mass social movements has become a topic of increasing concern in recent years. This has been particularly true with regards to the nations of the so-called Third World, where, contrary to the expectations of Marx, religious communities have put themselves in the forefront of the struggle for national liberation and socialism. Even in Western countries, such as the USA, the role of religion in society has been on the agenda. Witness to it is the wholehearted involvement of many conservative evangelical communities in the "Bible Belt" in the support of the "neo-cons," the most conservative branch of the growingly conservative Republican Party under Reagan, Bush I, and Bush II. These presidents used religious language in their speeches, ending them with expressions such as "God bless America" and "God bless you." At the other extreme, a good number of pastors (largely Baptist pastors) are campaigning for a more liberal form of government (mainly the Democratic Party) and creating a "Rainbow Coalition" of citizens of all shades of skin pigmentation. Prominent among them is the Rev. Jesse Jackson. Taking this a stage further, continuing with the US model, does the Republican programme of militarism and social austerity, for instance, find its principal mass support in a rightist social movement of evangelical Protestant inspiration? It is worth noting that, as Mansueto argues, "the most credible opposition to

this movement has come from political forces rooted in the Black Church, which forms the core of the Rainbow Coalition.”⁵ These examples remind us that religion always plays a role in politics, whether of the right wing or the left wing in its orientation. Even pretended “abstention from politics” is a political stance, usually favouring the status quo.

The resolution of the question about the nature of the relationship between religion and society has to be rooted deeply in the academic tradition of sociology of religion as well as in the traditional social teachings of the various religions under scrutiny. This is a field of study in which Houtart has been actively involved ever since he conducted his study of working-class people in Belgium in the 1950s and shortly after he studied for a postgraduate degree in Chicago, where he conducted a similar study. As we have seen, his sociological research was influenced first by Max Weber and later, especially during his sojourn in Sri Lanka, by Karl Marx, both of whom have written extensively on religion and its social functions. Houtart identifies different social functions of religion, and later in this chapter, we shall see how he analyses the religious demands of the people in different societal settings. Weber argues that religion has two basic functions: it acts as an ideology of legitimation for the superior position of the dominant class and offers compensation in the form of an afterlife for the dominated classes.

Houtart has conducted extensive research into societies in south Asia and has analysed these religious demands and social functions under the condition of colonialism, as well as postindependence. This chapter looks at different societal types, principally feudal, preindustrial, and industrial, analysing the extent to which Weber’s assumption of legitimation and compensation holds true and how the religious demands change when societies change. Closely connected is the aspect of the institutionalisation of religion, particularly how it influences the social demands and the interrelationship between the

⁵Anthony Mansueto, *Religion and Dialectics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 15.

religious and societal actors, especially in the Third World countries where religion, far from calling its adherents to alienate themselves from the struggles of this world, sometimes plays a protagonistic role in speaking out against social injustice and takes the side of the dominated group. One example examined is the Theology of Liberation and the role of religion in the class struggle generally. Another very recent example is the widely publicised mass rallies of Buddhists monks in their protests against the military tyranny and the corresponding demands for freedom and social justice in Myanmar.

Since many political and societal factors are shaped, not so much by reality, but by the ideas, values, and assumptions about how society should be organised and allied with the expectations, hopes, and fears of government or other ruling authority, the chapter proceeds to look more thoroughly into the theoretical concept of society, especially the connection of economics and politics. In this chapter, we will analyse Weber's conception of authority and power and will offer some direct examples of political and economic systems, including some of his insights into the questions of the legitimacy of the relationships of authority and power on the one hand and the general subordinate populations in different societies on the other; also, we shall deal with the question of how the inequality in these power relationships may lead to questioning the legitimacy of power yielding in the hands of some minorities, with the possible results of social struggle and unrest. It is worth noting that most of the societal research conducted by Houtart and considered in this chapter is concerned with South Asian societies, and the question remains to what extent the Northern conceptions of society, legitimacy, and authority—as defined by Weber, Marx, and Houtart himself—are relevant to societies far remote from the European situation in which those theoreticians were born and lived. Houtart, as we have seen, is not inflexible in the application of his theories learned from his European and American teachers and his previous research in Europe and the US.

Therefore, he does not force societies to fit into his theories but is ready and willing to change his theories to fit into the societies under study, within their specific contexts.

Houtart argues that a social ensemble is a system with different fields existing within a structure of interrelationships. According to Houtart, two ideas are required for a true contextualisation and development: *correspondence* and *stress* (perhaps a better term would be *tension*).⁶ The concept of *correspondence* or affinity is taken from Weber's analysis of causality, and no study of the relationship between religion and society is complete without understanding their geographical and historical contexts, with their necessary correspondence or affinity. We may ask, for example, why Thailand Buddhism and Sri Lankan Buddhism, being both of the Theravada tradition, are so different in many respects. The answer is clear: because there are many differences in their respective societies. We can see that many important details of Weber's study of religion and his overriding concern with a variety of world religions and their development stem from changes and variations of the religions and the societies themselves. *Stress*, in its Houtartian conceptualisation, stems from changes in the individual components of the social system. When a sector of a society becomes dissatisfied with the power relationship, we have the beginning of stress that leads to a tension, and the generalised tension may be conducive to conflict, open revolt, and/or some kind or other of social change. This is possible, Houtart adds, precisely because each system enjoys a measure of autonomy. These two concepts, only insinuated here, deserve a more detailed examination, which will be attempted later in this chapter.

It is against this background that Houtart analyses the relationship between society and religion in different State formations in Asia, namely the feudal societies wherein religion is closely connected to political power, the secular capitalist societies, and the

⁶For this important difference of *correspondence* (or affinity) and *stress* (or tension) see François Houtart, *Religion and Development in Asia*, commonly called *Baguio Report*, Baguio Feres Seminar, Philippines, 1976, 13-15. Houtart does not define clearly his concept of "stress."

socialist societies of China and North Korea. Theoretically, within the socialist paradigm, in contrast to the capitalistic system, the economic field is totally submitted to the political, and the main base of the whole ideological and political system is the primacy given to the people and their potential for development. As a result, the ideological system does not need any metasocial justification. Religion in such cases has no place as an ideological system. However, according to Houtart, no contradiction exists between Marxism on the one hand and Marxist analysis of religion on the other. Moreover, Marxism can be helpful to the sociology of religion to analyse society and religion more generally, and this analysis can greatly further social movements in their fight for social justice.

Religion

Towards a More Precise Definition of Religion

Jean Paul Sartre wrote that definitions should come at the end, but in our case it is at the middle of our road when we are in a good position to define religion and other related concepts more precisely. Given the evolution undergone by Houtart as he progressed in his studies of religion and society and his principle that methods must be adapted to reality and not reality to the methods, we arrive now at an advanced stage to define some recurring concepts in Houtart's studies, such as *religion, society, functions and roles*, and so on.

The study of "Religion and Society" is a broad topic to which a strictly sociological approach is adopted herein. To this end, not all aspects of the religious reality can be considered. Thus, faithful to his profession as a sociologist, Houtart leaves out of his consideration the extra-natural or supernatural origin of religion and focuses his field of study on analysing religion as a social phenomenon, bracketing out the transcendent

realm of religion and religiosity. In so doing, in this chapter we begin with the functional and operational definition of religion given by P. Bourdieu, who considers religion as

a symbolic medium, at once structured and structuring, in so far as it is the condition of possibility of an agreement on the meaning of signs and on the meaning of the world.⁷

Houtart accepts this tentative definition but adds some qualifications to make it more complete, precise, and operational; according to Houtart, this definition by Bourdieu does not sufficiently emphasise the specific quality of religion that distinguishes it from other symbolic systems that provide an ideological basis for social groups. Houtart adds a further element to the definition:

religion is a symbolic medium *referring* to what the believers are calling *super-natural forces*, personified or not.⁸

Hence, from a sociological perspective, religion appears as an organised set of meanings, a frame of reference for reality, structured around oppositions, which it aims to reduce to harmony. According to Houtart, some examples of these oppositions include life and death, the transient and the permanent, the natural and the supernatural, liberty and constraint. The part Houtart is particularly interested in is that which religion plays in reconciling opposites resulting from social interrelations and, notably, the degree to which it makes acceptable the tensions, contradictions, and conflicts that are necessarily involved in every interhuman relationship and with the social environment, especially with every category of social organisation.⁹

Social Functions of Religion: Special Focus on Asian Religions

On the level of its social functions, Houtart, in critical dialogue with Bourdieu, considers religion as a structured symbolic medium, standing in a relationship of

⁷Francois Houtart, "Religion and Development," in *Religion and Development in Asia: A Sociological Approach with Christian Reflections* (Baguio Feres Seminar, 1975), eds. Julio Xavier Labayan and Francois Houtart (Quezon: n.p., 1976), 8.

⁸*Ibid.*, (emphasis added).

⁹*Ibid.*

dependence towards other variables of society (economic, social, political, cultural, and familial). It is also structuring, for, by “sacralising” the human order, namely, by putting it into direct connection with the supernatural, it confers an indisputable character on this order. The mechanism by which this is accomplished is the “reduction of oppositions,” either through the system of beliefs situated directly on the level of explanations or by myths, which produce the link between two orders of reality—internal and external to human society—or by rites acting symbolically but efficaciously. The social functions of religion are numerous, and they differ according to the types of societies they are relevant to. Sometimes religion plays the role of a political ideology because in some cases it has the monopoly of social meaning, for example, in the European Middle Ages, as well as in Asian feudalism (e.g., the Indian kingdoms; the Sinhalese, the Burmese and/or the Vietnamese dynasties; or Korea’s royal and imperial regimes). In the Asian feudal society, for example, the homology between the various sectors of society was high. The social stratification was built on the economic mode of production, and the political organisation followed the same pattern. The religious system was the symbolic expression of the social reality, the King being the link between the two worlds: the supernatural and the natural.

Houtart argues that every system within society has a certain degree or level of autonomy and this autonomy must be studied within the framework of the social models. Furthermore, he argues that this autonomy is always the result of institutionalisation, and that differences exist in the way religion plays a role depending on the religious system, for example, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and so forth. Animist religions, so Houtart posits, have almost no autonomy. They respond to the immediate social, material, and psychological needs of human groups, depend almost totally on the natural forces, and have little control of the social mechanism. We have mentioned our reluctance toward using these terms “animist religions” and our preference for the more

appropriate expression “nature religions” but will retain the terminology used by Houtart. They are basically natural societies, in immediacy to nature, and their religion is a religion of nature. Their praxis is largely centred on the sacred manipulation of the natural environment. The organisational degree of institutionalisation is minimal. In these societies, there is no need for organisation because in such a system, religion is an immediate response to the social and material needs and, thus, follows the general pattern of institutionalisation of the group. However, some social structures exist in these systems, such as the roles of the shamans in central and north Asia and the *kattandiya* in Sri Lanka, to mention only two examples. They have also their own rituals and symbols, but there is no specific institution having authority over them. The group produces them spontaneously. Nevertheless, the specific meanings are not necessary when the social organisation has no opacity because it is diaphanous; it has no need of explanation or legitimisation because it follows the natural patterns of age and kinship. Such a religious system is flexible, corresponds with the social system, and adapts when there is change in society. The rapid diminution of rituals, symbols, or even sacred roles—when a cultural change is brought about—is typical among tribal groups, in India, for example.¹⁰ With the coming of modernity, beliefs are considered as atavic, vestigial superstitions; myths are told and retold as fantastic stories; and rituals are performed, but as mere folklore and occasions for joyous festivals. And yet, they are still parts of the culture.

Another form of religious systems is known as “founded religions,”¹¹ namely all religions having a founder (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, and so forth) or at least some recognised scriptural basis (such as Hinduism and Judaism). According to Houtart, they appear in concrete circumstances, generally when human groups begin to structure themselves in more complex organisations than the extended family, and when the scarcity of the natural factor of production requires a new type of

¹⁰Houtart, “Religion and Development,” 30.

¹¹Ibid.

social organisation based on the appropriation of power by one group, one family, or one person.¹² The founder (or founding scripture) transmits a doctrine and establishes the basis for an organisation. These are the two main elements of the institutionalisation. Houtart continues,

The doctrine points to a “utopia” which is the answer to the need for personal and collective meaning of life. The types of answer may be very different from each other, according to time, culture, philosophical basis, concept of history, experience of time, and experience of the group.¹³

It has been frequently stated that while the South Asian religions are influenced by a cyclical vision of history, religions based on the Judaic tradition have a linear conceptualisation of history. This distinction between cyclical and historical is now subjected to severe criticism. Houtart uncritically accepts this distinction¹⁴ and, from his brief excursion into the field of phenomenology of religion, moves quickly to his own field, sociology of religion. In a society of the feudal model, where homogeneity is the pattern, the religious organisation will closely correspond to the social one.

In a feudal society, so Houtart argues, there are two elements that favour the expansion or “diffusion” of feudal religion: First, there is a kind of integration in its system of some very important elements of nature religiosity or the religion of nature (remembering that the feudal society was mainly an agrarian society) in order to answer to the immediate social and material needs of the masses, by assuring good weather and rain in due season. So there are some elements of “religion of nature” in the feudal religion and society. These elements are not only vestigial but also functional. The second element is the protection of the political power, which needs a religious legitimation. A religious system is often adopted or imposed by the ruling dynasty on an exclusive basis because that form of religion serves best the interest of the ruling powers by making them

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Houtart, “Religion and Development,” 30.

plausible and acceptable by way of legitimation and sacralisation in the name of the gods. That form of religion becomes co-extensive with the entire society.

Only the tolerated minorities, partly because of their useful trades and professions, may be tolerated to have another religious system but, normally, not without difficulty. Jews in Europe, Jains in the Anuradhapura kingdom in Ceylon,¹⁵ and Muslims in Hindu kingdoms represent explicit examples of this historical phenomenon.

Another important way of diffusion-expansion of a religious system is by way of political conquest or influence, such as in the case of Emperor Asoka on the Indian subcontinent, Constantine in Europe, or the Great Moghul in Afghanistan and India.¹⁶ Houtart identifies commerce as another way of diffusion of religious systems but argues that this is often the case with less organised religious systems, such as Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan or Islam in Asia and Africa. Finally, the systematic and organised missionary efforts depend on various factors, including the doctrine of universal salvation, religious organisation, political influence, and the religious group embarking on its mission.¹⁷

Religion can also function as the basis for group identification in a given society. This is mainly the case when specific minority groups have a specific religious affiliation. The best-known example for this function would be the Jewish Diaspora. However, it is also the case with the Christians in many Asian countries. An example is the school conflict in Sri Lanka in the 1960s, in which a political conflict turned into a religious dispute, with the former political adversaries identifying themselves in religious terms. Organised religions also have some social impact in modern society. The Christian churches, for instance, have built and managed many schools and hospitals, contributing to the national development policy of a State. The activities of the religious institutions in

¹⁵Paul Younger, *Playing Host to Deity: Festival Religion in South Indian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73.

¹⁶Houtart, "Religion and Development," 31.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

a secular society are not different from the socioeconomic field, carrying out a social function, not so much on the level of meaning (as in a feudal society), but on the organisational level.

Identity and Belongingness: The Case of Sri Lanka

One issue that is of significant interest to Houtart is the interaction, in dialogue or confrontation, between different religions and the impact that the religious identity has on this interaction. For him, the relationship between different religions in the social field creates different religious demands that may either derive from the specific interests of the various social groups or may be a response to identical demands that, for various reasons, often with historical causes (invasion, colonisation), are now satisfied by different religions. This is the case among the peasant masses of Sri Lanka, who are variously Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. Identity may be defined as the sense of belonging to a particular ethnic, national, or social group, which in turn provides a certain social stability, a status, a worldview, and a manner of thought. A new term has been utilised for this kind of identity and cohesion: the “sense of belongingness.”

One example of this issue of identity is the relationship between Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus. In this case, the religious argument is invoked only by one of the two groups, namely the Sinhalese. Indeed, Houtart argues that some Sinhalese feel that their identity is under attack. Historically, they were converted to Buddhism under the rule of Emperor Asoka by means of missionaries sent by the Emperor himself. They argue that the Hindu Tamils gradually occupied the northern part of the island, thus eroding its cultural and religious homogeneity. During the period of the British colonial rule, the recruitment of Tamils for the administration and the resultant promotion of their business skills implied that this population group acquired influence all over the island, not just in the north. This development prompted a nationalist reaction, which erupted simultaneously with the struggle against British rule.

At the moment of independence, the conflict resulted in a refusal to recognise the basic rights of the Tamil minority. The sense of belongingness can be a very powerful political weapon. Nowadays in Sri Lanka, it is not uncommon to hear from powerful and influential *bhikkhus* incendiary speeches of this sort: "We remind the Tamils that this is a Sinhalese land, and the religion of the Sinhalese is Buddhism; this is our own land, a Buddhist land; we belong to it and it belongs to us. We only tolerate the Tamils to live in our land and to practise their religion, and they must know their place in this our land." The Tamil reaction to the widespread acceptance of this rhetoric was to fight fire with fire, power with power, and so they created different parties and movements that eventually crystallised in the emergence of the LTTE, which claims to be the sole representative of the Tamil people. Thus, one of the side effects of the Sinhalese pursuit of an exclusive identity was the emergence of a parallel Tamil pursuit of their own exclusive identity and, correspondingly, a rigid polarisation of Sri Lankan society. Houtart writes in this vein,

the identity defined by some very influential Buddhists has been very solidly established on religion and therefore it justifies a rigorist attitude, even to the pursuit of a merciless war. A sector of the Buddhist Sangha sees this as a religious mission. Furthermore, a more political view of the conflict and of the possibility of negotiation objectively implies a loss of political influence for the intransigent Buddhists. These two factors combined transformed Buddhism into a factor of violence, which is in direct contradiction with its basic philosophy.¹⁸

By way of an excursus, we may compare the religious-social situation in Sri Lanka with the situation prevalent in South Africa until recently. Houtart gives the situation of South Africa only passing references in his studies on Portuguese colonialism in Africa. What strikes us immediately is the similarity between the social role of the Calvinist and Reformed *Afrikaner* religion in South Africa to justify and maintain the apartheid system of domination over the entire population and the sociopolitical role of Theravada Buddhism to justify and maintain the Sinhalese domination over the entire

¹⁸Houtart, "Religious Identity," 106.

island, including the territories of North and East, where Tamils constitute the numerical majority of the population.

In the case of South Africa, the white Calvinist minority invokes the doctrine of the double predestination and a well-known myth in the Bible as means of legitimating their supremacy over the Black majority population. They refer to Genesis 9:20-28 to claim that the African peoples are the descendants of Ham and so included under Noah's curse: They shall be the slaves of the descendants of Japheth. Thus, they legitimise not only the White supremacy but also the debasing treatment to which the Blacks are subjected by their White masters. They consider themselves as the chosen people and the chosen race by God. Calvinism in South Africa becomes a political religion.

In the case of Sri Lanka, however, it is not a minority coming from outside that claims supremacy over the entire population but a numerical majority that claims to be the first occupants of the land. Invoking the rights of first occupancy, they have recourse to the religion of Buddhism and several myths that sprang from it as the first religion established in the land, while all others (Hindus, Muslims, and Christians) are considered as alien elements introduced later from outside to undermine, weaken, and disestablish Buddhism from its rightful position as the religion of the entire land and, ultimately, the religion of the State.

With the differences we have mentioned, both in South Africa and in Sri Lanka, religion functions as a referent for justification, legitimation and sacralisation of the status quo, a situation of permanent domination by a group with a privileged identity and belongingness (religiously, culturally, and even racially): Indeed, the Sinhalese identify themselves as Aryan, they take pride in speaking an Indo-European language, inhabit a land visited three times by the Buddha, and are especially *chosen* by the Buddha himself, who entrusted their primeval ancestor and the land to the special protection of God Sakka, the king of all gods. Thus, Buddhism in Sri Lanka is also a political religion. However I

am aware that in the context of Sri Lankan ethnic-conflict debate, some new questions have been raised now: Would-be peacemakers need to better understand Sinhala nationalism, which is too often dismissed as merely irrational and racist. This required multi-disciplinary interrogation.

Religious Demands: What Do They Mean?

The conceptual framework that Houtart uses to analyse religion as a social reality was initially inspired by Max Weber and Karl Marx, as we have mentioned earlier, but is also based on Houtart's own extensive research into the religions in Asia. Weber's main interest was the general issue of why institutions in the Western world had grown progressively in a more rational manner, while powerful barriers seemed to prevent a similar development in the rest of the world. Weber argues that rationalisation in religion is tied to concrete groups of people, in particular to priests and analogous religious agents. For him, the professionally trained priesthood in Western Christianity is the carrier and the expediter of rationalisation. In this, Christian priests stand in contrast to their counterparts in other more "nonrational" religious systems. The greater rationality of the priesthood is traceable to several factors. Members of Christian laity go through a systematic educational program to become priests, are more specialised, and possess a systematic set of religious concepts.

Weber further defines the religious demands as corresponding "to a social order (dominant/dominated relationship) and to the political interests of the two groups . . . created in the last instance by the type of economic production."¹⁹ These demands may be either explicit or implicit, and every demand also requires a response. According to Houtart, two levels of analysis exist: the explicit demand and the implicit demand. The former is the demand that is lived and consciously expressed by the social actors, both dominant and dominated. The latter, implicit demand is the demand that emerges from a

¹⁹Houtart, "Religion and Development."

reflection on the social function of religion, which enables us to affirm that we have here a response to an unconscious demand. As argued before, with all societies consisting of dominant and dominated groups, religion contributes simultaneously to the legitimation of the power of the privileged group and the corresponding subservience of the underprivileged. The social position of the former (the dominant group) is justified as being part of an order designed and fixed by a divine will while the promise of a better condition in an afterlife offers the latter (the dominated group) a consolation and compensation for its present position.

Houtart in his “Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka” is concerned exactly with the question of the social functions and demands of religion for the Catholic minority and the Buddhist majority in the Sinhalese social ensemble.²⁰ The question, as Houtart conceives it, is based on the fact that both popular groups desire socioeconomic advancement under conditions of economic scarcity. As argued before, in the case of an unequal distribution of goods, religion can provide a factor of social cohesion because it acts either in a legitimising or a compensatory fashion. In the contemporary situation, however, Houtart notes that

the constraints of international economy, together with an explosive demography, forces [sic] the development among the popular masses of an awareness of the historical nature of under-development, and the awakening of the responsibility of the social actors.²¹

Following this Houtartian logic, the ensuing expectation is that the underprivileged groups would no longer seek compensation for their situation in religion, but outside religion. This brings up the question of how, within such a situation, the unequal distribution of goods is accounted for, since “this is the fruit, not of the special

²⁰Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 448.

²¹*Ibid.*

competence of the possessors, but of their belonging by birth to a particular family, caste or class.”²²

Houtart describes the religious demands of the Catholic elite in Sri Lanka as considerably heterogenic and divides the Catholic minority into westernised and non-westernised Catholic groups.²³ Three cultural models condition the religious demands of the westernised elite group: 1) The first and most important sees the social order as one of the component parts of a more general order, of God’s plan for the world. It thus automatically becomes collective evidence that things as they are should not change because they are as necessary and unalterable as God’s mysterious and inscrutable designs for us. 2) The second, largely a minority view, contests precisely this principle of divine determinism in the social field. The actualisation of the Gospel values, on the contrary, implies for them the transformation of this order, so as to ensure improvement of the conditions of the underprivileged groups. 3) The third, which is at present the opinion of a small minority, defines its social belonging through its religious belonging, “and that’s all.” In this social perspective, political forces are measured in terms of religious majority or minority weight.²⁴

The non-westernised Catholic group generally contests the social order, similar to the second group of westernised Catholics. In general terms, it can be argued that, among the Catholic elites, the religious demand is associated with ideological options. However, these demands are generally connected to the interests of the social groups, that is to say, the maintenance of their positions of power. The differences found in these religious demands derive from “points on which interest is focused, the social ensemble for some,

²²Ibid., 449.

²³This division is not applicable today.

²⁴Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 448.

the religious group or the local society for other. This, however, does not basically alter the social function performed.”²⁵

In the first instance, the same tendency can be observed among the Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka, namely, the search for protection in those domains whose number increased with the complexity of daily life. Indeed, the more insecure the social actor feels, while remaining conscious of his role in an individualistic society, “the more he multiplies the practice, the cults and the horoscopes and this, whatever may be the social group, elitist or popular, to which he belongs.”²⁶ While certainly these appeals to the gods have an important psychological function, they have a social function too, to the extent that they are substituted for a search into the social causes of the living conditions of the actors. Another phenomenon revealed by Houtart’s analysis shows the incident of transformation of the social actuality on the construction of religious meanings. If in the past,

the Buddhist pantheon constituted a structured significant of the society signified, its structure reproducing the power-relations, and the evidence of these forming an essential element of social cohesion, this no longer exists today. The individualism involved in the dominant culture has become the factor which makes possible the maintenance of a social ensemble in which the pursuit of progress, as a chief value, can co-exist with the unequal distribution of goods, without the social forces or the play of interests being brought into question.²⁷

Consequently, the gods no longer act as the elements of a structure whose order is directly connected with the hierarchy of power, but as individual beings possessing the power to intervene in the hazards of daily existence. Religious practices are losing their character as collective manifestations, to become individual actions, even if great ceremonies or processions still exist, more and more folkloric in nature, whose festive

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 451.

²⁷Ibid., 452.

character now performs other social functions such as entertainment. One example of this could be the ostentatious Kandy Perahera (procession).²⁸

A third element is the recourse made to the religious by politicians in the exercise of their political functions. In today's Sinhalese society, the political leaders are no longer deified; thus, it is in order to underlie historical continuity, the unity of the people, and the authenticity of power that these practices are retained, even though most active action today is left to the Sangha. As a way of illustration, whenever the President or the highest political authorities of Sri Lanka appear in mass meetings and rallies, they are indefectibly and conspicuously flanked by the *bhikkhus* in their saffron robes and palm leaves fans. Buddhism becomes a political religion, and Sri Lankan politics become religious politics. Employing Weber's theory again as a basis, one can conclude that, at least in the example of Sri Lankan westernized society, a legitimating function persists.

For the masses, the function of compensation by salvation in the afterlife seems to disappear, replaced by the increase of an instrumental function in the actions of individuals. It has taken on a social value because religion, through the hope of efficacious supernatural assistance in the pursuit of the objective that the organization of society renders impossible, enables people to ignore the very causes of this deficiency, that is to say, the power relationships that engender the social inequalities and the relative immobilism of the structures of society. Nevertheless, a trend exists, at least among the Catholic minority in Sri Lanka, to use religious motivations for the transformation of the structures of social relations, providing religion with the function of contestation of a social order it has traditionally sanctioned.

²⁸The ritual of bringing out the treasured tooth from the temple began in the eighteenth century. The Tooth of Buddha begins its procession or "Perahera." The royal male elephant carries the sacred tooth and leads the procession. About 80 elephants make their way into town. Torches fend off curses. The number of dancers reached 3500.

The Concept of Affinity or Correspondence

As seen in the example of the Portuguese colonisation in Sri Lanka, within a social ensemble, the different fields, economics, politics, and religion are interrelated. Lévi-Strauss puts it laconically: "Society consists of a set of interlocking systems, expressing each other."²⁹ Houtart heartily agrees with Lévi-Strauss in the first part of the sentence ("a set of interlocking systems") but also makes his own the criticism of Gaboriau to the second part of the sentence:

Theoretically, we could envisage a strict correspondence, a real homology between the systems. Well, this is impossible . . . No system expresses another exactly; on account of the specific nature of their codes, but also because of stress, expression may be deformed or even reversed.³⁰

For Houtart, two theoretical ideas are connected, that of correspondence and that of stress. The first is close to the concept of affinity developed by Weber and is a concept of kinship, "a relationship between fundamental variables which depends, not . . . on historical circumstances, which are basically contingent, but on their own internal constitution."³¹ Weber's concept of affinity is linked with that of a *causality*, which is not necessarily one-sided and does not exclude a certain reciprocity. The critical thing to remember about Weber's thinking on causality is his belief that "because we can have a special understanding of social life, the causal knowledge of the social science is different from the causal knowledge of the natural science."³² Or as Weber puts it: "Meaningfully interpretable human conduct ('action') is identifiable by reference to 'valuations' and meanings. For this reason, our criteria for *causal* explanation have a unique kind of satisfaction in the 'historical' explanation of such an 'entity.'"³³ Weber's concept of

²⁹Houtart, "Religion and Development," 12.

³⁰Ibid. Houtart quotes approvingly M. Gaboriau, in his article "Anthropologie et Histoire," *Esprit*, November 1963, 588.

³¹Ibid., 13.

³²Ritzer and Goodman, 115.

³³Max Weber, *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* (New York: Free Press, 1903-1906/1975), 185. (For a review of this work see Paul Q. Hirst, *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics by Max Weber; The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*

causality, then, must not be interpreted in a Newtonian sense (natural causality) but as historical causality, which is less rigid and non-deterministic. Weber spent much of his life studying religion, in spite of, or perhaps because of, his being a religious or, as he once described himself, "religiously unmusical."³⁴ What Weber meant was that he himself is neither antireligious nor irreligious.

The Concept of Stress

As far as Houtart is concerned, the other important idea with regards to religion and society is the concept of stress. As mentioned previously, there is a correspondence between parts of one system and parts of another. However, any system can undergo change, as new elements are added and old ones dropped. Such a change "does not ipso facto, entail parallel changes in the corresponding system. Thus gaps appear."³⁵ The reason for that, according to Houtart, is because each system enjoys a measure of autonomy. The immanent laws governing the distribution and maintenance of the elements within each are not exactly the same.

An economic change, for example, resulting from a technological innovation, depends on a decision, which may be taken with very little delay, whereas a legal change requires a long procedure and a cultural mutation, for instance, in religious beliefs, representations or practices—follows an even slower pace.³⁶

This phenomenon is also frequently the result of institutionalisation, the process that stabilises the interrelationships of meaning and the relationships between actors. For example, a political system that produces a religious ideology and projects into the supernatural sphere the power relationships existing at a certain point in time may very

by Max Weber, *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Special Issue. History and Sociology (Sep., 1976), pp. 407-409 (review consists of 3 pages).

³⁴Hans Gerth and C. Mills Wright, *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 25.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 14.

³⁶Houtart, "Religion and Development," 14.

well go on being patterned by these same sacralised relationships at another time when the economic system has changed.

However, variations to this relationship between the political and the religious exist in different state forms. If the “Divine Right” was an effective argument in the monarchical systems of the Ancient Regime or in the feudal kingdoms of Kandy and Kotte in Sri Lanka, the distribution of power in the social ensemble of a secular state is justified by different arguments, such as respect for the defence of liberty, democracy, development ideology, or human equity.

Going back to the different societies described earlier, it can be observed that the relationship between politics, economics, and religion is different in feudal, precapitalist, and industrial societies. 1) In a feudal society, the socially and politically dominant group consists of those who have appropriated the monopoly of land property and so, indirectly, of production. This right, based on force or on birth, is entirely arbitrary because it is not an economic necessity. The result is an ideological demand, which will be met by a system of legitimation external to the social reality. Hence, religion comes in as a symbolic system vesting with indisputability the social position and the political power of the dominant group. For the dominated group, religion functions as a compensation by offering them the benefits of a salvation in the after-life. Thus, the religious system acquires the monopoly of symbolic meanings; the ideology is necessarily religious. The co-existence of several religious systems is impossible, except if geopolitical divisions exist. The doctrinal justification of this double social function is expressed as a direct divine authority or delegation to those who have the religious authority.³⁷ The religious institutions and the religious agents are of central importance in this kind of social ensemble. Generally, these agents are divided functionally into a group with high social status (the higher clergy) and another with inferior social status (the lower clergy).

³⁷Ibid., 23.

2) In the second theoretical model, the precapitalist society or, in other words, the capitalist society in its initial phase, the social ensemble is characterised by the breaking up of the dominant group into two subgroups; the part of the social elite that continues to reproduce itself in the same way as before and another group that develops the capacity to master new techniques of production.

These two sub-groups enter into competition with the meanings offered by existing religious systems. They search for others (even in another religious system), so as to provide a religious recognition of work as the foundation of social position.³⁸

As for the dominated groups, even if they diversify into rural and urban sub-groups (towns and cities have emerged in this phase of social organization), their relationships with the other elements of the social system barely alter, and the function of religion remains very much the same. Furthermore, Houtart argues, the social revolts, if they develop, express themselves in religious terms, messianic or chiliastic-millenarianist.³⁹ The religious institution diversifies its supply, and the religious organisations become more complex, especially in the urban areas. Conflicts develop between religious systems to the extent that the elite groups in political competition with each other adopt different religious systems. The doctrinal justification itself varies between the groups. It can act as a defence of the system of established beliefs of the traditional elite, an adaptation of doctrine to justify the functions it fulfils with the new elite, a marginalisation, or a new religious system, if the revolt of the dominated group is related to the divine.

3) The second phase of the capitalist society is characterised by a predominantly industrial form of economic production and gives rise to an economy of abundance. The social groups become highly diversified, and the division of labour in those societies becomes more complex. The system of production develops the phenomenon of class and

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid. For a comprehensive and convincing study of chiliastic or messianic movements in the feudal Middle Ages, as well as modern times, see Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed*. (New York: New American Library, 1965).

introduces among the dominated a new consciousness of the relationship between social forces. Hence, social movements, either revolutionary or reformist, develop. Ideology no longer has a religious aspect. The dominant group—the high bourgeoisie—either rejects religion or makes it a purely private affair. As for the dominated groups—the proletarian masses in Marx’s terms—they are no longer satisfied with the traditional religious meanings; “most often they see in the religious system nothing but the obstacle to the transformation of social relationships.”⁴⁰ Consequently, they either reject religion or, on occasion, demand from it motivation for the “social struggles,” which is not only a western Christian phenomenon but a universal phenomenon. Religion loses, at one stroke, both the monopoly of social meanings and its capacity to reduce social oppositions. Religion no longer provides the basic ideology, and religious pluralism becomes a possibility. The institutions and the roles defined in terms of the preceding situation are sometimes maintained simply because institutionalisation rendered them autonomous and they begin to lose their consistency. A peaceful co-existence may be established between different religious systems and solidarity to build up in the face of the competition of a religion or anti-religious ideology, while at the same time internal conflicts develop between groups with varying ideologies.

Religious Fundamentalism: A New Awakening

A recently increased phenomenon, very visible and widely publicised, is a particular type of religious fundamentalism that is different from the religious system in feudal societies. In religious fundamentalism, religion and politics overlap at a number of points, not least in the development of the major ideological traditions. But what is religious fundamentalism? Houtart makes only occasional and passing remarks about fundamentalisms in the plural. Thus, he writes,

⁴⁰Houtart, “Religion and Development,” 24.

This type of movement exists in several religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Their social representation is one of a social order established by the divinity that must be restored through a consistent desacralisation of the dominant western culture. . . . They do not represent real alternatives and, after all, they are not as dangerous to the capitalist order, that knows how to use them in the case of necessity, as it was seen in Afghanistan.⁴¹

What elements do they have in common? We can enumerate six elements that, in our opinion, are common to all: 1) A sense of crisis in a global dimension and of the impending damnation of the world. 2) A sense of a vacuum of authority in the religious institution to which they belong. 3) A return to their founding Scriptures to rediscover in their literal interpretation the unbreakable authority of divine revelation. 4) Clinging blindly to the purity of doctrine and moral precepts of those Scriptures as the sole norm of life and only doctrinal authority. 5) Utter condemnation of all those who fall outside their religious views. 6) Willingness to kill for the sake of their faith (fanaticism). These six elements make up a portrait of a fundamentalist and serve for an operational definition of fundamentalism. These varieties of fundamentalism are now springing up and spreading all over our planet and pose to sociologists a formidable challenge for serious and rigorous study. All of them have some political overtones or undertones.

Houtart is not a stranger to this new phenomenon, and the rise of fundamentalisms is not outside the sphere of his professional interest. In a personal interview, he stated that this phenomenon of fundamentalism should be “interrogated sociologically.” There are, he stated repeatedly, evidently many differences between these fundamentalisms, and these differences would come to the surface only after rigorous sociological studies of the planetary phenomenon. He deplored that he has not had the time and energy to study it in depth and leaves this most important socioreligious phenomenon for the task of serious studies in the field of sociology of religion. In the same conversation, he gave a longer exposition on his views on modern terrorism, which, in some extreme cases, is closely

⁴¹Houtart, *Mercado Religião* (Sao Paulo: Cortez Editora, 2002), 124. (Dr. Jose Lana of the Theological College of Lanka has translated this for the author.)

related to fundamentalism.⁴² We mention this because Houtart is keenly aware of the need for an objective study without emotionalism. A few remarks of our own will suffice here.

Religious fundamentalism can be divided into two types. The first one pretends to be apolitical and views politics (and indeed all aspects of political and social existence) as being this-worldly and, therefore, bound to damnation, in frontal opposition to the “revealed truth.” This is largely a Christian variety of fundamentalism. From this perspective, the political and social life should be organised on the basis of what are seen as essential or original religious principles, commonly supported by a belief in the literal truth of sacred texts. On a cursory analysis of their preaching and teaching, one immediately discovers that their pretended apoliticism and condemnation of the things of this world is only a pretension without any empirical foundation; deep down, most of the Christian fundamentalist movements and groups are staunch defenders and legitimators of the extreme right side of the political arena. In the US, for instance, practically all are defenders of the Republican Party. Their religion is, again, a political religion, and often it is identified with the so-called “civil religion” in the US. The second type is clearly and openly political and overtly sets out to give legitimation to the politics of the extreme right, as we can see in many of the churches and religious groups in the “Bible Belt” of the US and also beyond those geographical boundaries.

There are two contrasting explanations for the increase in religious fundamentalism at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. One views fundamentalism as essentially an aberration, a symptom of the adjustment that societies make as they become accustomed to a modern and secularised culture. The second suggests that fundamentalism is of enduring significance and believes that it is a consequence of the failure of secularism to satisfy the abiding human desire for “higher” or spiritual truth.

⁴²Sahabandhu, “Portraying.”

Several forms of religious fundamentalism have arisen in various parts of the world. The significance of Christian fundamentalism, for example, has increased in the USA since the 1970s, as a result of the emergence of the “New Christian Right,” which campaigns against abortion and for return to “traditional” family values. In Latin America, the Pentecostal churches have been growing at such a pace that some students of society see in them a threat to the numerical domination of Roman Catholicism, and they are gradually displacing Roman Catholicism in their social impact; in countries like Brazil and Chile, they are becoming the main “refuge of the masses”; some sociologists are now turning their attention to the political awakening of the Pentecostal indigenous movements in Latin America, from Chiapas to Ecuador and Argentina.⁴³ In Israel, Jewish fundamentalism, long represented by a collection of small religious parties, has grown in importance as a result of attempts to prevent parts of what is seen as the Jewish homeland from being seceded to an emerging Palestinian State. Zionism, which began as a spiritual movement, is now becoming thoroughly political. Hindu fundamentalism in India has developed to resist the spread of western secularism and to combat the influence of rival creeds, such as Sikhism and Islam.⁴⁴ The most politically significant, to judge by the publicity it receives in the mass media, of the modern fundamentalisms is undoubtedly Islamic fundamentalism, which was brought to prominence by the Iranian revolution in 1979 to counteract the secularist tendencies of the Shah Reza Pavlevi and eventually led to the founding of the Islamic State under the Ayatollah Khomeini. It has subsequently spread throughout the Middle East, across North Africa, and into parts of Asia. The Shi’ite fundamentalism of Iran has generated the fiercest commitment and devotion, and Islam is used as a vehicle for expressing anti-westernisation sentiments, which are

⁴³For example, the entire issue of *Social Compass* 49, no. 1 (2002) is devoted to this theme.

⁴⁴The Ayodhya issue is a case in point. In 1992, a mosque in Ayodhya was torn down by angry Hindus who believed that Hindu god Lord Rama was born there. But according to the Muslims, the mosque in Ayodhya was a monument to India’s first Muslim emperor, Babar. Its destruction led to the riots and violence that left some 2,000 people dead.

expressed through antipathy towards the neocolonialism of western powers and attempts to resist the spread of permissiveness and materialism. Islamic fundamentalism has, in particular, succeeded in articulating the aspirations of the urban poor in developing states, who, until the 1970s, were more likely to be attracted to socialism, in either its Islamic or its Marxist-Leninist form.

These and many other examples that we could mention give support to Houtart's contentions that, no matter what, there is no neutral religious organisation⁴⁵ and that religion has always a double role to play in society, as an ideology of legitimation and a means of consolation on the one hand or as an active incentive for its adherents to join the struggles to change societies on the other. Fundamentalism is no exception.

Role of Religion

As we have seen, Houtart drank avidly from the Weberian fountain during his formative years, but he was never a servile follower or imitator of his teacher; he also complemented Weber and sometimes corrected him. Even when Houtart shifted his focus of preference towards a Marxian analysis of society, he never forgot Weber and often took his views into account.

Max Weber's Study of Religion and the Spirit of Capitalism

Among the many works of Weber, the one most often quoted or referred to by Houtart is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.⁴⁶ By studying, correcting, and applying some of his seminal ideas—such as Weber's thesis on historical causality, for example—and supplementing or complementing him with insights taken from Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, Houtart introduced his own terminology in his analyses of the relationship of religion with society in its multiple aspects. We have chosen a special,

⁴⁵ Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

⁴⁶Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's, 1904-1905/1958).

though cursory, study of this work of Weber because it is one of the best examples of how religion can and does affect society or, in this case, the economic systems. As is well known, in this work Weber studies the role played by one variety of religious ethic, the inner worldly variety of ascetic spirituality, as exemplified especially in Calvinism, in the emergence and development of Capitalism. This work has been the object of hundreds of studies and deserves at least an exposition in this study on Houtart because it will help us to place Houtart more precisely in the map of sociology of religion and also serves as a preparatory ground for the next chapter on Global justice discourse. What follows is a brief Weber intermezzo and analysis into his *Protestant Ethic* thesis.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber attempts to demonstrate the influence of a religious system (in this case Protestantism of the Reformed and Lutheran varieties) on an economic system through a social ethics based on religious principles, without assuming that the consequences produced were necessarily willed. This work became so widely known that Weber's name became spontaneously associated with it in the minds of most, to the detriment of many other very important contributions of Weber in analogous fields, with some injustice done to him. Indeed, afterwards, he produced an extensive body of work on the links of dependence between religion and the economic system, most of which are unknown to the non-expert reader in sociology.

One of Weber's overriding concerns was the relationship among a variety of world religions and the development, at that time only in the West, of a capitalist economic system. He operated on a social-structural and cultural level, considering the thoughts and actions of Calvinists, Buddhists, Confucians, Jews, Muslims, and others as affected by changes in social structures and social institutions. Weber's main interest lay primarily in the systems of ideas of the world's religions, in the spirit of capitalism, and in rationalisation as a modern system of norms and values. Another of Weber's major

interests was the structures of world religions, the various structural components of the societies in which they exist that serve to facilitate or impede rationalisation, and the structural aspect of capitalism and the rest of the modern world. By according the religious factor a great importance, Weber appeared to be simultaneously building on and critiquing Marx's work. Weber, like Marx, operated with a complicated model of interrelationships of primarily large-scale systems. In the words of two of his expositors and compilers, Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills,

Weber's sociology is related to Marx's thought in the common attempt to grasp the interrelations of institutional orders making up a social structure: In Weber's work, military and religious, political and juridical institutional systems are functionally related to the economic order in a variety of ways.⁴⁷

In analysing the relationship between the world's religions and the economy, Weber developed a typology of the paths of salvation. Asceticism is the first broad type of religiosity, combining an orientation toward action with the commitment of believers to denying themselves the pleasures of the world. Ascetic religions are divided into two subtypes. The otherworldly asceticism involves a set of norms and values that command the followers not to work within the secular world and to fight against temptations.⁴⁸ Of greater interest to Weber, because it encompasses Calvinism, was the inner worldly asceticism. Such a variety of religion does not reject the world; instead, it actively urges its members to work within the world so that in their labour they can find salvation or at least signs of it. The distinctive goal here is the strict, methodical control of the members' patterns of life, action, and thought. The members of this variety of religion are urged to reject everything in the secular world that is deemed unethical or dependent on their emotional reactions. Inner worldly ascetics are motivated to systematise their own conduct.

⁴⁷Ibid., 49.

⁴⁸Ritzer and Goodman, 143.

Whereas both types of asceticism involve some form of action and self-denial, mysticism by contrast involves contemplation, emotion, and inaction. Weber subdivided mysticism in the same way as asceticism. The world rejecting mysticism involves a total flight from the world. The inner worldly mysticism leads to contemplative efforts to understand the meaning of the world, but these efforts are doomed to failure because the world is viewed as being beyond individual comprehension. In any case, Weber argues that both types of mysticism and world-rejecting asceticism can be seen as systems of ideas that inhibit the development of capitalism and rationality. In contrast, inner worldly asceticism is the system of norms and values that contributed to the development of these phenomena in the West.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber analyses the impact of ascetic Protestantism, primarily Calvinism, on the rise of the spirit of Capitalism. However, at that time his most general interest was in the rise of the distinctive rationality of the West. Capitalism, with its rational organisation of free labour, its open market, and its rational bookkeeping system, is only one component of the system. Weber directly linked it to the parallel development of rationalised science, law, politics, art, architecture, literature, universities, and polity. The spirit of capitalism can be seen as a normative system that involves a number of interrelated ideas. For example, its goal is to instil an “attitude, which seeks profit rationally and systematically.”⁴⁹ Also included in the spirit of capitalism are ideas such as “time is money”; “be industrious”; “be frugal”; “be punctual”; “be fair”; and “earning money is a legitimate end in itself.” Although Weber admits that a certain type of capitalism existed in China, India, Babylon, and the classical world of Greece and Rome, as well as during the Middle Ages, it was different from Western capitalism, primarily because it lacked “this particular ethos.”⁵⁰ Today, however, Calvinism or inner worldly asceticism is no longer necessary to the continuation,

⁴⁹Ibid., 64.

⁵⁰Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, 52.

prolongation, and expansion of that economic system. In fact, in many senses, modern capitalism, given its secularity, stands in opposition to Calvinism and religion in general. It is emancipated from religion and functions by its own law and logic. It is uncontrollable by us and is controlling us; the creature has become the master of its creators, as we will see in the next chapter. Contemporary capitalism has become a real autonomous entity that combines norms, values, markets, money, and laws. It has become, in Emile Durkheim's terms, a social fact that is external to and coercive of the individual.⁵¹

One crucial fact is that Calvinists did not consciously seek to create a capitalist system. In Weber's view, capitalism was an "unanticipated consequence of the Protestant ethic."⁵² The concept of unanticipated consequences has broad significance in Weber's work, for he believed that what individuals and groups intend by their action often leads to a set of consequences that are at variance with their intentions. It is, therefore, interesting to go into more depth about Calvinist ethic and the spirit of capitalism.

One feature of Calvinism is the idea of double predestination and election, a doctrine implying that only a small number of people are chosen for salvation and the rest to damnation. In Calvinism, we find the idea that, by an inscrutable design of God, some people are elected from eternity and predestined to be either among the saved or among the damned. There is nothing that the individual or the religion as a whole can do to affect or alter that fate. However, the idea of predestination leaves people uncertain about whether they are among the saved or among the damned. This uncertainty is the source of anxiety for the believers in double predestination: they want a clear and unequivocal answer. To reduce this uncertainty and anxiety, the idea of signs indicating whether a person is saved was developed. People are urged to work hard because, if they are diligent, they will uncover and discover the signs of their personal salvation, which are

⁵¹Ritzer and Goodman, 75.

⁵²Ibid., 145.

found in economic success. In sum, the Calvinist is urged to engage in intense worldly activity and to become a “man of vocation.”⁵³ However, isolated actions are not enough. Calvinism, as an ethic, requires self-control and a systematic style of life that involves an integrated round of activities, particularly business activities. This style of life stands in contrast to the Christian ideal of the Middle Ages, in which individuals simply engaged in isolated good works, as the occasion arose, in order to atone for particular sins and to increase their chances of salvation. As Weber puts it, “The God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system.”⁵⁴ Thus, Calvinism produced an ethical system and, ultimately, a group of people who were the nascent capitalists. Calvinism “has the highest ethical appreciation of the sober, middle class, self-made man.”⁵⁵

In addition to its general link to the spirit of capitalism, Calvinism has some more specific links. First, capitalists can ruthlessly pursue their economic interests and feel that such pursuit is not merely self-interest but is, in fact, their ethical duty. This stance not only permits unprecedented mercilessness in business, it also silences potential critics, who could not simply reduce these actions to self-interest. Second, Calvinism provides capitalism, “with sober, conscientious and unusually industrious workmen who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God.”⁵⁶ Third, Calvinism legitimises an unequal stratification system by giving the capitalist the “comforting assurance that the unequal distribution of the goods of this world was a special dispensation of Divine Providence.”⁵⁷ Weber has reservations about the capitalist system and about all aspects of the rationalised world at that. For example, he pointed out that “capitalism tends to produce specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart, this nullity imagines it has attained a

⁵³Ibid., 146.

⁵⁴Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 117.

⁵⁵Ibid., 163.

⁵⁶Ibid., 117.

⁵⁷Ibid.

level of civilisation never before achieved.”⁵⁸ However, if Calvinism was one of the causal factors in the rise of capitalism in the West, then the question arises: why did capitalism not arise in other societies? In an effort to answer this question, Weber dealt with spiritual and material barriers to the rise of capitalism in China and India.⁵⁹

The reader may ask whether Confucianism was an ethical system analogous to the Calvinist ethic in the West. Why, then, did capitalism not appear and develop in China if the base conditions for its emergence and growth were equally present? Weber makes a comparison between Confucianism and Calvinism to answer these questions. One crucial assumption that allows Weber to justify the comparison between the West and China is that both had the prerequisites for the development of capitalism, namely, a great industry and an enormous capacity for work in an expanding populace. Powerful guilds existed, as did a steady supply of raw materials and precious metals.⁶⁰ As has been noted, Weber generally believed that the social, structural, and religious barriers in China prevented the development of capitalism in that land. This is not to say that capitalism was entirely absent in China. There were money lenders and purveyors who sought high rates of profit. However, a market, as well as various other components of a rational capitalist system, did not exist. In Weber’s view, the rudimentary capitalism of China “pointed in a direction opposite to the development of rational economic corporate enterprises.”⁶¹ Weber listed several structural barriers to the rise of capitalism in China. First, there was the structure of the typical Chinese community, which, held together by rigid kinship bonds in the form of sibs, encouraged small, encapsulated land holdings and a household-based rather than a market economy. The extensive partitioning of the land prevented major technological developments because economies of scale were impossible. The

⁵⁸Ibid., 182.

⁵⁹Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (New York: Macmillan, 1916 /1964). Also see: Max Weber, *Religion of India* (New York: Macmillan,1958/1981).

⁶⁰Ritzer and Goodman, 147.

⁶¹Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, 86.

agricultural production remained in the hands of peasants, industrial production in the hands of small-scale artisans. Modern cities, which were to become the centres of Western capitalism, were inhibited in their development because the people retained their allegiance to the sibs. As a result of the sibs' autonomy, the central government was never able to govern these units effectively or to mould them into a unified whole.

The structure of the Chinese State was the second barrier to the rise of capitalism. The State was largely patrimonial and governed by tradition, prerogative and favouritism. Weber argued that a rational and calculable system of administration and law enforcement, necessary for industrial development, did not exist in ancient China. There were very few formal laws covering commerce, there was no central court, and legal formalism was rejected. Thus, the traditional type of administrative structure was a barrier to the rise of capitalism; as Weber notes, "Capital investment in industry is far too sensitive to such irrational rule and too dependent upon the possibility of calculating the steady and rational operation of the state machinery to emerge within an administration of this type."⁶²

The third structural barrier to the rise of capitalism was the nature of the Chinese language. In Weber's view, it militated against rationality by making systematic thought difficult. It remained largely in the realm of the "pictorial" and the "descriptive." Logical thinking was inhibited because, though intellectual, the language remained largely in the form of parables, hardly the basis for the development of a cumulative body of knowledge.⁶³

Another key factor was the lack of the required "mentality," the lack of the needed idea system. Weber looked at the two dominant systems of religious ideas in China—Confucianism and Taoism—and the characteristics of both that militated against the development of a spirit of capitalism. A central characteristic of Confucian thinking is its

⁶²Ibid., 103.

⁶³Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, 86.

emphasis on a literary education as a prerequisite for office and for social status. To acquire a position in the ruling section, a person had to be a member of the literati.⁶⁴ In Weber's opinion, Confucianism encouraged "a highly bookish literary education."⁶⁵ The literati produced by this system came to see the actual work of administration as beneath them, mere tasks to be delegated to subordinates. With this kind of orientation, it is easy to see why the literati were unconcerned with the state of the economy or with economic activities. Eventually, the worldview of the Confucians grew to be the policy of the State, and as a result, the Chinese State came to be only minimally involved in rationally influencing the economy and the rest of society. The Confucians maintained their influence by having the constitutional decree that only they could serve as officials; they held a monopoly in administration; the competitors to the Confucians, for example the bourgeoisie, prophets, and priests, were blocked from serving in the government. In general, Confucianism was an ethic that promoted adjustment to the world and to its order and conventions, sanctifying tradition and opposing innovation. In sum, Weber contended that Confucianism became a relentless canonization of tradition.

Regarding Taoism, Weber perceived it as a mystical Chinese religion in which the supreme good was deemed to be a psychic state, a state of mind, and not a state of grace obtained by conduct in the real world. As a result, Taoists did not operate in a rational way to affect the external world. Taoism was essentially traditional, and one of its basic tenets was "do not introduce innovations."⁶⁶ Such a system of ideas was unlikely to produce any major change, let alone such a far-reaching system change as the development of capitalism. One trait common to Taoism and Confucianism, Weber found, is that neither produced enough tension nor conflict among its members to motivate them to much innovative action.

⁶⁴Ritzer and Goodman, 148.

⁶⁵Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, 86.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 203.

Neither in its official state cult nor in its Taoist aspects could Chinese religiosity produce sufficiently strong motives for a religiously oriented life for the individual such as the Puritan method represented. Both forms of religion lacked even the traces of the satanic force or evil against which the pious Chinese might have struggled for his salvation.⁶⁷

Neither Confucianism nor Taoism forced actors to change the world or, more specifically, to build a capitalist system.

To complete Weber's analysis of the relationship between religion and economics, a short exposition of his thinking on the relationship between religion and capitalism in India will be sufficient. The argument, though not in detail, parallels the Chinese case. One element discussed by Weber was the structural barriers of the caste system to the emergence of a form of capitalism in India. Among other things, the caste system erected devastating barriers to social mobility and tended to regulate even the most minor aspects of the people's lives. For instance, the ideal system of the Brahmans had numerous components. They were expected to avoid vulgar occupations and to observe elegance in manners and proprieties in conduct. Indifference to the world's material affairs was the ultimate idea of Brahman religiosity. The Brahmans also emphasized a highly literary form of education. Although there certainly were important differences between Brahmans and Confucians, the ethos of each presented overwhelming barriers to the rise of capitalism.

The Hindu religion posed similar ideational barriers. Its key idea is reincarnation. To the Hindu, a person is born into the caste that he or she deserves by virtue of behaviour in a past life, his or her karma. Through faithful adherence to the ritual of the caste, the Hindu gains merit for the next life. Unlike Calvinism, Hinduism is traditional in the sense that salvation is achieved by faithfully following rules: innovation, particularly in the economic sphere, could not lead to a higher caste in the next life. Activity in this world is not important because the world is seen as a transient abode and an impediment

⁶⁷Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, 206.

to the spiritual quest. In these and other ways, the ideal system associated with Hinduism failed to produce the kind of people who could create a capitalist economic system and, more generally, a rationally ordered society.

Taking Weber as a starting point, Houtart concluded that there is a complex relationship between systems—religious and social—one system influencing the other, but not necessarily determining each other.

Hence, even if in a given theoretical framework one of the systems is taken as a starting point, the others being considered as dependent variables, one can never exclude a relationship in the other direction. For instance, in the case of the relationship between the religious and the economic systems, through the intermediary of the political system, one can well envisage the possible case of the influence of the religious system acting as a positive or negative constraint on the development of a given economic system.⁶⁸

However, for Houtart, this does not alter the fact that, once the mechanism of economic changes has begun to move, it effects changes in the political and religious systems as well. The direction is not only from the religious sphere to the economic sphere, but also vice versa: they interact with each other and can cause changes in each other. Nevertheless Houtart criticising Weber concludes that Weber did not raise the structural issue as to how this *protestant ethic* came into being:

In one of his major books, *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which is extremely interesting and is based on empirical material, there is one question that Weber does not ask except in one very small phrase. Where do Protestant ethics come from? He does not develop that. Because it does not come from heaven. It was born within an urban merchant bourgeoisie that developed an ethics in the religious field according to their own situation and interest, in order to fight against a social ethics of Catholicism that was linked with the medieval structures of land and landlordism, etc. That's why Protestant ethics developed and why it was functional for capitalism also. But Weber starts with the existence of Protestant ethics just as if it was almost an act of God.⁶⁹

Social ethics of Protestantism has been the reaction to the Catholic social ethics that developed in the context of middle ages. For Marx, analysing the roots of the problem is crucial; how this Protestant ethics came into being. There is no doubt that the

⁶⁸Houtart, "Religion and Development," 13.

⁶⁹ Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

Reformation succeeded partly because there were powerful people who had economic reasons to challenge the power of the Church and those it supported in political power. However the theologies had been around for some time - getting no-where because those who held them had no economic power. It was the shame of the Roman Church that it supported exploitation of the poor and saw no problem in amassing wealth. It was the shame of the Protestant Church that the wealth was hi-jacked by powerful individuals and that the burden on the poor was not lifted more completely. I think that we are in a very interesting situation at present (September 2008) as the financial world is in crisis. There is a realisation that there has to be ethics in economics otherwise the unprincipled syphon off wealth and do not care about the global misery they cause; that we can no longer leave the economies of the world in the hands of few managers of multi-national companies. We have waited a long time for that simple fact to be appreciated.

Houtart in his own methodology has taken the transition from Weber to Marx into account especially in his analysis of Sri Lankan pre-capitalist society (we shall deal with this issue elsewhere). But, as far as our general topic (dialectical interaction of religion and society) is concerned, the challenge for the current sociology of religion is not to play off Marx against Weber but to complement both theorists. For example one of Houtart's followers Gabriele Dietrich, argues that there is much more to Weber than religion and culture; and similarly, for that matter the mature Marx realised the significance of religion and argued for the interrogation of the same.⁷⁰ It is precisely for this reason that Gramsci, who is being discussed later in our study, is very significant. Gramsci rejected both extremes of apolitical culturalism as well as mere economism (economic determinism). We will discuss Gramsci later in the chapter.

⁷⁰ Author's interview with Dr. Gabriele Dietrich on 17th July 2007 at CSA, Madurai.

Some Observations on the Marxist Analysis of Religion

We make a brief mention here on the meaning, role, and function of religion vis-à-vis society in the writings of Karl Marx as understood, criticised, and exposed by François Houtart. As mentioned before, Houtart began to study the works of Marx in the process of writing his doctoral dissertation in Sri Lanka, precisely on the subject of religion and ideology, which instantly brings the reader to the Marxian background of those terms and their relationship. Religion is always a social reality, as Houtart is never tired of reminding us, and thus, any theory of religion is also implicitly a theory of human society. Part of the difficulty faced by the sociologists of religion, such as Houtart, who sympathise with dialectical and historical materialism, has been a reluctance to depart from the fundamental account of human society outlined by Marx and Engels.⁷¹ For Houtart, a reflection on the relevance of the Marxist analysis can start from two points. First, it is worth going into more detail about the role of religion in historical materialism and its relationship to the larger atheism of the philosophical system of dialectical materialism as a whole and then summing up Marx's critique of religion. Second, to look at what the Marxist approach contributes, as a method, to study religion as a sociocultural phenomenon. Michael Löwy shows that Marx attributes two functions to religion: expression and protest.⁷²

From Feuerbach, Marx takes over the thesis that religious ideas are an alienating projection of humanity's highest capacities to the transcendent and to infinity—knowledge, love, creativity, and power—and that, in ascribing these qualities to God, humans implicitly or explicitly deny them in themselves, rendering themselves ignorant egoists, incapable of acting or creating.⁷³ However, Marx states that Feuerbach fails to explain why or how this alienation takes place, suggesting it is a result of a deeper

⁷¹Mansueto, *Religion and Dialectics*, 208.

⁷²François Houtart, "Marxist Analysis of Religion and Postmodern Critique," *COELI*, 1995-1996,

2.

⁷³Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1841/1957).

alienation generated at the economic level.⁷⁴ In his early writings, this alienation is understood as consisting in the wage relation, by which the waged worker is alienated a) from the product of his labour and thus from nature, b) from other human beings, and c) from his own essence as a worker, as a producer of commodities, as a human being.⁷⁵ This idea is further developed in *Capital*, wherein he mentions the alienating character of “generalised commodity production or the market system,”⁷⁶ which constitutes a power independent of humanity, whether individual or collective, which disposes of human capacity in accord with alien laws that remain largely obscure and mysterious to the worker. It is only by transcending the market system that religious alienation itself can be overcome.⁷⁷ This can be seen as a fairly accurate analysis of a certain type of religion, most notably the Lutheran and Calvinist Protestantism of nineteenth-century Germany, and to a lesser extent, of religion generally, in so far as it has actually been shaped, at least in the West, by the market system.

The founders of Marxism were interested in early Christianity, wherein they saw a structural parallelism with socialism, as Houtart himself states.⁷⁸ The analysis was considering religion as a social movement rather than the study of its contribution to the “ideal part of reality.”⁷⁹ Enrique Dussel, for instance, stresses the relation between the analysis of religion and the concept of fetichisation. Paraphrasing the Psalms, Marx defines fetishism as “handmade gods.”⁸⁰ In the commandment prohibiting worshipping idols (“fetishes,” hand-made gods), religion too can serve as an antifetishistic critique of capitalism because, in capitalism, money is deified and the individuals are socialised in the market relations, not in human relations, which is severely criticised in innumerable biblical texts, both in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. In general, however, it can be

⁷⁴Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (New York: Norton, 1844/1978).

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Karl Marx, *Capital* (New York: Vintage, 1867).

⁷⁷Mansueto, *Religion and Dialectics*, 208.

⁷⁸Houtart, “Marxist Analysis of Religion and Postmodern Critique,” 2.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

argued that, whatever Marx's intent and whatever his personal beliefs, his conception and critique of religion is neither a general theory nor a global critique of religion, valid for all religions in all places and in all times; in fact, the Marxian critique of religion, in itself, neither presupposes nor implies atheism.⁸¹ We can say, at most, that God does not appear in the scientific field of study and experimentation of Marx's works; he rarely even mentions directly the word "God" in his writings, though he writes very often on "religion." For this reason, some liberation theologians insist that the pretended "atheism" of Marx is methodological and not systemic. In other words, atheism is not ingrained or grafted into the Marxist system. This fact is also defended by Houtart, almost every time he mentions his use of a Marxist *method* to study both religion and society and their inseparable relationship.

Other aspects of Marx's critique of religion, such as his concept of ideological superstructure of sacralisation to justify and maintain the status quo of society, the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless society, the consolation offered to the dispossessed in an afterlife when this life becomes unbearable, the opium of the people that helps them to bear unbearable situations, and so forth are beyond the scope of this study. Any reader of Houtart with some background knowledge of the writings of the "Young Marx" of the *Manuscripts* will detect many Marxian echoes in Houtart, but Houtart at all times maintains his own independence and changes the Marxian terminology with considerable convincing effect. Reading Houtart's writings after 1974 one feels that he is blending Weber and Marx, with the predominance of the Marxian influence on his thinking. And of course, we must remind ourselves at all times that Marx's countless remarks on religion were not aimed at religion as a separable entity (as in the case of Feuerbach), but as part of society; Marx's primary interest was to understand society in order to change the society; the study of society, then, includes also

⁸¹Marx, *Capital*.

the study of religion as a social entity, not as an ontological construct sent by heaven; his insights on religion must never be taken as a dogma, as happened in the later development of Marxism, beginning with Lenin; if we want to understand society, for Marx as well as for Houtart, it is imperative to understand also the religion of that society and the role religion plays in it.

Gramsci's Sociology of Political Praxis

Another author that strongly influenced Houtart in the field of praxis and the praxical application of his social findings is the Italian Antonio Gramsci⁸² (1891-1937), a contemporary of Weber's; Gramsci favoured Marx and Marxian ideology and practice, but unlike German bourgeois-liberal writers who embraced theoretical Marxism, he was a practising Marxist, who spent eleven years in an Italian prison for his political beliefs. Part of Gramsci's importance to the twentieth century and beyond is his laying down a hypothesis that enables us to criticise and correct what had become, in the post-Marx era, a rigid, mechanistic, and deterministic Marxian philosophy, which had failed in the attempts to put his insights into practice, to materialise into an operational socialism. Through his radical sociology of political praxis, Gramsci sought to reconnect Marxian philosophy and practice with its humanistic roots. His innovative conceptualisation of the "historic bloc" comprised a ruling class (infrastructure) that achieved social cohesion through acceptance, adoption, and allegiance to a shared societal and worldview (superstructure). Advancing both Marxian and Weberian formulations of authority and domination, Gramsci's political sociology foregrounds and centralises the battle of ideologies. And here we find one of the many aspects in which Gramsci was influential on Houtart. "A given social class maintains itself in power not by means of monopolization of the means of production and means of violence, but primarily through a more subtle process of winning the consent of all other subaltern classes to its

⁸²Paulo Freire, who influenced Houtart, has been greatly influenced by Gramscian thought.

ideology.”⁸³ Reviving the Marxian principle of praxis, the unification of philosophy and practice in a proletarian consciousness, Gramsci highlights the “spiritual and cultural supremacy of the ruling class, brought about by the spread of bourgeois values and beliefs via the ‘civil society’: the media, the churches, youth movements, trade unions and so forth.”⁸⁴

According to Gramsci, Marx and the Marxian philosophies were but one stage in the necessary transition to socialism, and Marxism needed rereading, revising, and rejuvenating to win the ideological battle. It is no wonder that Gramsci was considered a “revisionist” by the more rigid orthodox exponents of Marxism under the Stalinist ideology. Rescuing Marxian philosophies and practices from their rigid scientific determinism was central to the formulation of the essential Marxism, “a global, all-encompassing, coherent, original, autonomous Weltanschauung.”⁸⁵ A contextualised understanding of history is a prerequisite of philosophy, which Gramsci defines as comprising “absolute historicism, the absolute secularization and earthliness of thought, and absolute humanism. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world.”⁸⁶ In conceptualising society anew—arriving at a philosophical understanding—the proletariat, the subaltern achieves autonomy and hegemony and constructs a State that serves its needs in praxis. At the heart of the philosophy of praxis is the requirement for the subaltern class to “experience the concrete birth of a need to construct a new intellectual and moral order, that is, a new type of society, and hence the need to develop more universal weapons and more refined and decisive ideological weapons.”⁸⁷ Strategically deployed, these ideological weapons confront and supersede the ideology dispensing media presently serving the ruling establishment.

⁸³L. Salamini. *The Sociology of Political Praxis: An Introduction to Gramsci's Theory*. (London: Routledge, 1981), 35.

⁸⁴Andrew Heywood, *Political Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 146.

⁸⁵Salamini, *Sociology of Political Praxis*, 37.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

⁸⁷*Ibid.*

In our next and final chapter we will find the imprint of Gramsci on Houtart's many ideological and praxical battles to combat the coming globalisation, proclaiming that there is another alternative, that a new world is possible, and so calling all human forces to unite and combat globalisation. If Marx could end his "Communist Manifesto" with the battle cry "Proletarians of the world, unite!", Gramsci could make an equally forceful call to all ideological groups and movements to unite in their struggle against capitalist fascism. It is the same battle cry we hear from Houtart calling the nations of the Third World and all imaginable movements and ideologies to unite against the real threat of globalisation. To this, we shall turn in our next chapter.

The Theologies of Liberation

Houtart entered the orbit of the main thinkers and theologians of Latin America during his extensive research in almost all its component republics during the 1950s and 1960s. The results of this massive work (43 volumes) were published between 1958 and 1962, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. These were years of naïve optimism and hope for the poor masses in Latin America. They are called "the yeas of developmentism (*desarrollismo*).” Houtart himself shared the view that a rapid technological development of those societies would bring about the solution of many of their problems. After the Vatican Council, he encountered the main exponents of the new brand of theology, commonly called the Theology of Liberation. After seeing that developmentism was failing to fulfil its promises and that the gap between the few rich and the many poor was widening as a consequence of the introduction of modern technology in a mimetic copy of alien models, he changed his views on the subject and became more radical in his political thinking. Turning his thoughts to the role of religion in a subcontinent in turmoil, he came to realise that religion can be a potent force for progress in human beings, helping them to make sense of their position in society and go even further to better these conditions.

This is a position most readily represented by liberation theologians in Latin America, to whom Houtart was closely connected. The starting point of the theology of liberation is the question of the concrete and historical place of the message of the Gospel in the realities of this world. The realities that we see in this world are the misery of entire populations due to the unjust structures of society, the accumulation of riches on the earth in the hands of the few, and so forth. The Gospel, then, is addressed “to all men and to the whole of man” and not only to the spiritual element in the human being. Religion in this situation has a role to play, and the name of religion is The Church, the overpowering Roman Catholic Church in the entire subcontinent, where religious belonging to the Church is practically coextensive with society.

The theology of liberation aims to give an “option *to* the poor” so that they may become the makers of their own history; it states that the Church must make also “an option *for* the poor” and even “take sides *with* the poor,” and in this way, she will be faithful to her mission in the world; the liberation of the poor is “an option of God, but also of the humans in so far as they want to become free.”⁸⁸ Liberation is, thus, understood as the liberation of the poor from the systems that oppress them, the sinful structures of this present world, but not as an act of other people who have the duty of liberating the poor considered as objects; the poor are the subjects of their own history, and the mission of the Church is to enable the poor to become active agents of their own liberation and not merely passive recipients of religious consolation. The option for the poor absolutely requires a mutual recognition between subjects. Human subjects cannot achieve such a mutual recognition without acknowledging themselves as “corporeal and natural beings, as beings of need. Hence, poverty is the actual negation of that acknowledgement.”⁸⁹ The absence of mutual recognition is thus manifested in the poor.

⁸⁸Franz J. Hinkelammert, “Taking Stock of Latin American Liberation Theology Today,” *COELI* 1996, 17.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 18.

However, according to Liberation Theology, God is present where such recognition takes place, and the lack of it indicates a human relationship where God is absent.

This was met by fierce opposition by conservative Catholic priests in Rome. In fact, they are not only hostile to this new model of theology but to any other model that may introduce any significant change in the things as they are. In this vein, in more general terms, Mansueto argues that

the most vocal critics of secularization, from *Qum* to *Communio*, from Lhasa to Liberty University, have hardly proven themselves to be friends of human development and social progress. On the contrary leaders from the most diverse religious traditions have, when it really counted, cast their lot with Capital and defined the boundaries of their traditions in a way which effectively *identifies piety with patriarchy and spirituality with submission*.⁹⁰

The Roman Catholic Church is no exception to this.

In the face of the situation of turmoil in Latin American societies and a proposed reorientation of the role and function of the Church in those societies, there has been a growing effort by Houtart and other sociologists, especially close to the religious left, to develop a new sociology of religion that is capable of theorising both the powerful role of religion in catalysing struggles for social justice and the enduring presence of certain religious elites among the strategic reserve of reaction. Otto Maduro, for instance, has developed a complex analysis of the diverse ways in which religion can affect and be affected by the class struggle. Houtart himself goes further, acknowledging the role of religion in representing humanity's place in the universe as a whole, a role which endures even when contradictions between humanity and nature and between the forces and relations of production have been resolved in practice and no longer require symbolic resolution in a religious utopia.⁹¹ However, according to Mansueto, both Maduro and Houtart come to the conclusion that while religion plays an important role in the class struggle, it is in itself essentially a politically neutral phenomenon capable of being

⁹⁰Mansueto, *Religion and Dialectics*, 205 (emphasis added).

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 208.

mobilised by either progressive or reactionary forces. Houtart retorts in many of his writings that religion is not neutral because it is part of society; to make it neutral would be to place religion outside society. Mansueto argues that

while religion can and often is mobilised to legitimate social structures, which hold back human development, and in the process itself become profoundly distorted, the religious impulse itself is not only compatible with, but in fact essential to human development and social progress. Conversely atheism, while it may play a progressive role under certain limited social conditions where the criticism of reactionary religious formation is a precondition for social progress, represents by its very nature a denial of transcendental principles or values in terms of which alone progress can be defined.⁹²

Houtart would agree with this statement, as he explains in his later writings on religion and ideology. Houtart the sociologist is also a Roman Catholic priest and, seeing the vast extension of social misery, he endeavours to discover the causes of that social sickness and, once it is discovered, he puts his professional knowledge at the service of those who are struggling to uproot the extensive sociopathology of the subcontinent. He is not a theologian himself, but a collaborator with pastors and theologians and lay movements in their pursuit of liberation from the oppressive structures. In the process, some of his previous convictions on the relationship of Church and society undergo significant changes. The Church as a sign and an instrument of the presence of God's Kingdom in this world is interpreted now as sign and an instrument of the liberation of this world, a concrete liberation that embraces the entire human being and all societies and cultures. If at one time he could be considered as a religious sociologist and later a sociologist of religion, from this point on he becomes, more and more, a revolutionary sociologist, and this is one of the main turning points in his career.

Legitimacy and Political Obligation

This issue of legitimacy, the rightfulness of a regime or system to rule, is linked to the debate around political obligation. For Houtart, it is important to have a clear idea of

⁹²Ibid.

the legitimacy of the wielders of power and the corresponding political obligation on the part of the citizens, because many of his efforts in the last decade have been spent in expressing and spreading dissent from the growing global system of power and in active campaigning for a call to civil disobedience and resistance in an equally global and universal dimension.⁹³ Why should citizens feel obliged to acknowledge the authority of government? Indeed, why should they?

In political debates, legitimacy is now usually understood less in terms of moral obligations and more in terms of political behaviour and beliefs. In other words, it addresses not the question of why people should obey the state, but the question of why they do obey a particular state of domination or system of rule.⁹⁴ What are the conditions or processes that encourage them to see authority as rightful and thereby underpin the stability of a regime? This thought reflects a shift from theology to philosophy and from philosophy to sociology, but it also highlights the contested nature of the concept of legitimacy. Max Weber provided the classic contribution to the understanding of legitimacy as a sociological phenomenon and, thus, influenced Houtart's understanding of the concept. Weber categorised particular "systems of domination" and identified the basis upon which legitimacy was established. He constructed three ideal types or conceptual models, amounting to three types of authority: traditional authority, charismatic authority, and legal-rational authority. Each is characterised by a particular source of political legitimacy and, thus, provides different reasons that people may have for obeying a regime. In the process, Weber sought to understand the transformation of society itself, contrasting the systems of domination found in relatively simple traditional societies with those typically found in industrial and highly bureaucratic ones.

⁹³See, for example, the collective book *Globalising Resistance: The State of Struggle*, edited by Houtart's assistant François Polet (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium: The Continental Centre (CETRI), 2004).

⁹⁴Haywood, 134.

Weber's first type of political legitimacy is based on long-established customs and traditions already in effect; traditional authority is regarded as legitimate because it has "always existed." It has been sanctified by history because earlier generations had accepted it. Typically, it operates according to a body of concrete rules, that is, fixed and unquestioned customs that do not need to be justified because they reflect the way things have always been. The most obvious examples of this traditional authority are found among tribes or small groups in the form of patriarchalism (or matriarchalism in some cases), that is, "the domination of the father within the family or the 'master' over his servants,"⁹⁵ or gerontocracy, the rule of the aged, normally in the form of the village "elders." Traditional authority is closely linked to the hereditary systems of power and privilege, as currently reflected, for example, in the survival of the dynastic rule in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Morocco. Although it is of marginal significance in advanced industrial societies, the survival of monarchy, albeit in constitutional form, in the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain, for example, helps to shape the political culture by relying on values such as deference, respect, and duty.⁹⁶

Weber's second form of legitimate domination is the charismatic authority. This form of authority is based on the power of an individual's personality, that is, on his or her "charisma." Owing nothing to a person's prior status, social position, or office, charismatic authority operates entirely through the capacity of a leader to make a direct and personal appeal to followers as a kind of hero or saint. Although some recent political leaders, such as de Gaulle or John F. Kennedy, undoubtedly extended their authority through their personal qualities and capacity to inspire loyalty, it did not amount to charismatic legitimacy because their authority was essentially based on the formal powers of the offices they held.⁹⁷ Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, Ayatollah Khomeini, Fidel Castro,

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid.

and Colonel Gaddafi are more appropriate examples of this kind of authority. However, the charismatic authority is not simply a gift or a natural propensity; the systems of personal rule are invariably underpinned by “cults of personality,” the undoubted purpose of which is to “manufacture” charisma. Nevertheless, when legitimacy is constructed largely or entirely through the power of a leader’s personality, there are usually two consequences.⁹⁸ First, because the charismatic authority is not based on formal rule or procedure, it often has no limits. The leader is a messianic figure, who is built up to be infallible and unquestionable; the masses become followers or disciples, who are required only to submit and obey. Second, because authority is so closely linked to a specific individual, it is difficult for a system of personal rule to outlive its founding figure. This certainly applied in the case of the regimes of Napoleon, Mussolini, and Hitler.

Weber’s third type of political legitimacy, the legal-rational, links authority to a clearly and legally defined set of rules. In Weber’s view, the legal-rational authority is the typical form of authority operating in most modern states. The power of a president, prime minister, or government official is determined in the final analysis by formal, constitutional rules, which constrain or limit what an office holder is permitted to do. The advantage of this form of authority over both traditional and charismatic authority, so Weber postulates, is that, because it is attached to an office rather than a person, it is far less likely to be abused or give rise to injustice. The legal-rational authority, therefore, maintains limited government and, in addition, promotes efficiency through a rational division of labour. However, Weber also recognised a down side to this type of political legitimacy. The price of greater efficiency would, he feared, be a more depersonalised and inhuman social environment, typified by the relentless spread of bureaucratic forms of organisation.

⁹⁸Ibid.

Although Weber's classification of types of legitimacy is still relevant and has been important for the development of Houtart's sociological approach, it also has its limitations. One of these is that, in focusing on the legitimacy of a political regime or system of rule, it does not provide any significant insight into the circumstances in which the political authority is challenged as a result of unpopular policies or a discredited leader or government. For example, the anti-poll tax campaign in the UK in 1990 undoubtedly indicated a widespread popular hostility to the policy and contributed to the downfall of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher later that year. However, it did not amount to a loss of legitimacy, in the sense that it did not call the rightfulness of the political system into question. More significantly, as Beetham points out,

to see legitimacy, as Weber did, as nothing more than a "belief in legitimacy" is to ignore how it is brought about. This may leave the determination of legitimacy largely in the hands of the powerful, who may be able to "manufacture" rightfulness through public-relation campaigners and the like.⁹⁹

Beetham suggests that power can only be said to be legitimate if three conditions are fulfilled. First, power must be exercised according to established rules in formal codes or informal conventions. Second, these rules must be justified in terms of the shared belief of the government and the governed. Third, legitimacy must be demonstrated by an expression of consent on the part of the governed.

An alternative to the Weberian approach to legitimacy has been developed by neo-Marxist theorists. While orthodox Marxists were inclined to dismiss legitimacy as bogus, seeing it as nothing more than a bourgeois myth, modern Marxists, following Gramsci, have acknowledged that capitalism is, in part, upheld by its ability to secure political support. Some neo-Marxist thinkers, such as Jürgen Habermas and Claus Offe, have thus focused attention not merely on the class system but also on the machinery through which legitimacy is maintained, such as the democratic process, party competition, welfare and

⁹⁹D. Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

social reform, and so on. Nevertheless, they have also highlighted what they see as the inherent difficulty of legitimising a political system that is based on unequal class power. In his *Legitimation Crisis*,¹⁰⁰ Habermas identifies a series of “crisis tendencies” within the capitalist societies that make it difficult for them to maintain political stability through consent alone. At the heart of this tension, he argues, lie contradictions and conflicts between the logic of the capitalist accumulation on the one hand and the popular pressures that democratic politics unleashes on the other.

From this perspective, the capitalist economies are seen to be bent on remorseless expansion, dictated by the pursuit of profit. However, the extension of political and social rights in an attempt to build legitimacy within such systems has stimulated countervailing pressures. In particular, the democratic process has led to escalating demands for social welfare, as well as for increased popular participation and social equality. The resulting expansion of the State’s responsibilities into the economic and social life and the inexorable rise of taxation and public spending, nevertheless, constrain the capitalist accumulation by restricting profit levels and discouraging free enterprise. In Habermas’s view, the capitalist democracies cannot permanently satisfy both popular demands for social security and welfare rights and the requirements of a market economy based on private profit. Forced either to resist the popular pressures or to risk economic collapse, such societies find it increasingly difficult and eventually impossible, to maintain legitimacy.

These theoretical considerations are relevant if one wants to understand Houtart’s approach to sociology and his critique of capitalism, neocapitalism, and globalism. This study of legitimacy and illegitimacy, with its sequel of political obligation to obey or resist, is important for societies in the Global South, because they are the underside of history and the victims of the coming globalisation. In view of international capitalism

¹⁰⁰Juergen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 68-75.

with its sequel of injustice done to the underprivileged societies and nations, Houtart campaigns now for a united front at local, national, and international levels to delegitimise such forms of global domination of the very rich becoming even richer over the very poor becoming even poorer.

Society

The second part of the binomial (religion and society) is organised around the concept of society.

Society and Ideological Construct

For Houtart, society is largely the political field, but the concept of politics he employs goes beyond the framework of political organisations and includes every manner (formal and informal) of imposing choices in the functioning of the social ensemble.

Following Houtart, politics may be defined as

the complete set of meanings and choices concerning the functioning of society, which assert themselves as legitimate by justifying, through an ideological construct, the power relationships which ensure their effectiveness. The selection of meanings and choices and their imposition are possible only in the measure that a group, or an individual, occupies a dominant position in the social ensemble, and effectively exercise power within it. That does not necessarily imply a shared identity between the socially dominant groups and the political organisation.¹⁰¹

For example, in a feudal society, both the power and the political organisation resided, unseparated, in the same social actors. In the Western democratic system, policies are, in contrast, the result of a compromise between groups with divergent interests and do not carry equal influence within the social scale. These choices are, in fact, accepted as legitimate only to the extent that the political authority is considered as “neutral,” as deriving ultimately from the electoral body.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹Houtart, “Religion and Development,” 10.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*

The definition employed by Houtart uses the concept of ideological construction, which touches on the question of legitimation. In fact, the dominant groups, which exercise political power in the wider sense, are also the producers of meanings, since they are necessary to justify the choices imposed. The cohesion necessary for the functioning of society exists only to the degree that a consensus is established in the social ensemble with agreement on the objectives chosen, in other words, only if these are legitimated, recognised in fact or by right, as acceptable. This, of course, does not include the cases where the social cohesion results from strong government or political manipulation. The ideological construct is, therefore, a system of explanations referring to the existence of the social group, its history, and its future destiny, which presents as logical a particular type of social relationship, most relevant for this chapter, the power relationships already established. These justifications vary, depending on whether they come from dominant or dominated groups, but in all cases, it is essential that they are acceptable to the whole society.

Power Relationships

Analysis of the power relationships plays a significant role in Houtart's sociological and political studies. He presupposes the existence of objective social relations between groups, in which each has differentiated and unequal weight in decision-making and political options. The division of labour fixes their respective positions. In fact, for Houtart, it is this last element, bound up with a type of economic production, which underlines the fundamental social stratification found in almost every society.

The political field is that portion of social space constituted by the dynamic complex formed by the relationships between groups, institutions and social actors, which are situated differently as they are in this space by virtue of the division of labour, seek to give meanings and make choices in order to ensure the functioning of the social ensemble. The political system is the institutionalisation of the power of relationships between

groups, institutions and social actors in their pursuit of political objectives.¹⁰³

Theoretical Models of Society

Reiterating some of Houtart's ideas that we exposed before, he identifies three different theoretical models of society: feudal, precapitalist, and industrial societies, which are either capitalist or socialist. Feudal societies are essentially agricultural. Houtart takes the Kingdom of Kandy, in Sri Lanka, as the model of a feudal society. (His later clarifications or corrections of the feudal character of that society do not concern us at this point.) Agriculture, Houtart surmises, is

depending on natural rhythms, which demand a large labour force at well-defined critical periods. It is an economy of scarcity.¹⁰⁴

The available technology sets a limit to what can be grown, and the harvest depends on the whims of the weather. The social cleavage is determined principally by possession of the land and, hence, of the labour force, meaning that it lies between possessors and non-possessors. The socially and politically dominant group consists of those who have appropriated the monopoly of land property and so, indirectly, of production. This right, based on force or on birth, is entirely arbitrary. We could say that in the feudal type of society, "Right is might, and might is right." But in the case when some do not accept the right of the strongest, there emerges an ideological demand that will be met by a system of legitimation *from outside and above* the social reality. Thus, the feudal mode of production is enabled precisely by the appropriation of the means of production on the part of the political authority, which then delegates the use of these means at its own pleasure and by

the loosening of the collective links of the local social unit with this authority, in order to transform them into direct relations between the

¹⁰³Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 13.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 20.

peasants and the chieftains or kings. These relations are then expressed in terms of services or of personal-style dues.¹⁰⁵

The mechanism of the feudal societies can best be explained by a concrete example. In his study of religions in Asia, Houtart analyses the Kingdom of Kanda uda (which Europeans called Kandy) as an example of an Asian feudal society. The possession of the Sacred Relic (the tooth of the Buddha) bestowed the sovereignty upon the possessor, and its possessor thereby became the King of the land, defender, and protector of the Buddhist establishment, as repeatedly stated in the two epic poems-chronicles of the *Mahavamsa* and the *Chúlavamsa*.¹⁰⁶ The Sacred Relic, deposited successively in Anuradhapura, Polonaruwa, Matale, and Gampola, had its final rest in Kandy. There it became one of the most potent symbols of opposition to the penetration of Christianity, first in its Catholic form with the Portuguese, and later in its Protestant form with the Dutch and the English occupation successively. Kandy enjoys a favourable location in the mountainous centre of the island, making it easy to defend. That was the site that King Kirthi Sri Rajasingha chose for his court, and there he took with him the all-important relic, the “Tooth of the Buddha,” to be installed and venerated in perpetuity in its royal temple, the *Dalanda Maligawa*. This relic provided the king with authority beyond compare.

The books written during this period, whether Robert Knox’s *Historical Relation of Ceylon* in 1681¹⁰⁷ or the reports of British officials on the Kingdom, all present the Kandyan society as essentially centred on the King. The social stratification, as well as the symbolism that expressed it, was built around his person. The King intervened at

¹⁰⁵Houtart and Lemercinier, *The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions*, 107.

¹⁰⁶The *Mahavamsa*, (“Great Chronicle”) is a historical poem written in the Pali language, of the kings of Sri Lanka. It covers the period from the coming of King Vijaya of Kalinga (ancient Orissa) in 543 BCE to the reign of King Mahasena (334 – 361). The first printed edition and English translation of the *Mahavamsa* was published in 1837 by George Turnour, an historian and officer of the Ceylon Civil Service. The *Chulavamsa*, (“Lesser Chronicle”) is a historical record, written in the Pāli language, of the kings of Sri Lanka. It covers the period from the 4th century to 1815. A German translation of the *Culavamsa* was completed by Wilhelm Geiger in 1930. It was subsequently translated into English by Mabel Haynes Bode, and the English translation was revised by Geiger.

¹⁰⁷Robert Knox, *Historical Relation of Ceylon* (Dehiwala: Tisara Press, 1966).

every point in the religious institution and decided on the manifestation of the cult.

According to Robert Knox,

as to the manner of his government, it is Tyrannical and Arbitrary in the highest degree: For he ruleth Absolute, and after his own Will and Pleasure: his own Head being his only Counsellor. The Land is all at his Disposal, and all the People from the highest to the Lowest Slaves, or very like Slaves: both in Body and Goods wholly at his Command. Neither wants he those three Virtues of a Tyrant; Jealousy, Dissimulation and Cruelty.¹⁰⁸

Consequently, a meaningful analysis of this feudal society has to put a strong emphasis on the royal function.

Coming back to the specific consideration of the power relationships and legitimization, the first question is how the social organisation enabled the different groups to accept the domination of a single individual, whose power was such that he could impose his arbitrary will on everyone and everything and have it recognised as legitimate, for Knox's explanation that this domination was built entirely by force seems insufficient. The dominant groups are those possessing the means of production. In the kingdom of Kandy, a complex administrative apparatus, divided into three sectors, assured the objective function of power. The officials of the royal household and their subordinates, the Adhikarms or four ministers, were charged with the protection of the King, the administration of the town, justice and war, and the corresponding services, and finally the territorial administration.

The dominated group, in an agrarian society such as the kingdom of Kandy, in Houtart's opinion, possessed only the right to "subsist through the cultivation of a plot of land itself dependent on their furnishing manual labour."¹⁰⁹ The question remains: how were these people kept in a position that showed such imbalance between service and reward? According to Houtart, the most plausible explanatory hypothesis for the Kandyan population was the development of a caste system. Excluding the *radala* aristocracy, the

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 109.

¹⁰⁹Houtart and Lemercinier, *The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions*, 117.

Kandyan population was divided into groups determined by their hereditarily transmitted professions. Although less diversified and complex than in India, these groups also constituted closed social units, almost parallel to the European guild in the Middle Ages. In the absence of religious support, the caste system was a cultural model reproducing itself in the same way as do social practices like language and other customs of unknown origin, which persist in their function of social usefulness. This analysis led Houtart to the conclusion that

the essential characteristic of the Kandyan social organisation was certainly the existence of a single structure. . . . This structure situated the social groups along a continuum, whose strata became less and less objectively defined as they became more distant from the socially dominant positions. Moreover, and this aspect is peculiar to Kandyan society, it placed every social group, and consequently every Kandyan, in a situation which was at once that of dominant and dominated, only the two extremes of hierarchy being excepted: the king on the one side, who was in a situation of total dominance, and to the other extreme the outcastes without either power or prestige.¹¹⁰

The second theoretical model, the precapitalist model, differs from the first by the appearance of productive forces independent of nature's fortuity. The pressure to expand output and increase productivity is first reflected in the so-called "agricultural revolution," which results in the enclosure of overgrazed commons, the introduction of fertilisers, and scientific methods of production. The result is the break-up of the dominant group, one part of the social elite continuing to reproduce itself in the same way as before while another develops further in virtue of its capacity to master the new techniques of production. The two subgroups of the elite then enter into competition with each other on the political platform. The new elite cannot be satisfied with the meanings offered by the existing social systems, yet for the dominated groups, even if they are diversified into rural and urban subgroups, their relationships with all elements of the social system barely alter.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 119.

These earliest stages of modern capitalism, arising in the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, are commonly described as merchant capitalism and mercantilism. This period was associated with the geographic discoveries by merchant overseas traders—especially from England and the Low Countries—, the European colonisation of the Americas, and the rapid growth in overseas trade. The associated rise of a bourgeoisie class eclipsed the prior feudal system. Mercantilism was a system of trade for profit, although commodities were still largely produced by noncapitalist production methods. Under mercantilism, the European merchants, backed by state controls, subsidies, and monopolies, made most of their profits from the buying and selling of goods. In the words of Francis Bacon, the purpose of mercantilism was

the opening and well-balancing of trade; the cherishing of manufacturers; the banishing of idleness; the repressing of waste and excess by sumptuary laws; the improvement and husbanding of the soil; the regulation of prices.¹¹¹

The third model, the capitalist mode of production, is characterised by a predominantly industrial form of economic production and gives rise progressively to an economy of abundance. At this time, the capitalist mode of production of commodities with its corresponding market distribution of its products is sweeping the entire planet in waves. In an arbitrary way, our planet has been divided into three blocks: the First World that comprises the industrialised capitalist nations, the Second World that comprises the Communist Block, and the Third World that includes all the postcolonial and preindustrial nations. With the collapse of the Soviet Block and its gradual incorporation to the developed industrial First World, we can say that, nowadays, the world is divided into two distinct categories: The First World and the Third World or, more specifically, between capitalism on the one hand and *dependent* capitalism on the other. Most of the societies of Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia fall under the umbrella of

¹¹¹Quoted in Sir George Clark, *The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 24.

“dependent capitalism” and have to travel in the last wagon of the capitalist train, to produce raw materials for the production of commodities elsewhere, and to provide cheap labour and wide markets to buy the industrial products of the First World. Because all societies we are concerned with fall under the description of “dependent capitalism,” it will be convenient to have a good grasp of the development of capitalism in order to understand its geopolitical side effects, the emergence of a vast capitalist periphery that we call “dependent capitalism.” In other words, if we want to understand dependent capitalism, we must know first what capitalism is. The concept of dependent capitalism will serve also as a good background for our next and final chapter on globalisation in the thought and action of François Houtart.

Different forms of capitalism¹¹² do exist. Free enterprise capitalism is widely seen particularly in the UK and the USA and advertised by the World Bank and the IMF as “pure capitalism.” Social capitalism is a form of capitalism relying more on an economic system that is structured by market principles and largely free from government interference but operating in a society in which cohesion is maintained through a comprehensive welfare system and public services. This form of capitalism was, until recently, predominant in Germany, the Benelux countries, and Scandinavia. Another form of capitalism developed in post-1945 Japan and the so-called East Asian “tiger” countries (South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore). It has a distinctive character of collective capitalism and emphasises long-term, cooperative economic relationships.¹¹³

In capitalist societies, the social groups become highly diversified, the dominant group of the second model becomes practically exclusive and intermediate groups make their appearance. The system of production develops the phenomenon of the relationship between social forces. From this comes the development of social movements, revolutionary or reformist. According to Houtart,

¹¹²Andrew Heywood, *Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997). 166ff.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 166ff.

the organisation of power is either sides on the domination of the [industrial] group, by private appropriation of the accumulation of capital and of the means of production (the capitalist system), or on collective appropriation (the socialist system).¹¹⁴

On either side, the ideologies no longer have recourse to elements exogenous to the social reality in order to justify their social position or their desire to change them.

The mid-eighteenth century gave rise to industrial capitalism, made possible by the accumulation of vast amounts of capital under the merchant phase of capitalism and its investment in technological machinery. The industrial capitalism, which Marx dated from the last third of the eighteenth century, marked the development of the factory system of manufacturing, characterized by a complex division of labour between and within the work process and the routinisation of work tasks and finally established the global domination of the capitalist mode of production.¹¹⁵ During the resulting Industrial Revolution, the industrialist replaced the merchant as a dominant actor in the capitalist system and affected the decline of the traditional handicraft skills of artisans, guilds, and journeymen. Also during this period, capitalism marked the transformation of the relations between the landowning gentry and peasants, giving rise to the production of cash crops to feed the machine, rather than food crops for subsistence on a feudal manner. The surplus generated by the rise of commercial agriculture encouraged the increased mechanisation of agriculture. Mid- to late-nineteenth-century Britain is widely regarded as the classic case of laissez-faire capitalism. Laissez-faire gained favour over mercantilism in Britain in the 1840s with the repeal of the Corn Laws and the Navigation Acts. In line with the teachings of the classical political economists, led by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, Britain embraced liberalism, encouraging unlimited competition and the development of a market economy.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 22.

¹¹⁵Marx, *Capital*.

¹¹⁶Craig Calhoun, ed., *Dictionary of Social Sciences*, s.v. "Capitalism," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Several factors initiate the passage from one model to another. Houtart claims that different elements—specifically the economic, political, and religious—make up his study of society. In the transition from one system to the other, however, the economic variable is the most important. This variable is not the result of natural determinism. The economic system, more particularly the organisation of production, is itself the outcome of several factors—geographical, demographical, cultural, and social. The passage from a feudal to an industrial society is the result of a combination of elements, of which the conjunction of two key factors is fundamental: scientific knowledge on the one hand and a type of rational praxis on the other. The appearance of this conjunction has itself an economic basis, and the first element of scientific knowledge appears to be cumulative, which bestows an irreversible character on the process. The social change that initiates the changeover from a social ensemble of the feudal type to one of an industrial nature happens in a framework of societies in which the factors enabling the economic transformation are endogenous. Thus, the result is quite different if the factors of change are foreign to the given social ensemble, especially if one takes into consideration that the variations in the system of economic production are conditioned by the conjunction of noneconomic elements, such as social and cultural factors.

The structuralist concepts of centre and periphery are useful in explaining this phenomenon in terms of the colonial and neocolonial relationship.

The Case of Colonial Societies: The Example of Sri Lanka

Colonisation constitutes, on the scale of two social ensembles, a phenomenon analogous to the sociopolitical cleavage in a dualistic society. It is a case of arbitrary appropriation by one group of land, goods, and productive forces on the one side and, consequently, of the political power on the other, with another group that, by that very fact, is reduced to the condition of a dominated people. In terms of social relations,

every colonial regime (centre) represents for the social ensemble on which it is imposed (periphery) the introduction of factors which disturb the existing social order, as a result of the new power relationships which it implies. The new group is placed at the top of the stratification which either remains the same or is itself transformed.¹¹⁷

The political organisation can be maintained only by force exercised on a permanent basis, by elimination of the preexisting dominant groups, or by their social and cultural assimilation, possibly leading to the creation of a new assimilated elite. The social movements of reaction produce the dominated social ensemble, the political appropriation by exogenous forces, and the construction of new power structures. These social protest movements occur from the refusal to legitimate political choices, which leads to the breaking up of ideology and may end in the collapse of social cohesion. Ideology, in turn, provides legitimization of the dominance of one society over another. Because the colonial relationship does not really conceal the arbitrary character of the power relationships, the dominant group of the periphery must disappear as a group or be assimilated to the point of sharing the ideology of the conqueror. Colonisation begets oppression, oppression begets protest, and protest begets repression, with the end result of repression being total social control.

The destructurisation of the economic and political systems is a function of the strategy followed in any colonial enterprise but depends on the situation of the social ensemble that develops it. The outcome varies considerably, influenced by whether the centre is a feudal, a precapitalist, or a capitalist one.

An example of the destructurisation of the economic and political system and the effect this has on the dominant group within a society is the Portuguese colonisation of the kingdom of Kotte in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The society and the social ensemble were very similar to the aforementioned kingdom of Kandy, thus no more detail is needed. The most important change that the Portuguese colonisation brought was administrative. In

¹¹⁷Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 26.

the Sinhalese kingdoms, the administration, like all other services, was bound up with the devolution of land. The Portuguese regime changed it into an autonomous structure. The territorial division of the State (the former kingdom), the provinces (*disavas*), and the districts (*korales*) was maintained, but the officials paid by the Portuguese Crown controlled the administration and the courts and commanded the military forces.¹¹⁸ Houtart draws three conclusions from this example. First, though the system of production was not altered, the link between the economic and political fields was established on a new basis. Indeed, the Portuguese strategy had the effect of destroying the structure of services, which formed the key element in the cohesion of the social ensemble, and replacing it partially with a contractual-type system. Thus, although the economic organisation remained unchanged, the political system was completely transformed. Besides advantages for some Sinhalese citizens, who had sworn allegiance and gained new posts in the system, this alteration led, at the level of the cohesive structure, to the abolition of the indigenous monarchy.

Second, only the traditional elite, the members of which either fled or joined the Portuguese, was structurally affected by the colonisation. The Portuguese attributed land for faithful services but could withdraw this favour in an arbitrary fashion, providing a powerful means of ensuring the subjection of the local elite, and formed a new elite through the policy of attributing administrative and military responsibility at the local level. However, for the village peasants, no alteration in the basic organisation took place. Houtart's third conclusion of his analysis of the Sinhalese colonisation by Portugal was that it modified the identity between the economic organisation and the political administration, which altered the traditional polyvalent structure. A certain autonomy was established between the two fields, but without destroying the homology at the base of their interrelationship.

¹¹⁸Houtart and Lemercurier, *The Great Asiatic Religions and Their Social Functions*, 172.

Postindependent Asian Societies

We have already dealt with the impact of colonialism on the religious system in South Asia. Houtart undertook extensive research into some of the postindependence Asian societies. Three major types of postindependence economic models exist: the capitalist model, the communist model, and some type of intermediary socialist model (Myanmar). Many capitalist societies call themselves socialist because it is convenient for ideological reasons, but the fundamental structure of the economy and of society remains capitalistic, as was the case in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Philippines.¹¹⁹ Today, the capitalist countries in South Asia are characterised by a profound cleavage in the organisation of production between the industrial and rural sectors. A highly technical type of industry, more or less depending on foreign investments, generally constitutes the former, located in urban areas. Such enterprises give a relatively low rate of employment; for instance, the industrial sector of India employed between two and four percent of the labour force in 1975.¹²⁰ The result of low employment is often over-equipment (industries working at less than 50% of their capacities), a production oriented towards the consumption capacity of the upper ten percent of the population, a heavy dependence on foreign capital, the increase of the foreign debt, the development of a State capitalism controlled by a small minority, and the development of anti-capitalist movements, which are more or less clandestine.

As a result, the religious systems have to be analysed within this framework. Various religious systems coexist in the Asian societies. Numerically, the most important ones are the traditional Southeast Asian religions: Hinduism and Buddhism. Others, such as Islam, have been imported from West Asia. Most of the Christian minorities were

¹¹⁹Houtart, "Religion and Development," 51.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 51. (The employment scenario in India has changed significantly during the last few decades and the current distribution of the labour force is as follows: *agriculture*: 60%, *industry*: 12%, *services*: 28%, *unemployed*: 7.2%. (Source: CIA statistics, 2003).

created under the colonial rule of the sixteenth century and, even more so, the nineteenth century. Houtart argues that

all religions in one way or another give the meanings and explanations allowing man to situate himself with reference to nature and social environment, when neither of those elements were mastered by knowledge and practice. With the development of knowledge, i.e., the awareness that history is a human construction, this function of religion tended to disappear.¹²¹

However, not all social groups have been introduced to this process at the same time. The various colonial regimes of the nineteenth and twentieth century, for example, transmitted systematic knowledge through their educational systems to the elite minorities, which, because of that, were the only groups able to come into power, economically, socially, and politically after independence. The other groups were introduced, if at all, much later and not systematically, through the praxis of development. Hence, it is clear that there are many inconsistencies in the application of the social function of religion across many groups within the population.

This concept of transmission of knowledge leads to a consideration of the role of the religious institutions. The Christian churches, for instance, have been a major channel through which the colonial systems have assured the training of the native elite.¹²² The social position of the Church, combined with the conservative tendency of any institution (every system in the social ensemble tending to reproduce its own model) is at the origin of an opposition inside the institution against the production of new theological meanings and norms, even when the demand for them already exists, or against the introduction of new forms of religious roles of its agents. Hence, new conflicts exist now in the Asian Churches between those who are keen to preserve the orthodoxy and those who are acknowledging a changing social-cultural situation and see the necessity to evolve, bridging the gap between the Gospel values and the sociologically determined position of

¹²¹Ibid., 53.

¹²²Houtart, "Religion and Development," 54.

the Churches as institutions, in order to take up positions on the side of the dominated groups in society. According to Houtart, similar questions also exist in other religious groups. The theology of liberation, as mentioned before, is one of the best examples for this kind of conflict, not only within Latin America, but also within the whole Catholic Church.

The socialist system concerned here is basically communism, as it exists in China, North Vietnam, and North Korea. Houtart conducted this study in 1975, prior to the break-up of the Soviet Union. Hence, it has to be noted that the communist system in China, in its economic policies, is much more capitalist now than it was over thirty years ago. However, in general, in the socialist systems, the power of decision-making lies in the political field. Contrary to the capitalistic system, the economic field here is totally submitted to the political, and the main base of the whole ideological and political system is, in theory, the primacy given to the people and their potential for development. As a direct result of this, the ideological system does not require a meta-social justification. In this socialistic system, religion has no place as an ideological system. On the contrary, religion is seen in its traditional functions of giving legitimation to the dominant groups in society and a compensation to the dominated and, thus, is an essential part of the old order and must disappear. Christianity, in particular, has been associated with colonialism. Therefore, the religious institutions are suppressed, and religion as such is fought against with the help of ideology. However, too few studies existed in 1975, when Houtart conducted his research, to know what has been the effect on the religious mentality of the people in such a social and economic transformation.

Dialectical Tensions

Religion and Society: Antagonism Between Two Opposing Systems?

Houtart argues that when a political organisation is transformed through colonisation without the system of production being affected,

the normal result is an alternation within the groups higher up the ladder of social relations, and not a transformation of the nature of these groups. For in agrarian societies it is always the land appropriation which determines the social cleavage.¹²³

During a situation of conquest in which a centre-periphery relationship is established, the destructuralisation of the religious symbolism serves as a tool of domination. In the case of the Portuguese colonisation of the kingdom of Kotte, Buddhism was destructured, and the new structure of Catholicism implanted.

The religious system has two elements: meanings and organisation. The meanings are collected to form a coherent system that explains and justifies the social reality as it is by way of symbols, and the organisation of power relations is structured in correspondence to that symbolic system. Every activity destructive of the system of meanings and every replacement for the organisation of power must act on these two elements, namely the symbols by which that society understands itself and the corresponding organisation for distributing political and economic power. If in the Kotte Kingdom the Buddha was the supreme symbol and the King represented and enacted the meaning of that symbol in the land, by reducing that symbol to nothing, the Portuguese conquerors and colonisers could reduce the authority of that King to nothing. To fill the vacuum left in the symbolic system, they placed Jesus Christ as the supreme symbol and the Portuguese King as his supreme representative. In a feudal society, religion not only permeates the political system of the distribution of power but also the political economy. All these mechanisms of deconstruction and destruction were employed in the

¹²³Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 149.

suppression and destruction of Buddhism in the above example. On the political plane, the process began with the conversion of the king to Catholicism, causing him to withdraw his support from the Buddha, which as mentioned before, was a most important part in the social and religious functioning of the Sinhalese society. Following that, the new regime added to its political and economic objectives a religious aim that formed an integral part of the colonial undertaking.

Together with the merchants and sailors came the missionaries, making the conversion of society to Christianity an essential aim for the conquerors. If the Sinhalese were going to be the vassals of the King of Portugal, they must become worshippers of the King of Heaven, represented on earth by the Catholic King of Portugal. The temples were systematically destroyed and the statues of the Buddha and of the deities were broken into pieces and “reduced to dust.”¹²⁴ What followed in this logic of total devastation of the old system to impose the new system of total domination was the destruction of the religious organisations: temples, monasteries, schools, libraries, the burning of ancient books . . . everything to wipe out even the historical collective memory of the population. As mentioned before, no centralised organisation of Buddhism existed, because the King was the one who assured this, and now there was no king. The method for the conversion of the entire population was the method often called nowadays the “Constantinian method” and also the “percolator method”: if the rulers on top are converted, then conversion will flow down in a natural way; the conversion of the whole mass will be question of time.

Then, after suppressing the link to the royal power, the removal of the Sangha (monks) completed the destruction because, with the disappearance of the monks, no teacher of the traditional way of life was left. Historical amnesia was established, and the Sinhalese culture was destroyed. In the same way, Buddhism was destructured by the

¹²⁴Ibid., 151.

three mechanisms just described, Catholicism was implanted, and so Catholicism was installed to fill the gap as 1) the link with the political field, 2) the new system of symbols, and 3) a new religious organisation.

The Conflict between Marxism and Religious Belief

In general terms, Houtart sees no conflict between Marxism and Christianity or religious belief in general. As mentioned before, he agrees with Mansueto, who argues that religion can help people to get involved in social struggles and notes that in parts of Latin America it is no longer “unusual to find Christians in the ranks of revolutionary organisations of Marxist conviction.”¹²⁵ In this we also hear the echoes of Gramsci: Christians can be good revolutionaries without ceasing to be Christians. However, in spite of this

growing practical collaboration and in spite of a prodigious Christian literature discussing the use of Marxist methods of social analysis as well as the better known Latin American liberation theologians, there has been little effort to resolve the difficult sociological questions created for the Marxist theory of religion by the rise of popular and revolutionary Christianity over the past two decades.¹²⁶

While some organisations of Marxist inspiration, again largely in Latin America, have issued statements welcoming the collaboration of Christians in the struggle against imperialism and in the construction of socialism, none has explicitly criticised the classical Marxist theory of religion, and there have been no attempts on the part of Marxists to develop a new theory of religion more compatible with the contemporary political realities. The principal Christian attempt to retheorise the religious question, on the other hand, while offering a more balanced assessment of the role of religion in social life, fails to examine critically the social basis of Marxist secularism and, thus, simply enlarges and rectifies, rather than really breaking with, the classical Marxist problem. This is one problem with which Houtart is intensively concerned and which he tried to

¹²⁵Mansueto, *Religion and Dialectics*, 37.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*

resolve in seminars given in communist countries such as Cuba, as well as in his work in the studies on the sociology of religion at the University of Louvain.

Conclusion

The Religious systems exist on various levels: meanings, institutions, and organisation. The religious systems have performed many social functions, from providing an ideology for explaining and justifying the sociopolitical structures to forming a base for social identification. It now seems universally acknowledged that the exclusive ideological function of religion, as described by some orthodox Marxists, is rapidly disappearing. Generally, however, it can be argued that the process of secularisation is almost universal in the capitalist as well as in the socialist countries. In many ways, however, religion is still a cultural expression and a way to identify communities in the social ensemble. For Houtart, religion still preserves its ideological function, but echoing Gramsci, he states that the religious ideology can be used to support the present system of power and also, among the subalterns, to counter the power of such a system, to replace it by a more just social structure.

Two types of religious belief were analysed: those arising from spontaneous religiosity and those attached to the doctrines of founded religions. The first is that attached to popular religiosity that contains spontaneous beliefs born out of the daily needs of individuals and groups. They turn to a superhuman reality and use it to mediate and reduce life's contradictions. In addition, doctrines are structured complexes of meanings that give sense to the individual and collective existence. One of their social functions, according to Peter Berger, cited approvingly by Houtart himself, is to explain "the socially prevailing inequalities of power and privilege."¹²⁷ The vehicle for these doctrines is the religious institution, while a body of specialists stands as their guarantors.

¹²⁷Cited in Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, 484.

However, the political evolution is such that the basis of conflicts in society is more economic and political, sometimes communal, rather than strictly religious.

It should be apparent at this point that the resolution of the religious question presupposes a simultaneous resolution of a whole complex of questions that, taken together, determine the nature of a political and economic system. The social functions of religion are defined by two variables: the type of society and the particular characteristics of the religious system. This is true of all religions, and religion traditionally has acted as an agent of justification of the system in favour of the dominant classes and a compensatory consolation for the dominated classes by instilling the belief in an afterlife. Under certain conditions, religion fulfils an ideological function as well, by making up the symbolic system used by the social ensemble to interpret its history. However, with the development of industrial societies, this function of religion became obsolete, and in some cases, for instance in Liberation Theology in Latin America, the popular and revolutionary struggle against social injustice is not only, as Marx believed, rooted in the development of the productive forces but also in the traditional communal institutions, together with the popular democratic and religious traditions of the poor. At the same time, these traditional communal institutions and popular democratic and religious traditions have themselves, in various times and places, become means by which the dominant group have extended their hegemony over the dominated sectors. In the Christian churches at least, there has been a growing awareness of the necessity of another model of identification, even though it remains a minority opinion. Thus, Houtart concludes that

it seems improbable that organised religions having a system of meanings which go beyond the immediate psychological and social functions would completely disappear.¹²⁸

¹²⁸Houtart, "Religion and Development," 54.

It is, nevertheless, evident that religion has lost its traditional social function and that the religious demands are changing in secular industrial societies. Therefore if religious institutions want to prevent themselves from being irrelevant in the social realm, they have to:

- a) engage in a self-critique in the context of present challenges
- b) join forces with the poor and support the struggle for economic and social justice.
- c) find their place in the international relations and the new global order today (e.g.: resolution of conflicts, education for peace and human rights etc.)
- d) re-interpret the core ethical values in the new context today.

The interplay between the various roles of morality, religion, spirituality, social justice and charity is a complex one. It gets to the very core of the complex moral relationships between the individual, society and conceptualization of the “sacred or transcendent.”

Although intended to foster spiritual growth, organized religion itself is susceptible to the same limitations of any organized institution. Given this, late Houtart has focused much more on the issue of the *believer* rather than of the institution.

CHAPTER SIX

TOWARDS A MOVEMENT FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE

Introduction

We have arrived at the third and last area of our exposition of François Houtart's itinerary of social thinking and teachings, namely globalisation and global justice. The previous reflections have been on the dialectical interactions between ecclesiology, religion, and society. Global justice is the most recent and mature stage, as well as the most practically oriented and Gramscian phase, of Houtart's social thought. Though Houtart does not mention the name of Antonio Gramsci as one of his sources of inspiration, the reader finds Gramsci's footsteps on Houtart's thinking, especially in his concept of ideology as a possible instrument of social change. Houtart himself acknowledged this influence in our personal conversations. When speaking and writing on "the social power of culture," he includes religion within his concept of culture. Also, Houtart's repeated emphasis on the need for social engagement (praxis) on the part of Christians betrays not only his contacts with Latin American theologians, but also his reading and reflections on the philosophy of praxis of Gramscian inspiration.

One area of research that I have not explored in this work is whether Gramsci's influence on Houtart is largely due to a direct encounter or through personal and intellectual interaction with the Argentinean philosopher and historian Enrique Dussel. Both Houtart and Dussel were instrumental in the creation of EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians); Houtart behind the scenes, as usual, and Dussel directly. Thus, they had been in communication with one another in the creation of

EATWOT.¹ Dussel had been developing the thesis “Religion as Superstructure of Legitimation or as Infrastructure of Revolution?” with clear Gramscian overtones during that time.² (The first EATWOT conference was held in Dar-es-Salaam in 1976.)

In the previous chapters we have discussed what might be termed the “ecclesiological Houtart” and the “sociological Houtart.” This chapter will explore Houtart’s socioeconomic thought and praxis, the manifestation of what we might call a praxical-political Houtart. Here, Houtart’s critique of the present state of capitalist globalisation comes to the fore. This development is not a surprise emergence but is rather a climax in the gradual evolution in Houtart’s thought towards a struggle for social justice.

In this area, Houtart’s thought bears the influence of two modern thinkers, Emmanuel Wallerstein³ and Samir Amin,⁴ especially as regards the development of his anti-globalisation thinking and the blending of Marxist thought for a critique of the globalisation of capital on a larger scale. We also perceive at this stage the remote echoes of Gramsci’s voice. In keeping with Gramsci’s call to all social forces, including religious and cultural groups, to join in a common front to combat the fascism (Italian) of his day, we can see, in the present threat of capitalist globalisation, something resembling a variety of fascism of planetary dimensions. Houtart argues that the globalisation of which so much is spoken today is no other than “the globalisation of capital.”⁵ In the initial stage of his reaction to the trend of globalisation, Houtart argued that society needs to resist neoliberal globalisation and to focus common efforts more directly on resistance thereto,

¹Enrique Dussel, “La religión: como supraestructura y como infra-estructura [Religion as superstructure and as infrastructure. Some provisional hypotheses],” in *Conferencia dada en la Universidad de Dubrovnik (Yugoslavia), en el mes de abril de 1977* (Edicol, México: n.p., 1977), 87-97.

²Dussel, “La religión.”

³Emmanuel Wallerstein has contributed to the development of the world systems theory. For an analysis of Wallerstein’s work, see Walter L. Goldfrank, “Paradigm Regained? The Rules of Wallerstein’s World-System Method,” *Journal of World Systems Research* 6, no.2 (2000): 150-195.

⁴Samir Amin’s contribution to the alter-globalisation has definitely influenced Houtart. (Cf. Amin and Houtart, *Globalisation and Alternatives*).

⁵Houtart, “Common Good Ethics: Deconstruction and Reconstruction.”

a movement he calls *globalising resistance*. In a later stage, he shifted towards a stronger approach, which he calls the *de-legitimisation of capitalism*.

In this context, Houtart devoted much of his energy to conceiving of and rallying for the building of alternatives to globalisation, particularly to neoliberal structures, and for the convergence of social, cultural, and religious movements and NGOs and engaged intellectuals for the purposes of joint action. Houtart's speeches and writings in this period reveal a sense of urgency that persists to this day. Houtart's belief is that the movements struggling to resist the spread of globalisation and to construct alternatives must leave their differences behind and come together for dialogue on the issues involved and for solidarity in common action; in some cases, the urgent must take precedence over what is seen to be the most important. In other words, in order to be effective, the resistance to capitalist globalisation must take place on a global scale. To this end, Houtart does not hesitate to use the networking and communication space and potential made possible by today's globalised world.

According to Houtart, in order to build this social movement on a global scale, society needs to envision and embrace a concrete utopia, as against the theory that claims that there is no other alternative to the present capitalist global system. A concrete utopia implies that what does not exist today can exist tomorrow, and what today may seem to be a dream that is impossible to implement, tomorrow may be the familiar reality. The modern envisioning of a utopia includes the determination to work strenuously for its implementation. This requires action on a united front.

Houtart opposes historical determinism and the corresponding fatalist submission to historical currents and is determined to awaken the masses from what he sees as their lethargy of despair. He is a fervent believer in the possibility that "another world is possible": in other words, the emergence of another world through the social and political mobilisation of the victims of globalisation. Houtart's theory of, and appeal to, the

convergence of social movements for the globalising of resistance and the building of alternatives to rekindle hope is discussed herein in the context of different versions or approaches to current globalisation. This section also explores Houtart's contribution to the World Social Forum (WSF) and some evaluation of the work of the WSF as a whole.

Globalisation: A General Overview

When a new word becomes popular, it is often because it captures a supposedly important change that is taking place in the world. A new idea is needed to describe a new human condition, and a new word is needed to symbolise and express that idea. Robert Schreiter locates the advent of the modern form of globalisation in the late 1980s,⁶ and most modern interpreters agree. Since that time, globalisation has become a major buzzword, the term quickly entering the standard vocabulary, not only in academia, but also among journalists, politicians, business people, advertisers, and entertainers. Houtart gives the following definition to the culmination of a movement the origins of which are anchored in the writings of Adam Smith over a hundred and fifty years ago:

*To globalise (mondialiser) the exchanges in the frame of the free market will permit humankind to come out of poverty and to enter an era of balance and happiness: this is the message transmitted nowadays throughout the world, to the North as well as to the South. Such is the persuasion that animates the ones responsible for the world economy. It is at the vanguard, after two centuries of the evolution of the economic system, and is imposed in our own epoch in the general organisation of society that is commonly called globalisation (mondialisation).*⁷

The discourse on globalisation has become a springboard for economists, human geographers, religious people, scientists, and activists in our times. Whatever the discipline or the background in discussion, globalisation is a reality with which humanity has to grapple, especially in the context of the all-encompassing network of

⁶Robert J. Schreiter, "Contextual Theology, " in *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, ed. John Bowden (London: Continuum, 2005), 281-282.

⁷Houtart, *Délégitimer le capitalisme: reconstruire l'espérance* (Brussels: Colophon, 2005), 11. When writing in French or other Romance languages, Houtart uses the French term *mondialisation* or its Spanish equivalent *mundialización*, (emphasis added).

communications that constitutes our present information explosion. It is in this context that we reread Houtart's approach to globalisation.

Critiquing globalisation from an ecological point of view, the Indian thinker Vandana Shiva writes,

When the earth summit was organised in 1992, two revolutions were in the making: first, the focus of global governance on planetary management; and second, the movement of civil society to the centre-stage of defining global agendas on the basis of ecology, equity and democracy. But both revolutions stalled. The focus on the planet was replaced by the focus on *commerce*, citizen leadership was set aside for corporate leadership. . . . Engagement between UNEP and civil society is necessary, both for UNEP and for the protection of the planet's fragile web of life. In this engagement lies the potential for resurgence of democracy and ecological awareness, the processes that were interrupted over the past decade by the euphoria that *all decisions can be left to the market and deregulated global commerce* can take care of the planet's health. *Commerce ministries alone do not run countries*. Global governance cannot be left only to free trade treaties.⁸

Globalisation is typically understood as the radical alteration of cultural, social, and economic exchanges throughout the world; unfortunately, these exchanges have not been positive for the majority of the people involved.⁹ Rather, the proclaimed benefits of free trade and economic globalisation have been experienced only by a minority of wealthy individuals, most of whom are situated in Western (primarily the G8) nations. More theoretically, discussions of globalisation often involve discursive explorations into whether or not the phenomenon is one of far-reaching historical change. As mentioned before, questions arise as to whether globalisation is turning the world into a fundamentally different kind of place or whether it represents a final step in the development of global capitalism and the project of modernity. Commentators have variously linked globalisation to the rise of the information society, the onset of late capitalism, the advent of postmodernity, the triumphal victory of neoliberalism, and even

⁸United Nations Environment Programme, *Natural Allies: UNEP and Civil Society* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2004), 5 (emphasis added).

⁹John Baylis and Steve Smith, eds., *The Globalisation of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations* (New York: Open University Press, 2001), 20.

the end of history (Fukuyama).¹⁰ Some world system theorists argue that modern globalisation is the highest point (or *eschaton*) in the long history of capitalism.

We will begin our discussion with an analysis of globalisation through the lens of structuralism, used herein to denote the theoretical approach of world systems.¹¹ World system analysis is not a theory per se, but an approach to social analysis and social change, developed principally by Immanuel Wallerstein, with major contributions by Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, and Andre Gunder Frank. According to these and other theorists, the key feature in world politics is that it takes place within a global capitalist economy. The transnational economy divides the world into core, semiperiphery, and periphery, with further cores existing within the semiperiphery and the periphery, and peripheral economic areas existing even within the core. What is decisive in this regard is the dominance of power, not of states, but of transnational capitalism. The nation-states are only facilitators necessary to ensure the development of transnational capitalism. Based on this conceptualisation, globalisation is seen to be a sham; it is nothing particularly new and is only the latest stage in the development of international capitalism. In international capitalism, national barriers were still respected and taken into account; the nation-states still had a role to play. In transnational capitalism, on the other hand, there are no national frontiers or barriers, and the nation-states are made subservient subjects to transnational capitalism as exemplified by gigantic transnational corporations. Transnational capitalism, then, does not mark a qualitative shift in world politics or economics, only a quantitative advancement towards the inclusion of the entire planet in the grasp of the capitalist system. Transnational capitalism is a Western-led phenomenon, leading to total domination of international capitalism, but not to the development of the peripheral societies. Rather than make the world more homogenous, it further deepens the existing divide between the core, semi-periphery, and periphery.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

Crisis of the Modern Nation-State

Before progressing to an analysis of anti-capitalist globalisation and Houtart's specific approach thereto, it is apposite to consider the relationship between the modern nation-states and the role of imperialism as a facilitator of transnational capitalism in order to understand the relationship between the global North and the global South and the role that neocolonialism continues to play today. This is helpful in explaining why neoliberal trade practices and transnational capitalism are often met with fierce opposition from countries in the global South.¹²

As a necessary preliminary to considering globalisation and the modern nation-states, the first section below addresses the acute Eurocentrism that is pervasive in the common understanding of globalisation and attempts to outline a richer conception of the international sphere and the place of imperialism therein. The genealogy of the modern nation-state cannot be restricted to the West itself but must include the imperial relation between Europe and its colonies. As Hardt and Negri note, "the colony stands in a dialectical opposition to European modernity, as its necessary double and irrepressible antagonist."¹³ Furthermore, in the wake of de-colonisation, many new states were subject to high degrees of intervention by former imperial patrons and the superpowers, sometimes exceeding that experienced under the auspices of a formal empire.¹⁴ Similar relations of international rule can be seen to persist today in the policies and practices of the international financial institutions.¹⁵

New forms of hegemony of the North over the South have developed. Neocolonial theory suggests that it is no longer necessary to colonise territories to control their

¹²For a good and extensive introduction to globalisation from an Indian perspective, see the recent work by Indukuri John Mohan Razu, *Global Capitalism as Hydra* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2006).

¹³Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 115. See also Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

¹⁴Mark Laffey and Tarak Barkawi, "Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations," *Millennium* 31, no. 1 (2002): 109-127.

¹⁵David Williams, "Aid and Sovereignty: Quasi-States and the International Financial institutions," *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 4 (2000): 557-573.

economies. Many other means exist today, such as influencing the prices of raw material and agricultural products, which constitute the primary resources of the South. The value of these resources has steadily decreased over the last 50 years, with the exception of some increase in recent years, largely due to the growth of China.¹⁶ The cost of the foreign debt has constantly increased, with the result of a steady transfer of wealth from the South to the North. For countries such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa, foreign debt represents four times the combined budgets for education and health.¹⁷ Fiscal havens allow the rich of the South to invest their money in the North. The agricultural programmes of the North (the European Union and the USA) use subsidies for dumping policies, selling products at less than their production cost to the detriment of local rural economies. The so-called “brain drain” absorbs professionals trained in the South for the benefit of Northern economies, India being a prime example of this phenomenon. All those mechanisms result in an extraction of riches that is almost greater than during colonial times.¹⁸

Modern sovereignty and classical imperialism are inseparable: together they divide the world and its population, in Europe and elsewhere. Imperialism, however, was also “a system designed to serve the needs and further the interests of capital in its phase of global conquest.”¹⁹ From its inception, capital has tended toward world power in the form of a single world market. The processes of liberalisation have also another side, namely, a massive effort to make it harder for undesirable elements—be they illegal economic migrants, asylum seekers, illegal drugs, crime, or contraband—to cross borders. The nation-states and governments alike still play an important role in ensuring that the conditions for the practices of transnational corporations are set up and functional.²⁰ In

¹⁶Laffey and Barkawi, “Retrieving the Imperial.”

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Laffey and Barkawi, “Retrieving the Imperial.”

²⁰*Ibid.*

other words, nation-states are acceptable for transnational capitalism as long as they operate as “police-states” at the service of the world market. This implicit understanding and the resulting widespread resistance to neoliberalism and Western power is perhaps the clearest evidence of the world’s lack of compliance, which is a necessary condition for the establishment of a single world market bringing benefits for all and the end of imperialism.

Further Definition and Analysis of Globalisation

To deepen our understanding of Houtart’s approach and his involvement in active resistance to the present developments in international capitalism, it is necessary to approach globalisation and the neoliberal capitalist order from a theoretical point of view and to provide a more precise definition and analysis of the phenomenon from diverse theoretical perspectives. Houtart sees in globalisation the natural result of the inexorable logic of capitalism in the present stage of development. In *Délégitimer le capitalisme: reconstruire l’espérance*, his recent work on the subject, he writes,

The logic of capitalism forcefully endeavours to transform everything into a commodity, which is the only way to contribute to the accumulation of capital. Globalisation is the mechanism by which this logic acquires universal dimensions. That becomes manifest in the growing importance of the trans-national corporations.²¹

Houtart continues to analyse the meaning and planetary scope of the transnationalisation of the economy, applying this process of globalisation to assess its impact on the transformation and restructuring of *class systems*, the distribution and redistribution of *labour*, the decomposition of *the family* and its recomposition to make it a source of profit, the erosion of the *nation-states* and national identities, the destruction of the *environment*, the suppression of local *cultures*, and the imposition of a world uniformity in one single culture and one single way of thinking. He finally criticises the role of globalisation in the destruction of the *human being*, by reducing him exclusively to the

²¹François Houtart, *Délégitimer le capitalisme*, 67.

roles of producer and consumer of commodities; outside of those categories, humans are considered to be *foules inutiles* ('useless crowds').²² For Houtart, globalisation has an adverse and destructive effect on all these areas of life, that is to say, all of human life, and threatens to render it subhuman. The useless crowds are "those who do not contribute to produce a surplus value that leads to the accumulation of capital and who, otherwise, have an almost null purchasing power."²³ If individuals or entire societies do not submit themselves to the ongoing triumphal march of global capitalism, they are degraded to the condition of "useless crowds," to non-being.

In fact, the ubiquity of the term "globalisation" suggests that it is part of a reconfiguring and rethinking of contemporary social theory and politics and is inextricably bound up with some of the central academic debates and conflicts of the present age. It is certainly arguable that, during the past decades, the world has been undergoing the most significant period of technological innovation and global restructuring (especially economically and militarily). At least since the first decades of the twentieth century, these dramatic changes have acquired global dimensions; with the addition of increased speeds of communication and acceleration of transportation, we could state that the world has changed in this period more than ever before. Part of the "great transformation"²⁴ to a new stage of technocracy and techno-capitalism has involved a fundamental restructuring and reorganisation of the world's economy, polity, and culture, for which the term *globalisation* serves as a codeword. Globalisation is bound up with debates over "post-Fordism," postmodernism, and a series of other "posts" that signify a fundamental rupture with the past. Thus, globalisation is centrally involved in debates over the defining features and changes of the present era. The already highly complex articulations of the discourse of globalisation are rendered more complicated by

²²Ibid., 40.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Karl Polyani, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

the fact that, as argued before, globalisation not only acts as a replacement term for imperialism and modernisation but is often caught up in the modernity-postmodernity debates as well.²⁵

Feminism has also contributed to the debate, especially as regards capitalism, globalisation, and more concretely, the gender aspects of these phenomena, with women sometimes called “invisible communities” in connection with the effects of globalisation.²⁶ In the words of Houtart, “*The women of the world are the first victims of privatisation, of formalisation of the economy.*”²⁷ To mention only one aspect, the women of the subaltern classes and of the subaltern states of the world are the victims of the privatisation of water, of electricity, of health, and of education services, which entail a dramatic increase in the prices of these necessities. Because women are generally in charge of the household economy, most women in the Third World are unable to work for the profit of corporations by producing commodities. In addition, the market economy needs and makes use of the female body for advertising its commodities; we can even say that women’s bodies become a commodity in the market economy. In any case, women are degraded and deprived of their full humanity and condition.

However, the terms *feminism* and *third world* require a definition before it is possible to attempt an overview of the terms *third world feminism*, or *southern feminism* as it is sometimes called, and of the debate on the social equality or lack thereof between the sexes. In its early days, feminism primarily focused on the inclusion of women in the spheres of society from which they were excluded. As a category, women were brought into attention because they were placed against the backdrop or absence of formal recognition; the awareness of that generalised fact brought women to the attention of

²⁵Douglas Kellner, “Globalization and the Postmodern Turn,” <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/globalizationpostmodernturn.pdf> (accessed April 10, 2007).

²⁶This term is taken from a speech delivered by Lieve Troch on feminism and globalisation (given at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Dublin, Ireland, February 22, 2007).

²⁷Houtart, “Common Good Ethics: Deconstruction and Reconstruction. (emphasis added).

politicians, church leaders, bankers, and so forth. The feminist movement began when women began to realise that, being half of humankind, they were disenfranchised, so they forcefully fought for “universal suffrage.” In the more recent wave of feminism, women started voicing the fact that the contribution of women to the Gross National Product (GNP) or their involvement in the informal workforce had been largely ignored and uncoun- ted. The necessity of assessing the cost of household work done by women, the social value of childbearing and motherhood, and the economic value of generating human capital became unavoidable. For the first time, the impact on women of various national and international policies, including anti-discriminatory civil and judicial laws, privatisation, structural adjustment and so forth, along with existing patriarchal social and cultural norms that reinforced the very process of discrimination, was formally acknowledged and documented. Feminists made great strides in protesting against institutional discrimination against women both in the private and public spheres.

However the use of the term “third world women” by Western feminists has been widely critiqued. Chandra Talpade Mohanty from India uses the term interchangeably with “women of colour.”²⁸ She argues that

what seems to constitute “women of colour” or “third world women” as a viable oppositional alliance is a common context of struggle rather than colour or racial identifications. Similarly, it is the third world women’s oppositional political relation to sexist, racist, and imperialistic structures that constitutes our political commonality.²⁹

In reference to the term *third world women*, Mohanty argues that Western feminisms appropriate the production of the “third world woman as a singular monolithic subject” for a “discursive colonisation.”³⁰ Furthermore, Western feminisms articulate a “discursive colonisation” through the production of what she terms a “third world difference”: “that

²⁸Chandra T. Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61-88.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all of the women in [third world] countries.”³¹

Mohanty defines the third world geographically:

The nation-states of Latin America, the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-east Asia, China, South Africa, and Oceania constitute the parameters of the non-European third world. In addition, Black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous peoples in the U.S., Europe, Australia, some of whom have historic links with the geographically defined third worlds, also define themselves as third world peoples.³²

Kum Kum Sangari argues that the term “third world” not only designates specific geographical areas, but imaginary spaces.³³ According to Sangari, “third world” is “a term that both signifies and blurs the functioning of an economic, political, and imaginary geography able to unite vast and vastly differentiated areas of the world into a single underdeveloped” terrain.

Sangari is critical of the way “third world” is used by the West to indiscriminately lump together vastly different places, whereas each society is distinct and shaped by its own cultural traditions, religion, and social norms as well as the position of the particular nation-states in the world system. The countries of the South are situated at a juncture where legacies of old traditions and influences of Western ways of life create a fusion that continually shapes the structure of those societies. As cultural legacies and traditions have been shaken by colonisation and the sovereignty of the nation-states has been compromised under globalisation, cultural experiences and national policies are greatly influenced by international politics, affecting in turn the citizens within each national territory.³⁴ One example of such a phenomenon would be how structural adjustment policies adopted by third world countries—under the influence of the World Bank and the

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid.

³³KumKum Sangari, “Politics of Diversity: Religious Communities and Multiple Patriarchies,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no.51/52 (1995): 3287-3310, 3381-3389.

³⁴Sangari, “Politics of Diversity.”

IMF—have restructured the economic and social conditions, having an impact on societies all over the world.

Those factors that have contributed to the categorisation of parts of the world as the first and the third contribute to the differences of experiences that women face in those respective worlds. Nevertheless, the specificity of the context requires due consideration. Very often, third world women are presented as the “oppressed” without any attempt to further analyse the form and extent of the process of oppression.³⁵ This approach is sometimes called internalising the victims.³⁶ The defining of women’s problems in mainstream development planning or policymaking conferences, or even at women’s summits—where *women* means White, middle-class, Western women *vis-à-vis* an idea of uneducated, ignorant, third world women—has been widely criticised. In other words, positing “women” as an analytical category is problematic, to say the least. Women as a group or social category are not a homogeneous collective. Terms such as “women’s problems,” often hide the fact that women from different social classes, cultures, ethnicities, and religions face very different challenges and can experience contrasting outcomes from the same social phenomenon.³⁷ In sum, third world feminist thinking has emphasised the realities of third world women in the context of globalisation.

What Postcolonialism Has to Say About Globalisation

The field of postcolonial studies has been gaining prominence since the 1970s. Some date its rise in the Western academy from the publication of Edward Said’s influential critique of Western constructions of the Orient in his 1978 work, *Orientalism*. Although there is considerable debate over the precise parameters of the field and, in a

³⁵Cynthia A. Wood, “Authorizing Gender and Development: ‘Third World Women’ Native Informants, and Speaking Nearby,” in *Nepantla: Views from South* 2, no. 3 (2001): 429–47.

³⁶Lieve Troch of Nijmegen University mentioned in an interview.

³⁷*Ibid.*

very general sense, the definition of the term *postcolonial*, it is generally understood as the study of the interactions between the European nations and the societies they colonised in the modern period. The European empire is said to have held sway over more than 85% of the rest of the globe by the time of the 1914-1918 conflict, having consolidated its control over several centuries.³⁸ The sheer extent and duration of the European empire and its disintegration after the 1939-1945 war have led to a widespread interest in postcolonial literature and criticism in recent times. One widespread criticism is that the overly hasty celebration of independence masks the march of neocolonialism in the guise of modernisation and development in an age of increasing globalisation and transnationalism. Meanwhile, there are colonised countries that are still under direct or indirect foreign control.³⁹

As globalisation has gained currency in both academic and popular discourses, many postcolonial critics have taken up the question of the continuities (and discontinuities) between globalisation and postcolonialism and of whether these terms should be understood to refer to cultural conditions; social, economic, and political processes; or, more narrowly, intellectual methodologies and fields of study. Postcolonial critique has further entered into the fields of theology and biblical studies.

Despite the immense complexity of both terms, it is impossible to deny that there are distinct and important connections between postcolonial studies and the critical study of globalisation. One of the central aims of works such as Pamela McCallum and Wendy Faith's *Linked Histories* is to trace precisely these fluid and interactive ongoing connections, which raise urgent questions for postcolonial studies.⁴⁰ McCallum and Faith assert that a renewed focus on global patterns and structural markings of continents and

³⁸For an analysis of postcolonial studies, see Laura Chrisman and Benita Perry, eds., *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000). See also Deepika Bahri, *Introduction to Postcolonial Studies*, <http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Intro.html> (accessed April 9, 2007).

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Pamela McCallum and Wendy Faith, *Linked Histories: Postcolonial Studies in A Globalized World* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005).

peoples may prove especially illuminating for postcolonial studies.⁴¹ On the whole, the problem with postcolonialism is that the discourse ends with deconstruction and there seems to be no reconstruction at all.

Globalisation and Concepts of Modernity and Postmodernity

Some theorists claim that globalisation is replacing concepts like modernity and postmodernity as the central thematic of contemporary theorising,⁴² though others have assimilated the discourse, variously, to both the modernity and postmodernity problematic. For some, globalisation thus constitutes a continuation of the problem of modernisation and modernity, while for others, it signifies something new and different and is bound up with the postmodern turn or an altogether novel and as yet untheorised global condition. Yet, here too, totally different valorisations of the modern, postmodern, and globalisation processes are possible.

This section adopts the notion that the articulation of discourse of globalisation can proceed from both modern and postmodern theoretical viewpoints because, currently, the world is involved in an interregnum between an aging modern and an emerging postmodern era.⁴³ In this period of transition, a liminal borderland between two epochs, globalisation signifies both continuities with the past, with modernity and modernisation, as well as novelties of the present and the likely future. It can also be argued that globalisation must be seen as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that involves different levels, flows, tensions, and conflicts, of such nature that a transdisciplinary social theory is necessary to capture its contours, dynamics, trajectories, problems, and possible futures.

Many accounts of globalisation suffer from oversimplifications, exaggerations, and wishful thinking, and it is hard to determine a specific moment when globalisation

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Inter alia, Martin Albrow, *The Global Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

⁴³Kellner, *Globalization*.

started or to describe exact stages of its historical development. The questions of origins and periodisation are notoriously imprecise and contentious, as history shows no obvious and precise watersheds on which there is a general accord. Researchers have variously dated the onset of globalisation from the dawn of human intercontinental migration,⁴⁴ the commencement of the modern era,⁴⁵ the late-nineteenth century,⁴⁶ the 1950s,⁴⁷ or the 1970s.⁴⁸ If one conceives of globalisation as the rise of *supra-territoriality*, in counter-distinction to a global system of *international* character, then its chronology lies in a combination of several of these positions. Whilst considerable groundwork for globalisation was laid in earlier times, the fully fledged trend dates roughly from the 1960s.⁴⁹ To express it in other terms, we must distinguish between a “global social order” on the one hand and a “global transnational order” on the other. In the global social order, we can have an international ordering of politics and economics, where all the participating nations retain their independence, sovereignty, and autonomy, such as the international order represented by the United Nations Organisation; in the global transnational order, there is no cooperation among the participating nations, but an imposition on them of a system that is transnational; that is, it transcends and dilutes all the barriers and frontiers of national identities and reduces them to “national sovereignty myths.”

Globalisation as Replacement for Modernisation and Imperialism

Making sense of the discourse of globalisation requires, first, that we sort out the different uses and meanings of the term and try to specify what processes we are trying to

⁴⁴Clive Gamble, *Timewalkers: The Prehistory of Global Colonization* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁴⁵Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992).

⁴⁶Christopher Chase-Dunn, *Global Formations: Structures of the World-Economy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁴⁷James N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁴⁸David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Conditions of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

⁴⁹Baylis and Smith, *Globalisation*.

describe by using the term with those meanings. In a sense, one could argue that there is no such thing as globalisation per se. Rather, the term is used as a cover concept for a heterogeneity of processes that need to be spelled out and articulated. The term is neither value-free nor neutral in many of its uses and often serves to replace older discourses like “imperialism” or “modernisation.”⁵⁰ As a substitute for imperialism, it could shift focus from the domination of systemically underdeveloped countries by the overdeveloped ones or of national and local economies by transnational corporations. Moreover, the term globalisation serves as a cover to neutralise the atrocities of colonialism. It could be part of a dialogue on neoimperialism that serves to obscure the continuing exploitation of much of the world by one superpower (USA), a few major powers, and a number of giant transnational corporations, thus cloaking some of the more barbaric and destructive aspects of contemporary development.⁵¹ However, as a replacement term for modernisation, it could also rob these previously legitimating ideologies (modernisation often being regarded as a positive experience) of the connotations that the processes are necessarily bringing progress and improvement and are part of an inexorable trajectory of progress and modernity.

For its critics, however, globalisation is bringing about the irreparable and irreversible catastrophic destruction of local traditions, the continued subordination of poorer nations and regions by richer ones, the destruction of the environment, and a colourless, faceless homogenisation of culture and everyday life. These critics include Marxists, liberals, and multiculturalists who stress the threat to national sovereignty, local traditions, and participatory democracy through global forces; environmentalists who fear the destructive ecological effects of unchecked globalisation; and even conservatives who see it as a threat to national and local cultures and the sanctity of tradition.⁵²

⁵⁰Kellner, *Globalization. and the Postmodern Turn*.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Kellner, *Globalization and the Postmodern Turn*.

For Houtart, the criticism of globalisation is a necessary preliminary task. He uses stronger terms: not only to criticise, but also to *delegitimise* globalisation. Paraphrasing one of Marx's theses on Feuerbach, Houtart insists that sociologists and philosophers have tried to understand and explain globalisation: the question, however, is how to change and replace it with a better alternative. For Houtart, a criticism of globalisation leads necessarily to its delegitimation, but theoretical delegitimation in itself is fruitless if it is not accompanied by a search for better alternatives in a utopian style, for which society needs the mobilisation of all the organisations, movements, and personalities in the intellectual, religious, social, and political spheres that are opposed to globalisation with its manifold threats to a truly and fully human life on our planet. His approach is, at the same time, theoretical, programmatic, and practical. After analysing and describing the nature and scope of globalisation in the first two chapters of one of his programmatic books, he begins his reflections on a practical approach to resisting it:

The expansion of capitalism, a producer of wealth but also devastator of nature, destructor of human beings and constructor of inequalities, fortunately provokes reactions and impels many to the search of alternatives. It is in these perspectives that, nowadays, stand all the world's social forums and all the reflections on the search of alternatives. It is important, then, to look into these two dimensions of globalisation.⁵³

The term globalisation is a theoretical construct that is itself contested and open to various interpretations, inflections, and ascribed meanings. It can be described positively or negatively, or—as suggested herein—in a polyvalent way to describe highly complex and multidimensional processes in the economy, polity, culture, and everyday life.⁵⁴

Definition of Anti-Capitalism

The neoliberal practices that currently dominate the global system have met with fierce resistance, especially in the so-called Third World. Such anti-capitalist activism begins with a commitment to the idea “that capitalism cannot produce societies fit for all

⁵³Houtart, *Délégitimer Le Capitalisme : Reconstruire l'espérance*, 117.

⁵⁴Kellner, *Globalization and the Postmodern Turn*.

or even most of the people who live in them, and follows with a commitment to a realistic achievable alternative.”⁵⁵ Anti-capitalism refers to a general opposition to capitalism, in terms of beliefs or attitudes. As such, it is a very broad idea, covering a wide collection of views and ideologies, some of which oppose each other more than they oppose capitalism. This is one of the main obstacles to an effective outcome of some of the world encounters with the slogans of opposition to globalisation. Some feel that each of the participating groups has its own hidden political agenda.

Anti-capitalists, in the strict sense of the word, are those who aspire to the complete replacement of capitalism with another economic system; however, there are also ideologies that can be characterised as partially anti-capitalist, in the sense that they only wish to replace or abolish certain aspects of capitalism, rather than the entire system.⁵⁶ This stance is often labelled “reformism.” The choice between humanising capitalism and changing the system is probably the most important discussion occurring today among different anti-capitalist movements. Some claim that the first aim is the only possible one and that, through dialogue and reforms, things may become better. They delineate a difference between savage capitalism and a “civilised” form.⁵⁷ Others contend that a civilised capitalism is a contradiction in terms because the implacable logic of capitalist expansion on a global scale requires an equally global and radical resistance of that expansion, because capitalism itself is vitiated in the root and must be uprooted.⁵⁸ Houtart falls under this category of radical delegitimation of capitalism and its replacement by other alternatives. Houtart also insists that society must seek, find, and propose alternatives that are *credible*.

⁵⁵ Joel Schalit, *The Anti-Capitalist Reader* (New York: New York Press, 2002).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ This stance bears some resemblance to Boff’s argument that the concept of sustainable development is a contradiction in terms because it proposes as a cause that which is in fact an effect. It is said that poverty is the cause of ecological degradation. Leonardo Boff, *(Un)Sustainable Development* (2002), <http://www.leonardoboff.com/> (accessed April 22, 2008).

Houtart's Analysis of Global Capitalism

In order to understand Houtart's attitude towards globalisation and capitalism, it is helpful to refer back to some biographical details that may shed light on the influences that were important in his life and career. From the outset of his vocational career, Houtart has been confronted with class struggle and social deprivation. In the 1950s, he worked closely with Josef Cardijn, the founder of the Young Christian Workers Movement in Belgium. This association represents the most significant causal influence on Houtart's adoption of and preoccupation with the sociology of religion throughout his career. Houtart first encountered social deprivation on a global scale during the same period, when he travelled to Latin America.

With the passing of years, he adopted a very specific attitude to the capitalist system and to the conditions and strategies necessary to displace and replace it. According to Houtart, contemporary globalisation represents more than a technical problem. The economic project of globalisation is, he argues,

aimed at increasing the role of capital, result[ing] in a double offensive being initiated against *labour* and against the *State* in order to diminish their respective part in the social product. Because of the physical limits in the production of goods and the feeble possibility of their growth, the rate of increase of productivity necessarily diminishes, putting a hold to the free distribution of the social product and in line with neoliberal profit maximisation a new strategy of exploiting natural resources had to begin.⁵⁹

The new technology has produced and continues to produce profound transformations in the nature of labour, not so much for the betterment of work conditions as for an increase in profitability. Real salaries have decreased throughout the world, especially in countries where the working class is weak and labour has been systematically deregulated and delocalised. Trade unions have lost power in the industrialised countries and were occasionally criminalised in a number of countries of

⁵⁹Houtart, "Capitalism, Its Consequences and Its Logic," (speech at the World Forum of Liberation). Cf. Houtart, *The World Social Forum Nairobi*.

the South. For example, the organisation of trade union activities is prohibited in the new Free Trade Zones in Sri Lanka. The right to form a union and for workers to organise and collectively bargain exists; however, in reality, workers are prevented from exercising these rights.⁶⁰

This policy was most exemplary in the neoliberal administrations of political leaders such as Ronald Reagan and George Bush in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, but a global trend is evident.⁶¹ Houtart notes that

today in the countries of the EU, there are more than 20 million unemployed and in the USA the “working poor,” unable to live with their salaries, are multiplied. In Mexico and Indonesia, real salaries have been cut by 50%. An offensive against the State finds its expression in the wave of privatisations, not only of economic activities, but also of public services. State expenses are diminished in order to increase the revenue of capital.⁶²

Furthermore, the global trend towards the overexploitation of natural resources, considered necessary for the promotion of development in the neoliberal perspective, has created a massive environmental degradation, as well as being a major cause of climate change. Humanity has entered an area of non-sustainable evolution.⁶³ These economic forces, however, have not evolved unopposed. Increasingly, the neoliberalist dreams of global “free-trade” and an allegiance to the capitalist market have resulted in asymmetrical gains in wealth at the expense of global social justice and equality. The Web site of the sociological activist group The Affinity Project makes the following point:

Despite the (failed) promises that globalisation was supposed to spell, namely, a new era of universal prosperity, grass-roots groups and movements throughout the world—most notably in the Global South—

⁶⁰For a good report on the human rights of women workers in FTZ in Sri Lanka, see The Solidarity Center, *Justice for All: The Struggle for Workers Rights in Sri Lanka* (Washington: The American Center for International Labour Solidarity, 2003).

⁶¹Houtart, “Capitalism, Its Consequences and Its Logic.”

⁶²*Ibid.*

⁶³*Ibid.*

have stood up and opposed the exploitative military and economic regimes being imposed upon the world.⁶⁴

Roughly defined, the “global South” represents vast portions of the globe located in (though not limited to) the southern hemisphere that have yet to experience or are currently experiencing periods of economic and industrial “advancement” and are often portrayed as poorer nations.⁶⁵ The transnational corporations have been keen to exploit this level of development in terms of cheap sources of labour and raw materials, as well as a relatively untapped market:

Through privatisation, trade liberalization, and deregulation, as well as through the powerful persuasion of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the IMF (International Monetary Fund), and the World Bank, not to mention national and corporate pressures, postcolonial segments of the world are being brought into the fold of global capital.⁶⁶

The United Fruit Company in Guatemala, the International Trade Treaty (ITT) in Chile, Bechtel in Bolivia, Occidental Petroleum in Chile, Talisman Oil in Sudan (and recently Halliburton in Iraq), together with the all-encompassing North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and its expanded cousin FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas), are all examples of globalisation in the South.⁶⁷

The Origin and Development of Neoliberalism

As mentioned previously, this chapter treats globalisation as a logical development of international capitalism and its quest for the realisation of the world market. A more detailed description of the origins of neoliberalism and its development will illustrate how it has come to be regarded by many as a panacea for the world’s socioeconomic problems. In the aftermath of the 1939-45 conflict, the world economy, according to Samir Amin, was organised on three main pillars.⁶⁸ The first is the Western

⁶⁴Affinity Project, “Anti-Globalization and the Global South,” *Affinity Project: Web of Struggles*, <http://affinityproject.org/traditions/antiglobeglobalsouth.html> (accessed March 31, 2007).

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷*Ibid.*

⁶⁸Samir Amin, *Capitalism in the Age of Globalisation* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 94ff.

industrial economy, driven by the economic principles and practices of Keynesianism. This implies an agreement between capital, labour, and the state for the distribution of the social product, namely the wealth produced in a given country. This agreement was the result of the long social struggle between the working class, organised in numerous trade unions, and the Western governments' fear of communism, strongly represented by the socialist parties and groups in Western Europe and by the former USSR and the Eastern bloc.⁶⁹ The second pillar was the socialist bloc. Intended to be an alternative to capitalism, it developed a strong public sector, outside of private capitalist accumulation. Third, Amin identifies the Bandung model predominant in the so-called Third World. The aim was to substitute imports by local production and resulted in an alliance between the national bourgeoisie and the organised working class, with the peasants who constituted the majority in that region being little taken into consideration. In Asia, this third pillar is known as *nation building* and in Latin America as *desarrollismo*.⁷⁰

After a few decades, the three models entered into crisis.⁷¹ The first model to fall into crisis was the Bandung model, because of the cost of the transfer of technology and knowledge. Most of the so-called third world countries were obliged to open their economies to international capital protected by military dictatorships or authoritarian regimes. The second model to enter a state of crisis was the Keynesian model, due to a diminishing growth of productivity reducing the profitability of capital. Finally, the fall of the Berlin wall, for internal and external reasons, marked the end of the socialist pillar. Internally, the socialist project had been transformed by competition with capitalism and was ruled by a non-democratic power structure, and externally, the Cold War between the two superpowers had developed by involving the socialist block in an arms race in opposition to the social redistribution of the wealth produced.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

The theoretical basis of neoliberalism has its origins in the period immediately following the 1939-1945 war in the work of von Hayek and the Mont Pèlerin group in Switzerland.⁷² They felt that Keynesianism was destroying freedom and leading people to a new “welfare slavery” and, thus, that the power of the state had to be reduced.⁷³ Three main assumptions underlie neoliberalism. First, it is necessary to establish full freedom of exchange in order to develop economic growth. Whilst in theory this might seem convincing, in practice, Houtart remarks, within an unequal organisation of society, it means an advantage for the most powerful, the strongest. As a Nicaraguan economist and sociologist (Oscar René Vargas) put it, the Free Trade Agreements between North America and the Central American countries are treaties between the shark and the sardines.⁷⁴ These alliances and agreements between the all-powerful nations and the powerless “banana republics” are often caricatured in Latin America in the well-known parable of the fisherman and the worm: “Said the Fisherman to the Worm, ‘Let’s go fishing together; I put in the capital and technology, you put in the raw material and labour.’” Second, neoliberalism has been characterised by the increasing role of speculative investments that imposes its logic on the productive activities, creating “dictatorships of the shareholders.”⁷⁵ Finally, it has paved the way for the monopolistic power of the transnational corporations, absorbing an ever-growing part of the international commerce and economy.⁷⁶

All these developments led, in the mid-1970s, to the development of the Washington Consensus, a general agreement among the economic leaders of the capitalist system to transform the world economy along neoliberal lines.⁷⁷ The Consensus envisaged the rebuilding of a higher rate of accumulation necessary to introduce new

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Houtart, “Capitalism, Its Consequences and Its Logic.”

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Houtart and Polet, eds., *The Other Davos*.

technologies (informatics and communications) and to concentrate the economic decision-making power in the hands of a small number of international organisations and transnational corporations. Foremost among the institutions involved were the World Bank and the IMF, which transformed into the institutional framework of the project, followed by the OECD, the European Union, and most recently, the World Trade Organisation (WTO).⁷⁸

With this framework as a basis, Houtart argues:

Culture . . . is at stake because human beings are transformed into producers or consumers. It is only as a producer or a consumer that you are useful for capital accumulation.⁷⁹

This culture transforms attitudes and mentalities, in other words, culture. Consumer culture is important because, if human beings do not consume, they do not contribute to the accumulation of capital and, thus, are useless as regards the capitalist system. That is why, for example, the African continent, which consumes relatively little in comparison with North America and Europe, is floundering on the periphery of global economic activity.⁸⁰ This consumer culture creates an approach to life that ultimately influences the culture of the people and is the reason, according to Houtart, that resistance has to work from a cultural point of view,⁸¹ providing the possibility of being critical and proposing other aims in the social organisation of life.⁸²

We may wonder how and why Houtart, a sociologist of religion, suddenly jumps into the arena of action on a planetary scope for delegitimising the triumphal march of the capitalist globalisation with the call to seek alternatives and construct a better world for all. His anti-capitalist stance goes back to his encounter with the social and political situation of Latin America and becomes increasingly crystallised in some of his

⁷⁸Houtart and Polet, *The Other Davos*, 71.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

⁸²Ibid.

subsequent minor writings. Houtart unfailingly takes sides with the poor when he has to speak up on crucial social issues. Houtart focuses his attention on the sociology of religion, and his method is heavily influenced by Marxian analysis, which has been one of the main arguments of his detractors. According to Houtart, Marxism provides us with the best tools for understanding societies and for understanding the role of religion in society. However, he stresses the importance of regarding Marxian analysis as a tool and not a dogma.⁸³

Some Roman Catholic authors insinuate or even openly state that some papal social encyclicals—from John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* (1963) to Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* (1967) and his Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971)—in fact, permit the use of Marxist instruments of social analysis directly or indirectly, deliberately or unconsciously.⁸⁴ The popes who openly and emphatically condemned Marxist communism found in it three fundamental elements that are irreconcilable with the Gospel: a) atheism as a basic presupposition; b) the class struggle as the method to achieve the envisioned goal, a classless society; and c) the dictatorship of the proletariat as the end result. John XXIII and Vatican Council II broke the deadlock of dialogue and collaboration and opened the way for collaboration with “the historical movements that have economic, social, cultural or political ends.”⁸⁵ The most explicit texts of the new opening to dialogue and cooperation of Catholics with Marxist movements appear especially in *Pacem in Terris* (159-160) and in the further explication and elaboration of the same by Paul VI in *Octogesima Adveniens* (30-34).

Some Marxist philosophers and movements did not delay to accept this invitation to dialogue and collaboration. In 1965, the French Marxist philosopher Roger Garaudy published a book in the form of a manifesto with the revealing title *From Anathema to*

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴For the papal social teachings see, inter al., Joseph Gremillion, *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*. (New York: Orbis, 1976).

⁸⁵John XXIII, PT 159.

Dialogue: The Challenge of Marxist-Christian Collaboration.⁸⁶ Many other Marxist philosophers and movements followed Garaudy's lead, among them the Czech philosopher Milan Machovec with his call to Christians to go back to Jesus of Nazareth, recover for their action in the world the inspiration of "the cause of Jesus," and join in the struggle with Marxists in their common aspiration to build up a new society; this call he expressed in his book with the significant title of *Jesus for Atheists*, which in English was published under the title *A Marxist Looks at Jesus*.⁸⁷

Many Christians (intellectuals as well as activists) received the new *aggiornamento* with enthusiasm and initiated the movement Christians for Socialism at local, national, and international levels⁸⁸ and the Marxist-Christian Dialogue both at high academic levels and at the levels of local trade unions and revolutionary movements.

Houtart should be placed within the scope of these movements and goes a step beyond: He is not only a "Christian for socialism" but openly and unambiguously a "Christian socialist" (or a "socialist Christian," to put the accent on the second element). Why did he choose this option? There are four main reasons for Houtart's concern with Marx. The first has to do with the totality of the approach, in the sense that, when one studies one element of society, one has to put that within the context of the whole of society in order to understand it. As he says, "Religion or the family is not something in itself; it is always a part of the totality of society."⁸⁹ Second, it is a historical approach; one does not understand the contemporary situation if one does not know its genesis and construction. Third, it is a dialectical approach. Sociology is not a natural science; rather, it concerns itself with interactions between acting people: when one social group acts, another reacts. Reality does not proceed in a linear way, but in a dialectical fashion, an

⁸⁶Publisher in English by New York: Vintage Books, and later by London: Collins, with a significant introduction by Karl Rahner.

⁸⁷Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976.

⁸⁸The first international encounter of 'Christians for Socialism' was held in 1972 in Allende's Chile.

⁸⁹Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction."

element fundamental to Marxist analysis. Finally, the theory of historical materialism is central in the sense that, if one does not experience the way that people are organising themselves to produce their means of subsistence, one is unable to understand the constitution of a society. Thus, it is not dogma. It is the result of empirical research apparent everywhere. Houtart previously made use of Marxism for understanding individual societies and now uses the same methods and tools to study and understand society on a global scale.

Houtart's militant opposition to the capitalist globalisation, then, is not an anomaly in his career but rather a natural outcome of his lifelong interests. During most of his professional life, the Church hierarchies have looked upon him with the suspicion that his path would lead to open social revolution. Consequently, Houtart's main convictions with regard to the anti-capitalist struggle are, for lack of a better term, "ambiguously" situated inside the beliefs of Catholic social thinking. We say *ambiguously* because, while Houtart accepts the validity of such teachings, his active involvement goes much further and, as argued previously, in many ways his militancy is seen by his detractors as being in open opposition to the official Catholic teachings.

Five interconnected points sum up Houtart's theoretical perspective towards anti-capitalism.⁹⁰ First, he argues that the contemporary academic and intellectual movements place too much emphasis on analysis, to the detriment of placing sufficient emphasis on practical action. According to Houtart, analysis is important and necessary, but only for the purposes of aiding the project of actual social change. Analysis has to be holistic and global and has to combine different actors, such as churches, base communities, societies, and different anti-capitalist movements in a dialectical discourse. Second, the idea of collective consciousness is important for Houtart. For him, the World Social Forum offers opportunities for the convergence of the many social movements involved with it to adopt

⁹⁰Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

one common social conscience and strategy. In this, as a third point, he differs from Samir Amin, who aims at converting the diverse movements involved in the WSF into one movement, a kind of Fifth International.⁹¹ According to Houtart, a convergence of social consciousness is necessary; however, the World Social Forum can act only as a platform for debate, not as a means to create one single anti-capitalist movement.⁹² We will discuss this further in our concluding remarks. Fourth, in regards to reform or revolution of the capitalist system, Houtart adopts the attitude that the history of capitalism clearly illustrates that “it is always savage, because its logic tends to eliminate any other consideration than accumulation and that it is only when enough strength is exercised that it must accept some concessions.”⁹³ Finally, however, he stresses that it is not globalisation per se that is the problem. Moreover, he actually favours the convergence of transnational social movements, positing that it is the development of globalisation of capital that requires opposition.⁹⁴

Houtart’s Reasons for Delegitimising Capitalism

For Houtart, there are many reasons why capitalism has to be delegitimised in its logic and not merely condemned in its abuses.⁹⁵ The first relates to economic factors:

Capitalism is generally presented as the most efficient economic system to produce goods and services. This is true, given that one does not ask too many questions about the way goods are produced, namely the social and ecological cost and how the social product is distributed.⁹⁶

However, this understanding becomes more complex if one defines the economy as Houtart does, that is “as the human activity destined at furnishing the basis of the physical, cultural and spiritual life of all human beings in the world, a more inefficient

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Sahabandhu, “Portraying.”

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Houtart, “Capitalism, Its Consequences and Its Logic.”

⁹⁶Ibid.

system never existed in the history of humankind.”⁹⁷ The more it develops, the greater the inequality that arises and the more people around the globe feel adversely affected thereby. By way of example, since the beginning of the neoliberal phase of capitalism, the gap between the richest five percent and the poorest five percent of the global population has increased significantly:

The difference between rich and poor countries is growing. Humankind has the means to solve the problem, even in a comparatively short period of time. The fortune of the 500 richest persons in the world could finance more than ten times the cost of what the UN estimates necessary to solve the basic needs of the whole of humanity.⁹⁸

The second economic reason to oppose capitalism, Houtart argues, is that, to use the categories of Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, the destructive character of capitalism has now largely gone beyond its constructive aspects. According to Houtart,

the reproduction of life itself is at stake. Yet a considerable percentage of the economic activities are still not from sustainable sources and a continuation of this trend will result in even further climate change. Water supply is already a problem in certain parts of the world. The pessimistic approach, thinking that it is yet too late, might not be called for; however without going too far, it could be noted that the situation will definitely not be changed by continuing in the economic logic of capitalism.⁹⁹

Since it is within the global South that the most disastrous consequences of modern capitalism are being experienced, it should be of no surprise that the most vocal opponents also emerge from this area. It is amongst the people in the global South who are facing exploitation and oppression at every turn that the most militant and active anti-globalisation movements have been born.¹⁰⁰ Resistance movements have existed since the beginning of the hegemony of capital, but what is specific today is the convergence of those forces of resistance. Responding to third world issues together with the already-mentioned purpose of convergence and solidarity of social movements, specifically those occurring in the southern hemisphere, in 1976 Houtart founded CETRI (*Centre Tri-*

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Houtart and Polet, 14.

Continental) in Louvain-la-Neuve. For Houtart, no fundamental theological objections exist to the combining of Christian social teaching with a Marxist approach. Houtart's conviction that Marxism is an efficient tool to analyse society was heavily influenced by his close connection to liberation theologians in Latin America, especially Nicaragua, where he found many Christians working together with Marxists, among others, people like Ernesto Cardenal, who was very committed to social change.¹⁰¹ Houtart's message to Marxists is to take religion seriously, and his corresponding message to theologians or religious people is to take society seriously.¹⁰²

According to Houtart,

in 1999, twenty-five years after the Washington Consensus and ten years after the fall of the wall of Berlin, at the meeting "The Other Davos" and a few months later in Seattle, representatives of very different social movements and organisations, which never before had been working together, discovered that they are fighting the same enemy. It was the beginning of the common protests against the world decision-making powers such as for example the WTO, IMF, World Bank, European Union.¹⁰³

Following that message, in 2002, the first World Social Forum was held at Porto Alegre. The World Social Forum, a response to the World Economic Forum, has brought together a wide range of activists and thinkers to confront the negative trends of corporatisation and globalisation. The Zapatistas in Mexico, plus indigenous peoples in New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Bolivia, the US, and India—just to name a few—have been actively involved in the movement. Among the groups and coalitions involved are the Landless Workers Movement, Focus on the Global South, Culture Works Media, the Urban Poor Consortium, and the Indonesian Peasants Union. From various parts of Africa, South and Central America, and Asia, groups and coalitions have taken part in information

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Sahabandhu, "Portraying."

campaigns and anti-globalisation action to address environmental, labour, race, and gender issues that have been spawned from a particular form of globalisation.¹⁰⁴

The World Social Forum

Considering Houtart's active involvement in the World Social Forum, more detail is dedicated herein to this particular aspect of the anti-capitalism struggle. The WSF is unique in nature, and the fact that it had antecedents does not diminish its newness.¹⁰⁵ The struggles that find expression in the WSF do not conform to either of the processes of social change sanctioned by Western modernity, namely, reform or revolution. Apart from the consensus on nonviolence, its modes of struggle are extremely diverse and appear to spread out in a continuum between the poles of institutionality and insurgency. According to Houtart, the contribution of the WSF in this general framework is at the same time specific and global.¹⁰⁶ He argues:

being a convergence point between movements and organisations of the whole world, representing various sections of the victims of the system, they have mobilized hundreds of thousands of people during the seven years of their existence, through world, continental, national and thematic meetings.¹⁰⁷

The various meetings of the WSF are understood as points of encounter and exchange and have an important role to play in their plural character. They are also places of promotion for the various networks involved, giving them a political voice. Nevertheless, the WSF is not the place for systematically elaborating critical thinking, nor for planning action.

The WSF is not an event, nor merely a succession of events. As Houtart notes:

It is not a scholarly conference, although the contribution of many scholars converges in it. It is not a party or an international of parties, nor is it a non-governmental organisation or a confederation of NGOs. It holds no clearly defined ideology, either in defining what it rejects or what it asserts.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴François Polet, ed., *Globalizing Resistance* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Polet, *Globalizing Resistance*,

Given, however, that the WSF conceives of itself as a struggle against neoliberal globalisation, the aforementioned question arises as to the nature of change it anticipates. Is it a struggle against a form of capitalism or against capitalism in general? To date, the meetings of the WSF have resulted in a considerable number of partial alternative proposals, which have often come from single-issue groups.¹⁰⁹ The projects debated at the WSF are extremely heterogeneous. What generally unites the different movements involved is their denunciation of neoliberal capitalism and their demand for democratic participation.¹¹⁰

However, according to Houtart, two social deficiencies played a key role in the proposal and implementation of the agenda for the realisation of the 2007 World Forum in Nairobi, which were not specific to the African location but perhaps accentuated by the concrete context. The first one is a certain lack of clarity about the objectives of the Forums: "The opening to all forms of resistances over the 7 years of its existence has perhaps weakened the perception of the real goals."¹¹¹ As the WSF charter of basic principles clearly states, "the movements and organisations meeting in the Social Forums are the ones struggling against neoliberalism, against the world hegemony of capital and in search of alternatives." However, the involvement of identity groups, such as feminists, who at times might have a different political agenda, and the reformation or revolution debate within the movement makes the convergences a difficult, if not impossible project.

So large does anti-capitalism loom on the horizon of the twenty-first century, that sometimes virtually every opposition movement seems anti-capitalist, in one way or the other.¹¹² While fostering a sense of momentum, it has also had the gradual effect of confusing anti-capitalism with other, decidedly different, political agendas. Such

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Joel Schalit, ed., *The Anti-Capitalist Reader* (New York: New York Press, 2002).

confusion occurs perhaps most often with the various expressions of anti-colonial nationalism and feminism. While anti-capitalists have regularly filled the ranks of the movements for civil rights and gender equality, there has never been any good reason to assume that the relationship was a reciprocal one. As historian Eric Hobsbawm has argued, “However just their struggles, identity groups are ultimately motivated by particularistic interests and exclusive claims. At the end of the day, they are for themselves and no one else.”¹¹³ The second problematic factor has been the fact that the most financially powerful organisations have been able to occupy a larger space than those with less means.¹¹⁴ It is not necessarily a policy of domination, but a social law that indicates the necessity of certain rules to avoid the “law of the market” and also affects the full liberty of expression, which is central in the definition of the Forums. More specifically, Houtart notes:

In 2007 the weakness of popular social movements in Kenya has inevitably accentuated a certain commercialisation of the Forum. The lack of volunteers obliged [the organisations] to have recourse to commercial firms, which did not always comply with their contracts.¹¹⁵

All this affects one of Houtart’s main concerns, namely, the question of how to pass from a collective consciousness to collective actors. Indeed, he argues, “reality does not change only by increasing consciousness, even if it is indispensable, but as well by the construction of new relationships of power.”¹¹⁶ As mentioned previously, one of the concrete effects of the Forums has been the creation of networks oriented towards action but, according to Houtart, there are many unfinished tasks. The first of these is to increase the collective consciousness, not only geographically and in the various social sectors of society, but also from a qualitative point of view. He claims:

It is not enough to recognize and condemn from an ethical viewpoint the excesses and abuses of capitalism. It is necessary to come to the awareness

¹¹³Schalit, *The Anti-Capitalist Reader*, (New York: New York Press, 2002).

¹¹⁴Houtart, “Capitalism, Its Consequences and Its Logic.”

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*

that it is the logic of the capitalist system itself, which is at the root of such consequences. The victims progressively understand this. It is a process, which cannot be imposed from outside, but must be discovered by an internal analysis.¹¹⁷

A second prerequisite for the future is the formulation of a workable definition of exactly what the "other possible world" means.¹¹⁸ With anything less, it remains a generous idea without content. Houtart believes the participants in the Forums have achieved much in this area, but the serious work of concretisation remains incomplete.¹¹⁹ In disagreement with Amin, Houtart argues that it would be against the principles of the Forums to create one single and all-imposing doctrine; however, he does believe that a general awareness needs to be formed and the main areas of actions need to be systematised.

Houtart identifies four main orientations that have greatly contributed to the development of this new collective consciousness.¹²⁰ First, the conception amongst anti-capitalist movements changed from "there is no alternative" (to the capitalist market) as famously pronounced by Prime Minister Thatcher, to "another world is possible," representing a profound cultural shift.¹²¹ This process is ongoing, and many different social groups in the various parts of the world still struggle with incorporating it into their day-to-day realities. The second achievement has been the constitution or the strengthening of networks. The Forum has, for instance, helped to consolidate La Via Campesina, a coalition assembling more than 100 peasant movements around the world. Other constituted networks include people concerned with, for instance, lawyers defending leaders of social movements.¹²² The third result is the sheer number of movements contained under the umbrella of the Forum. An example of the magnitude of the movement is the global resistance the Forums facilitated by mobilising against the war

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹Sahabandhu, "Dialectical Interaction of Religion and Society."

¹²²Houtart, "Capitalism, Its Consequences and Its Logic."

in Iraq in 2003. As a result, more than 15 million people gathered in more than 600 cities around the world to protest against the war.¹²³ Finally, one important contribution of the Forums has been the creation of a new dynamics of functioning, not as “vanguardism,” but on a democratic basis and accepting plurality.¹²⁴

One of the novelties of the WSF is the fact that the large majority of its movements and organisations believe that, although we live in grossly unequal societies, equality is not enough as a guiding principle of social emancipation.¹²⁵ It is necessary that social emancipation be predicated upon two principles: equality and the respect for difference; otherwise, equality may result in uniformity. The struggle for either requires and necessitates articulation with the other, for the fulfilment of either is a condition of the fulfilment of the other. Nonetheless, there is disagreement among movements and even, sometimes, inside the same movement, as to whether priority should be given to one of these principles and, in which case, to which one. Those who favour equality argue that equality alone may create opportunities for the recognition of difference, whereas those who give priority to the principle of the recognition of difference argue that, without such recognition, equality conceals the exclusions and marginalisation on which it is based, thus becoming doubly oppressive both for what it conceals and for what it reveals.¹²⁶

This dispute stretches across the categories of, among others, worker, feminist, indigenous, and Black movements. For instance, whereas the workers’ movement has privileged the principle of equality to the detriment of that of the recognition of difference, the feminist movement has privileged the latter to the detriment of the former. Many of the conflicts mentioned above are not specific to the WSF. They belong to the

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴Ibid.

¹²⁵Sousa Santos, “The World Social Forum: Towards a Counter-Hegemonic Globalization,” in *Globalizing Resistance*, 117.

¹²⁶Ibid.

historical legacy of the social forces that, for the past century and a half, have struggled for a better society against the prevailing status quo. As mentioned before, these clashes are themselves common for a social movement as large and diverse as the anti-capitalism movement. However, what is specific to the WSF is the fact that all these conflicts coexist within it without apparently upsetting its aggregating power. The most widely shared position is indeed that both principles have a joint priority and that it is not correct to prioritise either one.¹²⁷ In the feminist movement of the WSF, for instance, this position is now dominant. Virginia Vargas, for example, claims:

At the World Social Forum, feminists have begun . . . nourishing processes that integrate *gender justice* with economic justice, while recovering cultural subversion and subjectivity as a longer-term strategy for transformations. This confronts two broad expressions of injustice: socioeconomic injustice, rooted in societal political and economic structures, and cultural and symbolic injustice rooted in societal patterns of representation, interpretation and communications. Both injustices affect women, along with many other racial, ethnic, sexual and geographical dimensions.¹²⁸

An Example of Anti-Capitalist Movements: La Via Campesina

One specific example of a movement that was born out of the reaction to the capitalist developments and is closely connected to the WSF is La Via Campesina, an international movement coordinating peasant organisations of small and medium-sized producers, agricultural workers, rural women, and indigenous communities from Asia, America, and Europe.¹²⁹ It is an autonomous, pluralistic movement, independent of all political, economic, or other denominations. It is integrated by national and regional organisations whose autonomy is jealously defended. La Via Campesina is organised in and across seven regions: Europe, Northeast and Southeast Asia, South Asia, North America, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Additionally, La Via

¹²⁷Ibid.

¹²⁸Ibid., (emphasis added).

¹²⁹La Via Campesina: International Peasant Movement, "La Via Campesina: International Peasant Movement—What is La Via Campesina?" http://www.viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=27&Itemid=45 (accessed April 9, 2007).

Campesina has one African member and is collaborating with other organisations in Africa.

Its origin goes back to April 1992, when several peasant leaders from Central America, North America, and Europe got together in Managua, Nicaragua, at the Congress of the National Union of Farmers and Livestock Owners (UNAG). In May of 1993, the First Conference of La Via Campesina was held in Mons, Belgium, where it was constituted as a World Organization and its first strategic guidelines and structure were defined. The Second International Conference, held in Tlaxcala, Mexico, in April 1996, was attended by 69 organisations from 37 countries, with the aim of analysing a series of issues central to small- and middle-scale producers, such as food sovereignty, agrarian reform, credit and external debt, technology, women's participation, rural development, and other issues.

La Via Campesina is at present in the process of expansion and consolidation and aims to be a pluralistic, democratic, multicultural movement, with a wide geographical coverage. As a result, it is believed to be one of the most representative organisations for small and middle-sized producers worldwide.¹³⁰ The complex work that La Via Campesina takes on demands an important effort to achieve the articulation, communication, and coordination among regions, as well as between member organisations of each region and the global movement.

According to its official Web site, the principal objective of La Via Campesina is as follows:

To develop solidarity and unity in the diversity among small farmer organisations, in order to promote economic relations of equality and social justice; the preservation of land; food sovereignty; sustainable agricultural production; and an equality based on small and medium-sized producers.¹³¹

¹³⁰La Via Campesina.

¹³¹Ibid.

Thus, the stated primary goal of La Via Campesina is to develop solidarity and unity within the diversity of rural organisations in order to combat the neoliberal model of industrialised agriculture and to struggle against the neoliberal capitalist system and the agrarian model of business based on agricultural export. It aims to promote economic relationships that are equal and socially just, to promote access to and defence of land, to promote food sovereignty, to protect biodiversity and the environment, and to promote sustainable and equitable agricultural production based on small and medium-sized producers.¹³²

The Place of the Religious Believers in the Social Struggles

Houtart began his career as a young priest entering the terrain of the working classes to persuade the workers to reconsider the religious values that they had abandoned; in 2005, the 80-year-old Houtart entered the realm of religion to persuade Christians to be converted to the realities of this world by entering the social struggle for justice that they had neglected and to put in practice the message that they have been entrusted to proclaim by word and deed. In the final chapter of his programmatic work on delegitimising capitalism and reconstructing hope, Houtart approaches a specific dimension of the social struggle, namely, the religious engagement therewith, concentrating his attention on the Christian commitment to social struggles as an imperative of its prophetic faith and the calling of the Gospel. This message echoes the programme of the theology of liberation. Houtart considers it fitting to give a brief introduction, not for justification, but by way of explanation:

It may seem strange to devote a whole chapter to this subject in a work about the de-legitimisation of capitalism. However, it is important to show to the believers on the one hand, that their faith makes no sense if it does not lead to make the life and dignity of human beings to be respected, and to the non-believers, on the other hand, that the religious aspiration can be the source of a radical engagement. That is what we shall try to do by

¹³²Ibid.

referring to some foundational texts, to the spirituality, the theology and ethics.¹³³

In the following twenty-eight pages he condenses his message.

In this section we shall make a summary of a summary, performing a close reading of the chapter and stressing five major points: 1) A globalisation of justice, love, and life; 2) A spirituality nourished also by the social sciences; 3) A theology of liberation, hope for the peoples; 4) An ethic inspired by the radical character of the Gospel; and 5) Liberation and hope. These points imply a hermeneutical reconstruction of ancient texts to make their message relevant and applicable to the present situation. To achieve this, Houtart introduces and applies what we could call a “method of correspondence” between the present context and the perennial message and a correspondence between the present context and the historical context of the writers of those ancient texts. For example, when examining Jesus’ prophetic message denouncing the rulers of his own times, Houtart aptly remarks,

Jesus points to the institutions and social groups that are at the very source of the rejection of the poor: the Sadducees, the great owners and merchants and families of the high priests; the scribes and the Pharisees, the middle stratum of society, but politically powerful; the Sanhedrin that monopolises the juridical apparatus; the Temple officials, that combine in one the economic, political and religious power. Jesus’ words are harsh: hypocrites, whitewashed sepulchres, cave of thieves.¹³⁴

This text is self-explanatory.

Towards a Globalisation of Justice, Love, and Life

Houtart offers a few texts from the prophets, the message of Jesus, and the rest of the New Testament, with a concentration on the vision of the Reign of God as the grand utopia that we must envision and on the parable of Jesus’ final judgement of the nations with his blessings of those who fed the hungry and assisted the needy and corresponding

¹³³Houtart, *Délegitimer Le Capitalisme*, 165.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 166.

curses on those who refused for selfish purposes to do so. The correspondence comes immediately, and a long quote seems justified, given Houtart's vibrant, prophetic style:

My curse on you, who have not seen that you are the instruments of death, you who speculate on the world's savings, you who attribute to yourselves immoderate salaries, you who preach the gospel of the market, you who make the values of the stock exchange rise by suppressing employments, you who manipulate the scientific research and teaching in a market perspective, you who utilise the bank secret as an instrument of class struggle, you who dismantle and privatise the public services, you who destroy solidarities, you who reduce half of humankind to the state of "useless crowds."¹³⁵

A Spirituality Nourished by the Social Sciences

The Gospel, for Houtart, is, above all, "a lesson of life." Any Christian spirituality practised in a social vacuum, devoid of the content of social considerations, in a kind of flight from this world, is a soulless spirituality; Houtart calls it a "disincarnate spirituality." The sociologist can contribute with his professional analysis of society and of the human predicament in the modern world, and that, in itself, is very important as a preliminary step to theology and a base for spirituality. The believing sociologist, Houtart claims, can provide something crucial to the ongoing practice of faith with the specificity of his discipline:

The believing sociologist . . . affords the richness of his disciplinary knowledge in order to enhance and give its true value to the life, the deeds and the words of Jesus. But he does not utilise it in an instrumental manner, as if the social sciences made no sense apart from being placed at the service of a cause, as in the religious instance, to make an apology of religion. Sociology is not at the service of religion, and far less for the crushing of the religious dimension underfoot, by secularising social analysis. The believing sociologist proves and manifests himself in the richness of thought that his knowledge provides him.¹³⁶

In a Teilhardian vein, Houtart proposes spirituality embodied in the material realities of the world, anchored in life; it must be oriented towards service to the poor, who are the main recipients and beneficiaries of the Gospel. He takes seriously the universal covenant

¹³⁵Ibid., 169.

¹³⁶Ibid., 170.

that God establishes with all of humankind and with life on our entire planet, symbolised in the appearance of the rainbow among the clouds:

This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth (Gen. 9:12-13).

Translating this magnificent symbol into modern terms, Houtart sees in the *arc-en-ciel* the divine promise and determination to respect life on our planet with its infinite richness of biodiversity and the corresponding task of believers and non-believers to join that covenant in their resistance to the present threat of life's degradation and destruction on a global scale by the unfettered globalisation of capitalism, with its corresponding catastrophic destruction of nature, cultures, and human solidarity. This is, today, a dimension of an incarnate spirituality.

A Theology of Liberation, Source of Resistance, and Hope for the People

For Houtart any Christian theology and reflection that is not anchored in the knowledge of the realities of this world is mere speculation. The transcendent in theology should be put at the service of precise social causes. In fact, he believes,

all human collective action has symbolic aspects, ethical references, a formulation of utopias, in short, a cultural dimension. On the other hand, every theological reflection is localised in a given place and time, which give it form and content: *a socially immunised theology does not exist at all.*¹³⁷

When discoursing on a theology of liberation, the first question that naturally arises is “liberation from what and liberation into what?” When the threat to life and human dignity is an ever-present reality, especially on the periphery of the “world system,” when it “kills humanity, wreaks havoc on nature, colonises the future and pollutes the cultural representations,” the answer comes readily:

¹³⁷Ibid., 172 (emphasis added).

The theology of liberation underlines that, in the combat against the nihilism of the capitalist modernity and its materialistic conception of the world, it is peremptory to rehabilitate the ideal spheres and metaphysic of humanity, to think and live the creative tension between the spiritual conscience and the political action, between religious identity and social engagement.¹³⁸

Theology is certainly a discourse about God, but it demands a specific discourse from a specific perspective, the perspective of the poor, in faithfulness to its prophetic tradition and mission. It also demands a corresponding action. In Houtart's words:

That is its way of plunging into the mystery of God's love that the Gospel speaks about, and calls all believers to live their faith concretely in the womb of a world where justice is something to be achieved, and love to neighbour something to be constructed. It is in this sense that theology contributes to the hope of the peoples.¹³⁹

As God cannot be relegated to the spiritual, non-material spheres of life, theology must be also immersed in the social struggles of this world.

After the onslaught of attacks from conservative Christians and non-Christians, from the mass media and especially from the high hierarchical spheres of the Church, some representatives of the theology of liberation seem to retreat to other particular fields of study, such as eco-theology, popular religiosity, theology of native movements, and so forth. Houtart is not pessimistic about this apparent trend towards particularising the focus of theology; on the contrary, he claims that these theologians are not being seduced to separate themselves from the global context to reduce their attention to specific areas, but that all of them are necessary for a global theology of liberation that will embrace all continents and all spheres of life, without neglecting any element thereof.

Towards an Ethics Inspired by the Radical Character of the Gospel

Houtart contrasts the traditional moral theology centred on individual choices to social ethics that focus on the social character of humans and the common human task to construct their own habitat in order to make it truly and fully human. Christian ethics

¹³⁸Ibid., 174.

¹³⁹Ibid., 178.

must be inspired by the Gospel, and the Gospel consistently and unfailingly digs into the roots of the evil ingrained in the human construction of society in the belief that the doctrine of original sin is not a fable, and from there to build up a specifically Christian way of living in this world. He writes,

in Christianity, the ethical judgement inspired by the spirit of the Gospel is necessarily radical: there is no possible compromise, because what is at play is the dignity of human beings.¹⁴⁰

Houtart emphasises again the role of social analysis in obtaining a good background of knowledge in order to make ethical choices in the social sphere and not only in the individual lives, as is often emphasised by the “natural law ethics,” so common among Roman Catholic moral theologians. The good Christian life and ethics, Houtart concludes, are “necessarily a social construction in constant evolution.”¹⁴¹ We will develop this in our concluding remarks.

Liberation and Hope

Houtart confesses that these two words—*liberation* and *hope*—taken together may look naïve, vainly enthusiastic, and utopian and that “they risk to be inscribed in a purely idealistic perspective.”¹⁴² Houtart emphatically states that liberation and hope have a material, cultural, and religious dimension that has to do also with food, shelter, work, education, and drinking water. God is also present in those day-to-day material needs. The satisfaction of those immediate needs is only the starting point to reach the wider horizons of liberation as envisioned by the concrete utopia presented by the Gospel.

Conclusion

To conclude this final section, I will summarise and show that Houtart’s deep concern with the real coming threat of globalisation of the capital and his indefatigable

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 181.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 189.

¹⁴²Ibid., 191.

campaign to rally forces to combat it in union and collaboration with political, social, cultural, religious, and other groups and forces do not constitute a novelty in the context of his life-long interests. On the contrary, these concerns are the ultimate tasks of a long intellectual and praxis-oriented itinerary that spans a long trajectory from Houtart's youthful apostolic concern with the working class and later through a critique of the structures of the Church in his mature youth, his frequent encounters with Protestant churches and world religions, all culminating in his absorbing efforts to delegitimise capitalist globalisation and to search for credible alternatives. We cannot speak of three Houtarts in succession, namely, the young Houtart, the mature Houtart, and the old Houtart. We would further do a great injustice to Houtart if we were to separate Houtart the scholar and sociologist from Houtart the priest and prophet and Houtart the social activist with apostolic zeal. We are aware that pure social science methods reject our position. But these three functions in the same one person penetrate and explain each other and also justify one other. There are not three people, but one Houtart. There is a common thread to all the periods of his life that runs through and unifies them all. I have become increasingly aware that this thread is no other than the methodological model developed by Cardinal Cardijn for the Young Christian Workers, in three steps: 1) *to see*, 2) *to judge*, and 3) *to act*. As regards his approach to the globalisation, these three steps correspond to the following phases: seeing, as the act of analysis in understanding globalisation; the judgment that constitutes the critique of denouncing globalisation; and the culmination of this process in the action through a movement from collective consciousness to collective praxis.

As regards Houtart, we have tried to analyse his major theoretical and practical contributions both to understanding the threat of global capitalism and to discerning the equally global struggle needed to revolutionise the system. We have given some examples of the social struggle in the South; some of them, for example, the World Social Forum

platforms and meeting points, serve as rallying cries calling for social movements from all over the world to converge in the common struggle; others, such as La Via Campesina movement, deal with more particular and concrete problems in specific communities.

The chapter has tried to provide a general overview of the theoretical basis of globalisation. In providing different definitions, it has been argued that globalisation is sometimes used as a substitute word for the more ideologically burdened expressions of modernisation and imperialism. As a result, it appears as though we are at the crossroads between modernity and postmodernity; thus, an analysis of globalisation is possible from both theoretical angles. By universalising labour relations, economic systems, cultural expression, and political power, global imperialism destroys autonomous nation-states to turn them into vassal states that serve the economic interests of the few who accumulate most of the world's wealth. It breaks the spine of labour relations by minimalising the power of the trade unions; it reduces the variety of cultures to the one culture of capital and erects capital and profit as the supreme ideologies of this "Brave New World," to use the title of Aldous Huxley's vision of dystopia.

Houtart claims that the widely publicised optimistic heralding that the world market has been realised and that the end of imperialism has been achieved flounders in the face of the day-to-day experiences of many millions of people in the global South. However, since globalisation has been approached largely from the theoretical basis of a world system, this is not a surprise because, from that viewpoint, globalisation is really only another step in the development of international capitalism as a movement towards the transnational and nation-states have always been regarded only as useful facilitators of exactly this development. This process is often also called neocolonialism and has had even more catastrophic consequences for the colonised peoples than experienced under the previous colonial rule by European powers.

As regards the second step of his approach to globalisation, Houtart has had a long career of contestation and denunciation of unjust structures of exploitation and oppression, not only in civil societies but also in the Catholic Church itself. His voice has had a prophetic character. His authority comes from two sources: a clear understanding of social reality, on the one hand, and the Christian Gospel, on the other. It is the main function of a prophet to denounce oppression and injustice wherever and whenever it reigns. In denouncing capitalism, Houtart looks at the facts that 20% of the world's population (usually from the northern hemisphere) dispose of 82.7% of its material resources and that the poorest 20% of the population have access to only 1.4% of the wealth of the world. Houtart unequivocally says "no" to this situation. It is illegitimate and must be delegitimised. According to Houtart, these statistics are not theories but the crude facts of the reality in which we live. This disproportionate accumulation for the few and scarcity for the many is the main structure of the present day economic system. This is the way things are currently, but things should and must be otherwise, and alternatives must be found and developed. It is not just an accident of history but also a wilful systematic accumulation of capital. It is not "fair play" economics but giving advantage to the strongest. It is not for the common good but for the benefit of the few.

Houtart also studies and then denounces the effects of this system on the relentless destruction of nature. It is in the highest stage of the neoliberal period that two-thirds of the world's forests have been destroyed and a massive increase in global warming has taken place. The present mega-trend of globalisation is also destroying individual cultures in their rich diversity. The present-day state of globalisation has constructed a homogeneous monolithic culture, a process which is sometimes called *McDonaldisation*. The kaleidoscopic variety of cultures is being reduced to a faceless uniformity of the One World culture imposed from the North.

For Houtart, the critique of globalisation must be accompanied by the proposal of viable alternatives. It is not enough to analyse where social evil resides, discover the roots of that social evil, and then denounce it. The prophet has also a message of hope to announce. The second aspect of the prophet's function and vocation is to announce the advent of the new. The prophet announces that a new world is possible and invites his listeners to join in the construction of that future that is not merely a prolongation of the present. The reconstruction of hope runs parallel to the delegitimation of capitalism; indeed, the title of one of Houtart's works is *Delegitimise Capitalism: Reconstruct Hope*.¹⁴³ Houtart ceaselessly cries out that it is necessary to deconstruct the myth that "There is no alternative" (also called the TINA syndrome) and proposes instead that "Another World is Possible," and we must join together to construct it. For Houtart, the battle cry "Another World is Possible" is not an illusion but a hope against the hard and opaque facts of reality. As we have mentioned before, for Houtart, utopia is that society that does not exist today, but can exist tomorrow, and should be embedded in the social reality. Imagining the *impossible* has the power to motivate communities toward action, to converge at a meeting point for the comparison and contrast of ideas and projects, and to propose credible alternatives to the reality they are denouncing. Many social movements, religious and cultural organisations, and political parties find their place in this task. The World Social Forum plays an important role here in terms of resistance and networking on a global scale. Houtart calls for this convergence of social movements. The social movements must work together for the common purpose of delegitimising neoliberal capitalism and engaging in dialogue for the exploration and formulation of new alternatives.

As regards the third phase of Houtart's approach to globalisation, he holds that there must be a move from collective consciousness to collective action. Denunciation

¹⁴³Ibid., 205.

and protest should not be an end in themselves, but should be complemented with the construction of alternatives by way of common action through the joint activity of the victims of globalisation. Human communities should and can prove that alternatives are possible. In the World Forum for Alternatives held in Bamakko in the Republic of Mali,¹⁴⁴ Houtart together with others reminded the social movements that it is crucial to engage in common praxis. That is, a good analysis is not enough; we need to continue our analyses in dialogue, comparing and contrasting our findings, but simultaneously, it is necessary to create and construct concrete, credible alternatives at all levels: short-term alternatives, medium-term alternatives, and long-term alternatives.

Short-term alternatives. In his article on “Social Development and Alternatives to Contemporary Globalisation,”¹⁴⁵ Houtart enumerates a series of regulations that need to be introduced and imposed; it is not a full catalogue but only a few samples to prove that the possibility of creating real concrete alternatives exists. He mentions some *economic* regulations, *ecological* regulations, *social* regulations, *political* regulations, and *cultural* regulations. Taken together, it seems, they amount to no more than a reformist program to alleviate some of the most catastrophic results of globalisation. So society goes beyond reformism.

Medium-term alternatives. Houtart mentions more general goals, the achievement of which “inevitably imply long processes and struggles.”¹⁴⁶ He separates them into two sections: social-economic and political alternatives.

Long-term alternatives. In the more explicit article “Alternatives to the Neo-Liberal model,”¹⁴⁷ written in 2000, Houtart finds recourse to the theological concept of the Kingdom of God and the humanistic concept of utopia. He does not consider utopia as a society that is nowhere and can never be anywhere, but as the envisioned future society

¹⁴⁴FWA, TWF, and Forum for another Mali, *The Bamako Appeal* (Bamako: Author, 2006).

¹⁴⁵See Houtart and Amin, *Globalization and Alternatives*.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴⁷Houtart and Polet, eds., *The Other Davos*, 47-59.

that will come into fruition, not only in dreams, but in reality. He links that concrete utopia with the Kingdom of God:

We must dream of this type of society be it called the Kingdom of God or a socialist society (or why not even both at the same time?), because even if it is not attainable in our *topos* (place), it does have the force of attraction, which mobilises the spirit and the heart and a dream of the necessary utopia.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Introduction

In this research, François Houtart has been presented as a social thinker by reconstructing his intellectual itinerary. We attempted a reconstruction of his approach to the varieties of relationships between religion and society:

1. *Religion and Society*: Religion as a social agent and religion and society interacting dialectically. Religion is not an ideology, but it can play an ideological role in any given society. Religion can also be an instrument of social change.

2. *Church and Society*: The Church is a social institution within the structures of a wider society, and the Church lives and exercises its ministry and mission in the world in a dialogical relationship with the society; to achieve that, it needs a precise social analysis as a prerequisite for the social witness, the social function, and the social communications of the Church.

3. *Globalisation*: Globalisation today is the globalisation of capital. It functions for the advantage of the strongest. It is followed by more and more victimisation of the marginalised sectors of the social fabric, especially in third world countries. This is a destructive phenomenon, and we need to delegitimise capitalism and engage in the construction of alternatives. In order to achieve this end, humanity has to have a utopian vision of a just society: Another World Is Possible!

This reconstruction of Houtart's thought has been achieved through gathering and organizing a number of his writings spread across countless books, articles, lectures,

published and unpublished papers, and, finally, through conducting personal in-depth interviews with him.

It seems appropriate at this point to conclude this study with some remarks evaluating Houtart's contribution to ethics, politics, economics, and theology at large (a macroscopic view). The reader will find a reflection on how Houtart's methods can be brought to bear on the church and society in Sri Lanka and the application of Houtart's ideas in practical theology and ethics, as promised in the general introduction (a microscopic view). Both views, macroscopic and microscopic, will alternate and mingle together in the following concluding remarks. However, I propose that they serve as hypotheses for further dialogue and debate and not as ends in themselves.

After completing this stage in my intellectual and spiritual development, constituted by my "Houtart research," I intend to go back to Sri Lanka to continue my ecumenical journey by becoming a partner in programmes of theological education and ministerial formation and by taking part in the social research and social action of organisations such as the Ecumenical Institute in Colombo and the Centre for Society and Religion, amongst others. My theological teaching will gravitate toward the following four areas: 1) Social analysis (introduction of some methods); 2) Ethics in a pluralistic society; 3) Church and society; and 4) Applied theology (pastoral theology).

I have been considering to what degree I can incorporate my insights on Houtart's contributions to these interrelated subjects when I have to put them to the test on the anvil of empirical verification on my own. The following sections offer some insights from the light of my research on the many contributions of Houtart. These reflections will serve as concluding remarks to my research.

The Inclusion of Social Analysis in the Theological Curriculum

When I return to the Theological College of Lanka at Pilimatalawa, Sri Lanka, I will be entrusted with the teaching of a course entitled Social Analysis. Applicable in this

respect are two particularly relevant things I have learned from my Houtart research : 1) In the theological curriculum of the seminary for the formation of priests and pastors, the course on social analysis is not an end in itself or a separate independent discipline but must be interwoven with all the other theological disciplines, from the study of the prophets of Israel to the study of spirituality, worship, the liturgy and preaching, pastoral theology and the like. 2) Any theological study divorced from a rigorous knowledge of the society from which it should emerge and to which theology should be directed will be reduced to sheer speculation and, in many cases, just pious nonsense. In other words, we need to question how to “do theology” and pastoral work effectively and meaningfully in our own context (i.e., a context of extreme poverty, ethnic violence, and a torn social fabric due especially to the sociopolitical and religious divisions in the country). Unless theological education, with its structures and programmes, raises these questions honestly and makes unceasing efforts to answer them, theological education will remain alien to a rapidly changing society and detached from social praxis and will remain just another academic form of “God talk.”

The best theological minds in Asia have insisted on the need for a *contextual* theology first; they then moved to a deeper understanding, emphasising the need for theology to be inserted in societies and cultures, in other words, of an *incarnated* theology. Finally, they are now formulating the need for theology not to be an alien ideological system of ideas, symbols, myths, and rituals that is inserted into our societies from above and outside, but rather to become assimilated to the cultures and societies in which it is immersed; in other words, theology must be *enculturated*. This process of enculturation demands an active dialogue with other religions; with religious, social, and cultural movements; and with humanistic ideologies and the like. To achieve this dialogue, Houtart’s ideas as a Christian social thinker, his methods and organising action are of critical significance. Houtart affirms and reaffirms that religion is a social reality.

Why is a societal analysis important for theologians?

1. We cannot understand people without understanding their society. (Human beings are social beings and political beings.)
2. We cannot understand society solely by looking at individuals; not only do we make the society, but society makes persons and systems. Thus, it is a necessity to understand the structures of society if we want to understand the psychological structures of human personality. As Weber insisted, we humans are the creators of society and culture, and at the same time, we are the children of the cultures and societies we have created; we could say that we are creatures of our own creation. This should not imply what Houtart calls “culturalism” or “cultural absolutism.”
3. We cannot change the society purposefully without knowing how we are shaped by it.
4. We cannot engage in God’s mission to the world unless we understand society and how society functions in a critical way.

Because the churches and religions are parts of society—at the same time shaping and being shaped by societies—the analysis of society leads naturally to an analysis of the churches and of their roles and functions in the larger societies where the Christian communities constitute but a small fraction of the entire society.

The following question has to be answered: Is the mission of the Church to grow just to become bigger, or is it rather a sacrament of salvation-liberation for the larger society, namely, a sign and an instrument of the Kingdom of God? Jesus Christ did not come to save the Church, but to save the world. If so, the world does not exist for the sake of the Church, but inversely the Church exists for the sake of the world. For a meaningful partnership in the work of the Kingdom, theologians must be equipped in social literacy;

by this term, Houtart means the knowledge and application of social analysis. Consequently, social illiteracy leads to social dysfunction.

Socio-Ethical Reflection and Praxis Based on Social Analysis

We are living at a time when the task of social ethics is becoming more exciting and challenging than ever before. The scope of ethics is ever widening, entering some new and unexpected fields. The ethicist has to be well informed before making judgements on what is happening in the field of genetics, to mention just one example, and its implications for life.¹ The issues involved vary from making choices in daily situations to fundamental issues, from taking the responsibility of having (or not having) a child who is about to be born carrying a genetic disorder² to the questions of whether we should clone human life.³ The issues within this one field include questions addressing topics ranging from genetically manipulated food items to the Human Genome Project.⁴ All these are not only individual choices but have deep social, political, and cultural implications, and researching Houtart has challenged me to study and teach this subject from a broader perspective.

Some say there has been a paradigm shift in ethics, for example, with the increasing modern knowledge of genetics, but in our caste-oriented and dominated society, we must go further and ask: What are the social and cultural consequences of the application of the new findings of genetics? To begin with, thanks to those findings in genetic manipulation, we can decide whether a couple will have a boy or a girl. Most couples in our societies will decide for a boy because girls are an economic burden for the family for reasons of dowry, lack of employment, and so on. This ability to choose the sex of a child would generate a general imbalance of the male and female components of

¹Catherine Baker, *Your Genes Your Choices: Exploring the Issues Raised by Genetic Research* (n.p: American Association for Advancement of Science, 1996), 5.

²*Ibid.*, 36.

³*Ibid.*, 75.

⁴David Cole, "The Genome and Human Genome Project," in *Genetics*, ed. Ted Peters (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 49-70.

society with a vast array of unpredictable consequences, including a deeper, utter degradation of women and a destruction of the traditional family system.

At the same time, the ethicist cannot be blind to issues on the periphery of genetics, for example, issues concerning what some call “gene robbery.”⁵ Why this has been called gene robbery is a relevant question, and Dietrich and Wielenga are helpful in this context.⁶ Gene robbery refers to the activities of some powerful transnational companies (TNCs) that, for profit, have set up gene banks in some third world countries to collect and take away the genetic material of very important plants, which are of great nutritional and medical value. These have been protected and viably used by indigenous populations for centuries in their human habitat, for purposes of nutrition and healthcare,⁷ but now, not only these plants, but also the livelihood of some communities have been threatened. The TNCs take away the control of seeds from farmers and indigenous peoples who are the original breeders and developers of these biological resources in agriculture and indigenous herbal medicine (sometimes called traditional medicine or alternative medicine or *Ayurvedic* medicine in Sri Lanka).⁸ This “robbery” has been accomplished through patent rights, which come under the area of intellectual property rights. With patents, local producers are forbidden to process and produce plants and materials as they have done for generations.⁹ These cases demonstrate the number of ethical issues involved only in the case of genetics.¹⁰ The implications of genetics and the adaptation and manipulation of genes are not limited merely to individual cases in the community, but with the commercialisation of genetics, extended to macroeconomics at

⁵Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 237f.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Oswald Firth, O. M. I., “Globalisation, Christian Perspective on Economics,” *Dialogue* (New Series) 24 (1997): 101-124.

⁹*Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁰For a discussion of some of the major ethical issues in genetics, including issues of justice, see R. H. M. V. Hoedemaekers, “Normative Determinants of Genetic Screening and Testing” (doctoral dissertation, Wageningen University, 1998).

an international level.¹¹ In other words, globalisation has come to the village to destroy the very means of subsistence of the village in order to obtain economic profit for pharmaceutical transnational corporations, in an illustration of what Adam Smith termed “the invisible hand of capitalism.” Thus, the social ethicist must be aware of the multi-dimensional nature of the issues involved.

What do all these issues have to do with Houtart? Houtart began considering long ago how religions, in his case, Christianity, must engage in a dialogue with science and technology in a rapidly changing society.¹² It is in this light that Houtart has thought about the issue of genetics, beginning in the 1960s. In his *Eleventh Hour* (1968), he writes, “Birth control for example is already a very old problem; the problem of tomorrow is control of genetics.”¹³ The tomorrow of the 1960s has already arrived. What matters here is Houtart’s future-oriented attitude. If we take the genetic field, the social ethicist must be well informed not only on changes in the biological sciences, but also on how biological sciences have changed society, with special reference to issues of social justice.¹⁴ It was largely the application of Houtart’s scheme of social analysis in the Indian context that facilitated Dietrich and Wielenga in bringing to light the aforementioned patent issues related to biogenetic engineering in the so-called “gene robbery” case. Such critical issues illustrate that the task of the theological ethicist is a challenging one. In a Houtartian sense, the real point is keeping updated and well informed, being prepared with regard to the issues and the impact of these issues on life today and in the future. This is the main thrust of Houtart’s proposals on dialogue with science and technology in the contemporary world.

¹¹Ibid., 179-192.

¹²Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, 158.

¹³Houtart, *The Eleventh Hour*, 46.

¹⁴For a discussion of justice issues involved in Human Genome Project, see Karen Lebacqz, “Fair Shares: Is the Genome Project Just?” in *Genetics*, ed. Ted Peters (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998), 82-100.

What we are attempting here is to dissect Houtart's research on the sociology of religion and analyse it from the viewpoint of ethics. It is only by doing so that we shall be able to uncover and point out some particular areas related to the work of the ethicist that we might otherwise have missed. We have already touched on some issues related to the importance of the sociological sciences in the ecclesiological and theological reflections. Here, we shall develop some key areas briefly to discuss not only the social ethicist's critical use of sociological knowledge but also issues involved in making a collaborative contribution to the public debate and action, assuming the paramount significance of the public arena in ethical discourse.¹⁵ The topics to be considered are as follows:

1. The search for a fresh approach in theological ethics.
2. Ethics and interreligious relations: Some problems.
3. Ethics as part of symbolic representation.

The Search for a Fresh Approach in Social Ethics

Let us begin with one of Houtart's direct statement on ethics. He writes in *Eleventh Hour*,

A new awareness of the *human condition* based on fact and not on outdated theory will be reflected in moral theology if we are really serious in giving orientation to men and women of this time. Moral theology has to apply changing concepts of the human and the teaching of the Gospel to the concrete situation of humanity. This is why a sociological approach is always helpful to Moral theology, because it helps us to know *what* the concrete human situation *is*.¹⁶

What Houtart says about moral theology in the Roman Catholic tradition, we nowadays call "Christian ethics," mainly in the Protestant tradition. Houtart has sought a new approach to ethics that he has called a sociological approach. Thus, we have to go beyond the old framework, which was solely based on the so-called key pillars of moral theology, namely, scripture, tradition and reason. Houtart argues for a paradigm shift from a judicial

¹⁵Jon Nuttall, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 171.

¹⁶Houtart, *The Eleventh Hour*, 45f (inclusive language and emphasis mine).

approach to an approach based on love and context.¹⁷ According to Houtart, our new theological ethical approach to moral problems should take the social sciences very seriously.¹⁸ The social sciences must be able to provide specific perspectives and reflections on moral problems, not to hide behind mere sociological and anthropological theories but to make use of them both implicitly and explicitly, as and where necessary, and also to take an interdisciplinary approach to the problems of our day.¹⁹ Of course, some contemporary theological ethicists and social ethicists are already working along these lines, but there is still much work to be done in the construction of the discourse on social ethics in this new way.

Acknowledging that the time of isolation has passed, the new approach must consider the wider contemporary context.²⁰ Houtart talks about the “planetarisation”²¹ of society (not to be confused with capitalist globalisation), in which the world is becoming a unity from the scientific and technological point of view. It is this perspective that helps us to highlight major problems, such as poverty and violence, on a planetary scale. From this perspective, the public arena and public action become crucial. In their relation to social science, these two elements play a critical role, whatever moral theory we use as a framework for reasoning. The contemporary public arena is not limited to the so-called national and/or local boundaries but extends to interregional and international levels.

Ethics and Interreligious Relations: Some Problems

Interreligious relations can occur at different levels. What is happening between religions is as important as what is happening inside one’s own religious tradition and theological world. This idea implies the possible extension of the interdisciplinary approach even to the area of interreligious relations. Today, ethicists cannot bypass

¹⁷Houtart, *Challenge To Change*, 206.

¹⁸Houtart, *The Eleventh Hour*, 46

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Houtart, *Challenge to Change*, 8.

²¹Ibid.

interreligious relations and cooperation on issues such as justice, peace, and ecology. Of course, addressing these issues includes not only dialogue but also conflict, if the whole interreligious domain is approached from the standpoint of the sociology of religion, in which there is room for further developed sociology in interfaith dialogue. Thus, comparative religious ethics and philosophical ethics have become of paramount value in the agenda of the ethicist. Our interest is what Houtart has to say on the issue of interreligious ethics, in which regard we shall limit ourselves to his insights on religions and peace. This topic is of special interest for us in Sri Lanka because some in the West identify our twenty-three-year-long armed conflict between LTTE and the successive governments in Sri Lanka as a religious war between Buddhists and Hindus, parallel to the naïve interpretation of the Ulster conflict. Unfortunately, some influential Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka add some credibility to this misinterpretation.

In a study conducted in 1984 on the World Conference for Religion and Peace, we encounter the following statements from Houtart:

The problem of peace can only be related to religion through ethics, but today an ethics, which is not religious in itself. Ethics is a matter of norms for social and international relations, which are not natural products but which are the result of human undertakings. No one can represent this reality any longer as the direct result of a social order coming from above, which has to be respected because it has been imposed by supernatural beings. Ethical norms have to be worked out according to some criteria. And it is here that the religions are facing difficult problems.²²

The establishment of such criteria involves a two-fold approach:

1. Fundamental values, which include values on which many religious traditions agree: respect for life, dignity of the human person, and the like.
2. A certain type of social analysis of social reality.

At the level of fundamental values of religions, possibilities are open for a religious cooperation and agreement. In fact, some work has already been done in the so-

²²François Houtart et al., *Religion and Peace: Analysis of the Statements and of the Members' Opinions of World Conference for Religion and Peace* (Louvain-la-Neuve: CRSR, 1984).

called “interfaith dialogue” programmes.²³ However, it is when religions confront social reality that they meet with a lack of agreement. Here, there are some basic problems because ethical judgments and norms will be very different if we compare the analysis of society conducted in *individual terms* with the analysis conducted in *structural terms*.²⁴ To have structural social analysis on the agenda is one of the future challenges of interfaith dialogue.

For many people still today, society is none other than the aggregate of many individuals forming an organised group, with the individual taking precedence over the society. This understanding ignores the modern principle that the whole is larger than the sum of its parts. An individualistic approach considers parent-child relationships, teacher-student relationships, employer-employee relationships, husband-wife relationships, and so forth, therefore viewing society as the sum of all social relationships. This approach assumes that we can sustain and change society by maintaining the goodness of the individual or at least of the majority of individuals. Thus, this approach produces an interpersonal ethics²⁵ and charity towards the poor in society. Indeed, all religions contain guidance for such interpersonal relationships. Social ethics, on the contrary, begins with the whole of society and considers the individuals as living members of that organic whole or “organism.” Human rights are not the rights of the individuals taken in isolation, but social rights, because, as Sri Lankan thinker Carlo Fonseka writes, “all rights are social.”²⁶ However I am aware that some may disagree with this position.

Let us consider the example of theological students who wanted to help the poor people in a village. Dietrich and Wielenga write, in the introduction to Houtart’s social

²³For example, the inter-faith dialogue programmes of the World Council of Churches: World Council of Churches, “Interreligious Relations and Dialogue—What Do We Do?” <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/index-e.html> (accessed March 15, 2006).

²⁴Houtart et al., *Religion and Peace*, 86.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Fonseka, *Towards a Peaceful Sri Lanka*, 68ff.

analysis scheme,²⁷ that the example of Fr. Volken (a priest in India) is very relevant and leads us to the point we want to make by referring to some theological students in India who really wanted to help the poor people in the village. Our imagination requires a village in India:

They went and asked useful things they could do. They helped to dig wells and improve roads. After some time they found out only the rich in the village benefited from their efforts. The students had good intentions. *But good intentions have non-intended effects if we act in the framework of bad systems/structures.*²⁸

The students had naïvely taken the village as a community in which all would benefit from improvements, but they had not “seen through” the issues.²⁹ They took for granted that the village leaders represented the interests of the entire community. This example reveals the limitations of an individualistic approach that comes out of charity and challenges religions to see through the structures of the society; in other words, the socioeconomic, political, and cultural aspects must be taken seriously.

Religions find it quite difficult to go beyond this interpersonal ethic, possibly because their potential for action depends on the individual and on personal morality, or it may be that the *soteriologies* of religions focus too much on *individual salvation* with a nonanalytical social vision.³⁰ However, it is necessary to go to the structural level of social analysis if religious ethics is to make a significant and relevant contribution in the public arena today. Houtart acknowledges that this approach is relatively new,³¹ yet it is precisely when we come to these actual situations that contradictions and disagreements appear. It is not so much along religious lines (in basic ethical teachings of faiths) that lack of agreement occurs, but in regard to the socioeconomic, political analysis of the situation.

²⁷Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 4.

²⁸*Ibid.* My emphasis.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Houtart et al., *Religion and Peace*, 86.

³¹*Ibid.*

These crucial matters are yet to be addressed in real interfaith dialogue. The sociologists of religion could facilitate the debate, not by imposing their conclusive perspectives but in the conceptualisation, clarification, and application of some issues involved, especially as related to the social ethics of religions. However, this debate requires a certain amount of openness from all faiths.

Ethics as Part of Symbolic Representation

Finally, it is important to remember Houtart's conviction that religious ethics are part of the symbolic field, just as religions are part of symbolic representation.³² Social ethics are essential for any human society, and the ethical concepts of religions have never emerged out of nothing or in a vacuum, but in a given social-historical context.³³ In fact, every symbolic representation has a sociohistorical context. This aspect helps us to understand the historical conditions in which the religious ideas and values have been expressed and continue to be expressed or interpreted.³⁴ However, the very applications of the concepts may not be limited only to the original geopolitical context in which they were produced. Concepts such as compassion, peace, justice, and respect for the earth show the capacity to speak to a wider community, transcending cultures. They speak with a universal vocabulary and for a universal audience.

Ethics is a construction that, once produced, has a certain autonomy in reproduction and evolution.³⁵ The religious ethical values and norms are subject to interpretation and reinterpretation (hermeneutics). In this respect Houtart says,

Ethics by virtue of the fact of being mediated through social analysis is necessarily the same as a social construct subject to continuing evolution. . . every ethic is also a collective enterprise that is intimately bound to social awareness of the phenomena.³⁶

³²Houtart, "Role of Western Religion," 259.

³³Houtart et al., *Religion and Peace*, 86.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 87.

³⁵Houtart, "Religion and Development," 32.

³⁶Houtart, "Traditional Christian Ethics and the Social Reality: A Critique," 102.

For example, we take the need of reinterpretation of the ethical concern for service to the needy and the poor, which all religions have emphasised. We have already seen this in the case of the theological students helping the poor villagers. Religions are becoming more and more conscious of the responsible application of their values of love and service to the poor. They have realised and learned that just distributing basic aid in an emergency will not solve the problem of poverty; rather, this charitable approach tends to make the poor *more dependent* on others. It could also lead to the blind activity of those engaged in service, which may result in the opposite of what was intended, even though the intention seemed good. Thus, new approaches are necessary and serious rethinking is crucial as to what we mean by service to the needy and the poor in the contemporary world context. Thus, the approach to the ethics of charity is undergoing a change in all religions. It is the autonomy in the religious and ethical spheres that provides this flexibility.

A relative autonomy exists even within a single tradition. For example, in the Christian tradition, denominational attitudes are very different on some ethical issues, so there is no single approach to ethical issues within the Christian tradition itself. In fact, Schreiter, summarising Elmar Holenstein's rules for intercultural communication, argues that the intracultural differences may be greater than the intercultural ones.³⁷

It must be noted that there are certain major principal values in all religions, such as human dignity, affirmation of life, peace, and justice, but a search for fresh interpretation of these values is needed in the present-day context. However, we have no intention of either embarking on a discussion of various possibilities of ethical pluralism or taking a stand on any of the positions. Our wish is to make the point that ethics is a social construct in the social reality and has a relative autonomy. It belongs to the symbolic medium, and its theoretical and practical perspectives are subject to change. It is

³⁷Robert J. Schreiter, "The Possibilities (and Limitations) of an Intercultural Dialogue on God" in *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue*, eds. Werner G. Jeanrond and Aasulv Lande (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 24.

this symbolic nature that gives ethics the possibility not only to be contextual, situational, and relative, but also to be universal, common, and global.

Ethics involves judgments, but the ethicist must be aware of two issues when making judgments. We have discussed already that to make a judgment presupposes a vision of a society,³⁸ but judgments are the result not only of a religious vision but also of a social-analytical vision of society. This social envisioning takes place from a specific perspective or point of view that has to do with the place from which the problem is analysed.³⁹ *Place* here does not necessarily mean the geographical sense of a space, but could also include an ideological dimension of the term. Therefore, our location is significant and Houtart comments, “a good knowledge of this location is a necessary spiritual exercise for everyone.”⁴⁰

We have emphasised the need for critical social analysis and social sciences in this study throughout. One last thing should clearly be mentioned here on the social sciences themselves. As Dietrich and Wielenga clearly point out, “There is no neutral or value free societal analysis. We use social sciences and analysis from particular angles and particular purposes.”⁴¹ When Houtart writes about the location of analysis, it certainly includes this perspective, but we are aware that some might disagree with this view. The awareness of such limitations allows ethicists to keep a critical eye on their own work as well as on the work of others. Being aware of such factors in social ethics is becoming an essential ethical responsibility of the social ethicist today.

In a world that is increasingly becoming pluralistic, the social ethicist has to be equipped with a knowledge of the problems involved in ethics at a comparative or interreligious level in this age of collaboration and cooperation. Thus, we conclude that, for the social ethicist and theologian, Houtart, as a sociologist of religion, has raised some

³⁸Houtart et al, *Religion and Peace*, 86.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹Dietrich and Wielenga, *Towards Understanding Indian Society*, 12.

critical issues for the debate. Some issues have already been addressed in ethics and its method, but some others are yet to be addressed. However, at least, we can start thinking how to begin to address them.

The Sociological Approach and the Theological Approach: Contradictory or Complementary?

Why is the sociological approach to religion not in contradiction with the theological approach? We speak of only two among many approaches to religion: the sociological and the theological. In this study, we have taken a sociological approach as explicated by Houtart. According to Houtart, the two approaches are not contradictory but complementary.

Practically speaking, theology and sociology are two poles: theology involves discourse about God, and sociology focuses on humanity. We cannot speak about God except in our own human words and through human language and symbols. Human language is part of human society in which one finds an ideology, a mentality, social relations, social structure, and the like. Theology is part of that language (i.e., symbolic) process in society, so theology emerges out of contexts. We have to use our own frames of reference when we talk about God(s) or an ultimate reality or the Supreme Being or the source and ground of all being (Paul Tillich). Every theology is contextual.

Sociology analyses the way religion behaves, functions, and changes as a part of the symbolic field and as a social reality, and also how, in turn, religion influences the society, together with how religion uses language in explaining the relationship between God and the world. In other words, it is possible not only to analyse religions as institutions in society but also to build sociology of religious and theological language. Every theological concept or expression has a sociological background or a context. Some even argue that theologies are sociopolitically bonded. This analysis is an important contribution to the study of religion (a linguistic line of thought that has not yet been fully

developed), while at the same time acknowledging the contribution it makes to the development of the conceptual framework and to the technical aspects in sociology of religion as a subdiscipline within sociology.

How can religion contribute to the renewal of social ethics? The critical socioanalytical vision of society challenges social ethics of religions to go beyond some of the very common ethical approaches in religions: 1. An ethics that focuses on social stratification and smooth functioning of the society; 2. An ethics of “the common good”; and 3. An ethics of condemnation of abuses. A shift toward an ethics of challenging the causes of social problems and social evils is needed. Are religions ready for this task?

Presociological Choice of the Christians

Houtart challenges Christians to make a choice when analysing the society. The problem is the *choice* that one makes for a sociological approach to society, necessary to formulate an ethics. This is a presociological question in which the Christian (theological) approach plays a role. Society has to be read with the eyes of the poor and the marginalised if we want to be coherent with the Gospel. Houtart writes on social ethics:

It is in effect a pre-analytical approach. To the extent that choice is explicit, it is not possible to contradict a radical ethic that takes a stand in favour of the poor and the oppressed. In the case of Christianity even if one is unable to reduce the interpretation of the Gospel to this sole aspect, no one can deny that texts are perfectly clear at least as far as the interpretation of the Magnificat or the presentation of the last judgement is concerned, either through abstract interpretation or through pure spiritual discernment. It is a matter of choosing an analysis that corresponds best with the Gospel option or in other words, that, which allows one to give an adequate response to the primary question, namely, how does one construe poverty, which is an offshoot of oppression.⁴²

In other words, the preference goes to an analysis in terms of social structures, where a link exists between the positions of different social groups and not in terms of stratifications. This analysis implies another meaning for the concept of “common good”: structural transformations or better cooperation between existing social groups. At this

⁴²Houtart, “Traditional Christian Ethics and the Social Reality: A Critique,” 102.

moment, the criticisms of abuses and excesses are not sufficient for a social ethics. The causes have to be envisaged. It is the logic of the economic system that is at stake. This is an important perspective for a Christian social ethics. Our discussion on the dialectical interaction of religion and society throughout this study itself is a contribution to this perspective (in the Houtartian sense).

Sociology of religion helps also to understand better the social values of traditional religions, as in the case of the autochthonous peoples of Latin America, of ethnic minorities of Asia, of the peoples of Africa. Two main values, respect for nature and for human solidarity, are very important for the social critics of capitalist modernity (as a euphemism for capitalist globalisation), where the exploitation of nature and individualism prevails. To express in analytical terms such values present in precapitalist societies is a challenge for a theological approach. However, it is my responsibility to study and challenge these and other related subjects in a “peripheral” society. I hope others will join in the exploration.

Questions for Further Research

Let me offer some questions for further elaboration and research:

1) What are the implications of Houtart’s development of a Marxist sociology of religion for sociology—and for Marxism—generally? This is, of course, an area in which Anthony Mansueto has concentrated his efforts. Mansueto takes an essentialist approach, arguing that religious impulses are essential to human development. Houtart takes a constructionist approach by arguing that religion is a social reality and social construction and capable of being mobilised by either progressive or reactionary forces. This debate is a relevant and useful area for further research in the new global situation that we find ourselves in today.

In a Houtartian sense, religion can be an agent for social change and transformation. A rigorous social analysis and critique are a must in this process. Within this context, Houtart has defended the belief that religious persons and communities can be part of the struggle for social justice and can play a positive role as representatives of human agency. He rejects the atheistic denial of the right to be religious and to practise religion in the sociopolitical arena. However, the reality of our world today shows the vulnerability of religious phenomena. Religion can be misused or abused, but it also can be used for the common good. This is again a theoretical position still pending further investigation.

2) Houtart's ecclesiology was developed at a time when popular movements inspired by a revolutionary Christianity were on the upswing and at least some elements in the Vatican saw these movements as an asset for their geopolitical strategy for the Church. Neither of these situations any longer exists. While the epitaphs for the theology of liberation are clearly premature, it would be difficult to describe the trend as on the upswing, and clearly the Vatican has been locked in a mortal battle with it for nearly thirty years now. What should we conclude from this? Can a movement like liberation theology exist on the margins of a Catholic Church that is attempting to silence it, or does it need a new institutional base if it is to survive? What would that new base be?

3) Similarly, Houtart's thought developed at a time when the communist movement was advancing. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, communism has been in retreat for nearly thirty years. This development has deprived liberation theology of its political-theological strategy. Liberation theology mobilised theological support for the popular movements, as they actually existed—not uncritically, perhaps, but without offering an overtly religious alternative. Now, the core of those movements is in retreat, and the elements that remain, the movements like the World Social Forum, seem to lack both a global aim and a global strategy. I think Houtart recognises this, as he has said as

much in the interviews and many conversations, despite the fact that he firmly believes some of the contributions these movements make to the issues of church and society, religion and society, and globalisation are sophisticated and useful in advancing both theoretical and substantive work on questions of a large-scale, long-term change. Are there global scale resources in his thought to contribute to developing such a vision and such a strategy? This is a particularly relevant question in the context of dominant deconstructionist postcolonial and postmodern social discourse.

Synthesis

We have explored the work of a Christian social thinker whose formation took place in the context of Catholic Action groups and the liberation theologies. As a sociologist of religion, François Houtart is Weberian-Marxist, albeit less Weberian and more Marxist in his theoretical-conceptual outlook. Methodologically, his interest lies with the social functions of religion and he has gradually developed his own form of applied sociology. It is in this applied dimension that Gramsci has been resurrected in Houtart. The work of Houtart and his collaborators, while still unfinished, has provided a major push toward structural social analysis, including the social analysis of the church and religions. While some have rejected Houtart's approach outright, others have borrowed various elements from it to enrich their own accounts of sociological-theological reflection and praxis for the study of religion and society and modern social change and, hence, the modern world itself. Our world truly seems to be neither rushing toward doom or Utopia nor staying the same as always. Rather, we seem fated to change slowly and, barring a planetary catastrophe, both to theorise and to practise the transformation of enduring social structures.

Let Houtart himself finish this exploration in his own vibrant words on liberation and hope:

Liberation and hope are bound to contradiction, to suffering, to death, but the challenge is precisely to overcome them in order to arrive at *a different reality*. The process is dialectical, concrete, material and spiritual. It is concerned with the day-to-day life as well as with the international economic order. In the midst of all that, the essential task is to continue believing in the Utopia, in the possibility of constructing *another world*, in the possibility of looking beyond the given reality, of obtaining a position to act in the present, to the possibility of availing ourselves of a reference that may launch humankind beyond itself, and which will serve as the base for the *construction of alternatives*. On these conditions, liberation and hope will not become mere ingredients of an outdated ideology, but they will become meaningful for us in the present day. On these conditions, the believer has a place in the social struggles.⁴³

⁴³Houtart, *Délégitimer le capitalisme*, 193 (emphasis added).

Thus, François Houtart's entire life, thought, and ministry may be synthesised as a search for the *emergence of a world made other*.

Appendix: (A) The Champagne Glass Effect (UNDP Human Development Report 2005.p 36-37)

This chart gives the inequality a very visible and comprehensible form, the so-called ‘champagne glass’ effect, was contained in the 2005 United Nations Development Programme Report, which showed the distribution of global income to be very uneven, with the richest 20% of the world population hold 82.7% of the world’s income and wealth. This may be interpreted as a practical application of Pareto principle. Italian social thinker Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) noticed that 80% of Italy's wealth was owned by 20% of the population (Cf. UNDP Report 2005 p.36-37).

Box 1.5 The champagne glass effect—the global distribution of income

Building a global income distribution model from national household expenditure surveys reveals just how unequal the world is. It also helps to identify the global underclass living on less than \$2 a day and to compare their position with that of people at the top end of the global income distribution.

If the world were a country, it would have had an average purchasing power parity income of \$5,533 and a median income of \$1,700 in 2000. The gap between median and average income points to a concentration of income at the top end of the distribution: 80% of the world's population had an income less than the average. Meanwhile, the average income of the top 20% of the world's population is about 50 times the average income of the bottom 20%.

Global income distribution resembles a champagne glass (see figure 1.16 in text). At the top, where the glass is widest, the richest 20% of the population hold three-quarters of world income. At the bottom of the stem, where the glass is narrowest, the poorest 40% hold 5% of world income and the poorest 20% hold just 1.5%. The poorest 40% roughly corresponds to the 2 billion people living on less than \$2 a day.

How has the regional composition of the poorest 20% changed over time? The share of South Asia has fallen sharply, from one half in 1980 to one third today. Reflecting two decades of declining average incomes, Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for a rising share of the poorest 20%. Since 1980 that share has more than doubled from 15% to 36%, and it is still rising. One in every two people in Sub-Saharan Africa is now located in the poorest 20% of world income distribution, compared with one in every five people in East Asia and one in every four people in South Asia.

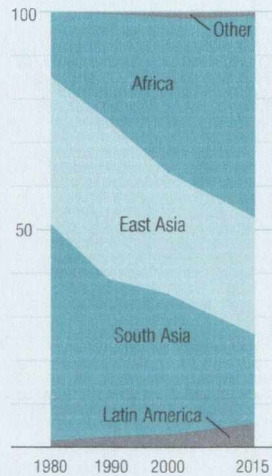
Unsurprisingly, rich countries dominate the top 20%. Nine of every 10 of their citizens are among the richest 20%. And Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries account for 85% of income in the richest decile.

The global income distribution also highlights the extraordinarily high degree of inequality in Latin America. One-quarter of the region's population enjoys an income that puts it in the richest 20%, while more than 8% are in the poorest 20% of the global distribution.

Source: Dikhanov 2005.

Shifting shares of the world's poorest

Regional distribution of the poorest 20% in income (%)



Source: Dikhanov 2005.

more than tripled from 2000 to 2003, underlining yet again a lesson delivered by the 1997 East Asian financial crisis: integration into global capital markets comes with high human development risks attached.⁴⁵

Inequality and poor countries' share of increased global wealth

Globalization has given rise to a protracted and sometimes heated debate over trends in global income distribution, their links with poverty and whether integration into global markets is leading to a convergence or a divergence of

income between rich and poor countries. The trends matter because the share of increases in global wealth captured by poor countries has a bearing on average income and so on prospects for poverty reduction.

The answer to the question of whether poor countries are capturing a larger or smaller share of global increases in wealth depends partly on how it is asked.⁴⁶ For most of the world's poorest countries the past decade has continued a disheartening trend: not only have they failed to reduce poverty, but they are falling further behind rich countries. Measured at the extremes, the gap between the average citizen in

the richest and in the poorest countries is wide and getting wider. In 1990 the average American was 38 times richer than the average Tanzanian. Today the average American is 61 times richer. Purchasing power parity income in low-income countries as a group is one-thirteenth that in high-income countries.

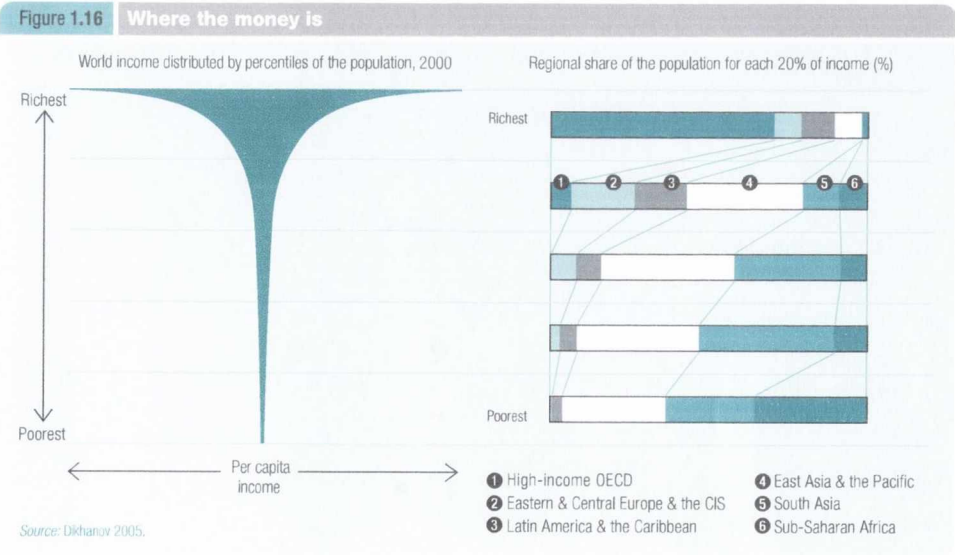
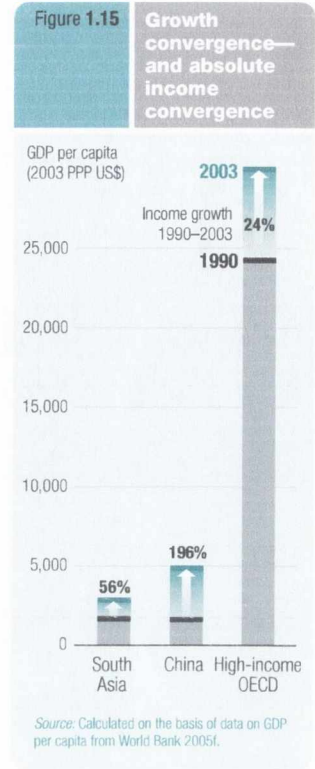
Weighting for population changes the picture. Because incomes have been growing more rapidly in China and (less spectacularly) in India than in high-income countries over the past two decades, the average gap has been closing in relative terms. This reverses a trend towards increased global inequality that started in the 1820s and continued until 1992.⁴⁷ Even here, though, the idea of convergence has to be put in context. High growth in India has been one of the most powerful forces for convergence. But on 2000–05 growth trends it will still take India until 2106 to catch up with high-income countries. For other countries and regions convergence prospects are even more limited. Were high-income countries to stop growing today and Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa to continue on their current growth trajectories, it would take Latin America until 2177 and Africa until 2236 to catch up.

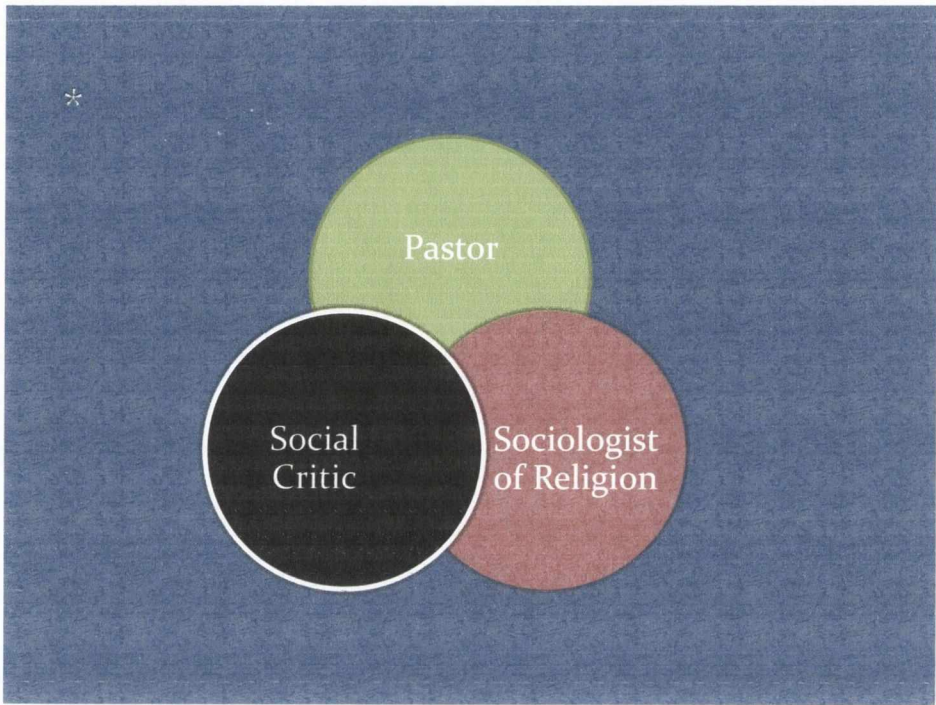
Most developing regions are falling behind, not catching up with, rich countries. Moreover, convergence is a relative concept. Absolute income inequalities between rich and poor

countries are increasing even when developing countries have higher growth rates—precisely because the initial income gaps are so large (figure 1.15). If average incomes grow by 3% in Sub-Saharan Africa and in high-income Europe, for example, the absolute change will be an extra \$51 per person in Africa and an extra \$854 per person in Europe.

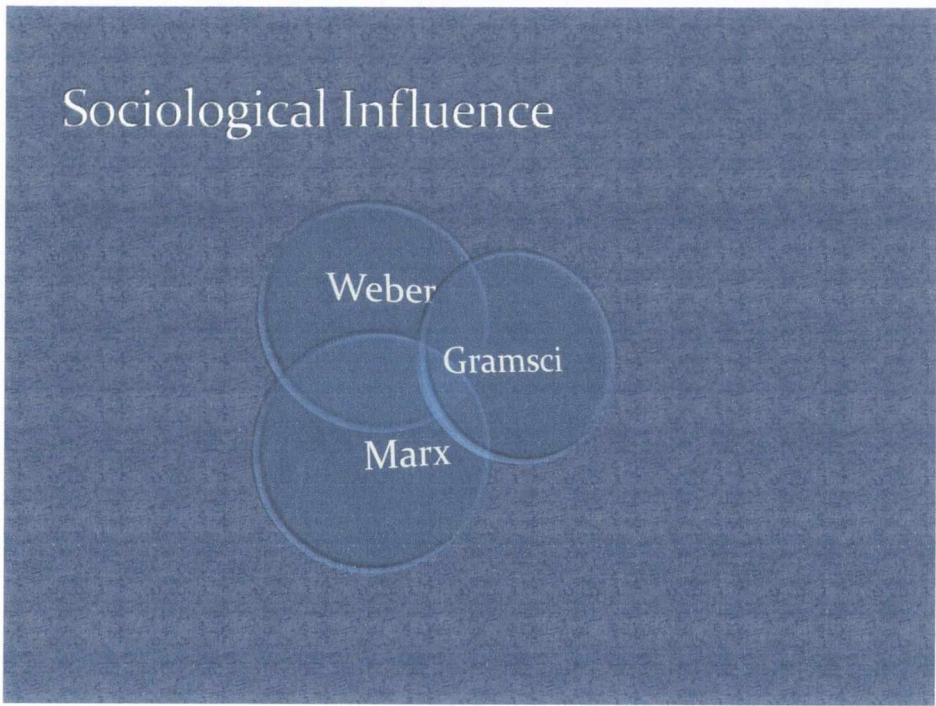
Part of the problem with the debate over global inequality is that it misses an important point. Income inequality is exceptionally high however it is measured and regardless of whether it is rising or falling. On the (conservative) assumption that the world's 500 richest people listed by *Forbes* magazine have an income equivalent to no more than 5% of their assets, their income exceeds that of the poorest 416 million people.⁴⁸

The scale of global inequality is best captured by global income distribution models. These models use national household survey data to create a unified global income distribution, placing everybody in the world in a unified ranking regardless of where they live (box 1.5). Presented in graphic form, global income distribution resembles a champagne glass, with a large concentration of income at the top and a thin stem at the bottom (figure 1.16).⁴⁹ The gap between top and bottom is very large—far greater than that found in even the most unequal countries. In Brazil the ratio of the income





Houtart’s multiple roles



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