

## François Houtart



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### **PORTRAYING THE PERSON AND THE WORK OF FRANCOIS HOUTART**

Based on Interviews in July 2005 in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium [\[1\]](#).

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#### **Abstract**

This report that compiled in a question-answer format contains the first of an interview series I have conducted with Prof. François Houtart of Belgium as a part of an ongoing research. Interview sessions were conducted in July 2005 at the Tri-Continental Centre in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. This is the first in the series of three interviews. The present interview was aimed at the development of an overall theoretical framework for reconstructing François Houtart's intellectual biography and social thought in its socio-political and ecclesial plus Houtart's reaction to some issues such as terrorism, democracy, reconciliation and common good ethical approach. The report in its own right is informative and has pedagogical importance for theology and sociology alike.

#### **BACKGROUND to François Houtart**

Houtart was born in Brussels in 1925. The young seminarian completed his Philosophy and Theology in Malines, Belgium in 1949. His initial experiential context was in the aftermath of World War II (1939-1945). Houtart, as a student encountered one of the very crucial social issues at that time, namely, the *sitz im leben* of the working class community, in particular of the young workers and wanted urgently to respond to the issue. This led him to study sociology of religion.

Houtart obtained a Licentiate in Socio-Political Sciences from the Catholic University of Louvain (KUL) in 1952. Upon completion of a postgraduate course in Urban Sociology at Chicago University in 1954, Houtart embarked on a PG Diploma programme in City Planning at the Institut Supérieur d' Urbanisme Appliqué, Brussels. In 1974, Houtart presented to the Catholic University of Louvain, of which he is now professor emeritus, a PhD thesis on "Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka ". An abridged version of his doctoral thesis was published under the same title and become a ground breaking systematic study in Sociology of Buddhism and Ideologies in Sri Lanka . Hoping for a radical change in the Church, Houtart has been an optimistic and energetic facilitator for the

Vatican II Council on two fronts. Firstly in his capacity serving as the secretary of the sub-committee on *signs of the times*, by drafting the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), which became a key instrument in 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian Social Teachings. Secondly, he advised Latin American Bishops during and after the Council.

In 1956, Houtart founded the Center for Socio-Religious Research (CSRR) and in the same year became the secretary general of the International Conference of Sociology of Religion. After 1958, he directed various research projects and empirical studies for the International Federation of Institutions for Socio-religious and Social Research (FERES).

Responding to Third World issues together with the purpose of convergence and solidarity of the social movements, specifically those occurring in the southern hemisphere, Houtart founded CETRI- centre tri-continental in Louvain-la-Neuve in 1976. The third World Documentation Centre of CETRI is now integrated to the UCL library, Louvain-la-Neuve. Houtart has carried out socio-religious research in various countries, such as Malta , Latin America, USA , India , Sri Lanka , Vietnam , Nicaragua and has been consulted for socio-religious research in South Africa , Korea , Philippines , Cuba , Russia , Hong Kong, Poland and Italy . In addition, Houtart has been invited to be a facilitator at many conferences and workshops around the world. He still keeps in touch with many countries and contexts in which he worked. Nicaragua was one of the turning points, as he discovered a dialogue between Marxists and Christians, as a model for liberation.

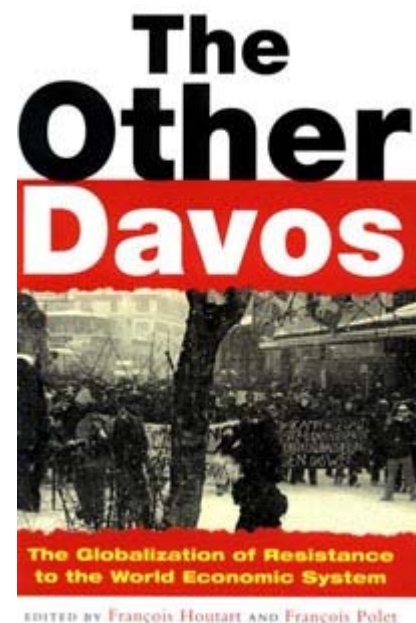
Some of the theological colleges and institutes in South India and Sri Lanka have introduced Houtart's social analysis methods into the theological education modules. This method has had a positive impact on the training of Christian ministers and the Laity who opted for theological formation in South Asia.

In 1996, at the twentieth anniversary of CETRI, Houtart proposed a meeting that later became the "Other Davos", with the view of creating a counter movement to the dominant world economic forum in Davos in 1999. The World Forum for Alternatives came into being, as a result and paved the way to the World Social Forum (WSF) in Port Alegre in 2002. Houtart was one of the co-founders of the WSF.

Houtart was the Chief Editor of the international journal *Social Compass* from 1960-1999. He served on the advisory council of the Catholic Journal *Concilium* while contributing to the pages. A quarterly from Brussels, *COELI*, carries Houtart's articles regularly. Currently, he serves as a consultant to the journal *Alternative Sud*.

Houtart is actively involved in the Brussels Tribunal for the war in Iraq . His involvement in the people's tribunals goes back to the war in Vietnam . Houtart is shifting the focus of his studying, moving towards issues of primal/indigenous communities (especially in Latin America), reparation and compensation, spirituality and political-economics, as he continues to work with social movements and forces.

THE INTERVIEW



Q: What have been the most important stages and turning points in your priestly and intellectual life?

A: In the late forties I was very conscious of the situation of the **working class community**. My experiences with the Young Christian Workers (YCW) challenged me a lot. Josef Cardijn was an inspiration for me. He was the founder of the Young Christian Workers Movement and later became a Cardinal. The situation of young workers at that time was extremely difficult. The working class went through a very difficult time during and after the Second World War.

After my ordination in **1949** I asked permission to proceed with studies in the social sciences. I studied the religious situation of cities: in particular, Brussels compared with other European cities. In the study, one of my questions was why the working class was so much against the Church.<sup>[2]</sup> Actually, the Church was allied with the enemy of the working class-the bourgeoisie. I also discovered the pastoral situation at that time - pastoral institutions like parishes were much less present in the working class neighbourhoods. During the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century the Church in Europe was really literally absent from the places where the working class was constituted - working class neighbourhoods and also in the big cities. The identification of the Church was with the bourgeoisie in the context of industrialisation. Of course, there were some priests who worked with the working class community but they had to face a lot of troubles.

I did a similar kind of study in Chicago.<sup>[3]</sup> There, I discovered just the contrary. 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. My study on American Catholicism was published in French and the original research work may be found in manuscripts.

This research work was an important turning point for me - in order to better study the pastoral issues of the working class I opted for a sociological approach.

**The second turning point was my travels in Latin America in the 1950s.**



My first visit in Latin America was in Cuba for the YCW congress for Central America and Caribbean in 1953. This was something I had wanted to do for as long as I had known the leaders of YCW movement at the International Level. In addition to this, I was very impressed by the priests from Latin America who came to Louvain when I was studying there. It was during my holidays from the University of Chicago, where I was attending a postgraduate course in sociology, that I went to Cuba for the congress, and I also took the opportunity to stay one week in Haiti . So that was my first introduction to Latin America. A year later I spent six months visiting the Young Christian Workers movements in all the countries in Latin America before returning to Europe. This was my way of

discovering Latin America from the perspective of the poor. I learned of many social issues that Latin America was facing at that time and wrote an article on the situation of the Church in Latin America for a North American Jesuit journal, which was widely reprinted. This was the origin of the research work that I did on Latin America

over a four year-period. The research concerned all the countries in Latin America from social and religious points of view; the work was published in 43 volumes between 1958 and 1962 and was finished just before the Second Vatican Council.

In Brazil I had worked with Dom Helder Camara, who later became the Vice-President of the Bishops' Council of Latin America (CELAM), so when the Council was announced he asked me to make a synopsis (résumé) of my research in Latin America to distribute to all the Bishops at the beginning of the Council so they might better understand the Latin American situation. I was then appointed as an expert to the Latin American Bishops.

### **The third turning point was my commitment against the war in Vietnam.**

My work in Belgium for the Socio-Religious Centre of the Bishops' Conference took place at the time of the Vietnam War. I took a position against the war and became associated with many of the anti-war movements of the left, especially the Communist movement. Because of this commitment, I became the Vice-President of Belgium-Vietnam Association. This experience helped me discover the other wars of liberation in the Third World and elsewhere.

Of course, I had already been involved with the struggles in Latin America for quite some time, especially with Camillo Torres.<sup>[4]</sup> I knew him even before he became a priest and had invited him to come to Louvain and study sociology. We were friends for many years.

It was my experience in Latin America, which led me to discover the context of Vietnam , the role of American Imperialist war and the liberation movements and wars in Africa. 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 in South Vietnam in 1968 and, later, in 1974, to North Vietnam ). That was also the origin of my sociological research on Vietnam .<sup>[5]</sup> 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 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic of Vietnam in August this year. The war in Vietnam was a very strong turning point in my social commitment.

### **Another important turning point has been Sri Lanka .**

Because my Latin American work had reached a certain stage, after Vatican II, where I had also been involved with *Gaudium et Spes*, the secretary of the sub-commission of Latin American bishops asked me to help them prepare the Medellin Conference of 1968. The conference was focused on the application of Vatican II in the context of Latin America. Since I had accompanied them to the Council and also because of my studies on Latin America, they wanted me to help them with preparatory material and the like, dealing with all aspects of the Church, social commitment, pastoralia, liturgy, etc. They invited me to the meeting as an expert, but when I arrived, there was a Veto of the Holy See and so I could not participate in the conference. The Latin American Bishops were very disappointed but could not reverse the decision.

Though it was a disappointment, I also thought that I had completed a step of the work and I had trained many leaders in Latin America (many of whom had studied in Louvain) to continue the work. I was then invited to do the same work in Sri Lanka by Tissa **Balasuriya** OMI [\[6\]](#) whom I had met in Kenya when he was there for the YCS[\[7\]](#) Movement meeting. As I was conducting some research work in Kenya at that time they had invited me to the meeting. Tissa asked me, "Why do you not come to Sri Lanka to do the same kind of work you have done in Latin America?" I replied, "Of course, I am most interested!" In 1968 I was in Kerala (South India) for some conferences in different universities. In Kerala they pay well for resource persons, so I collected enough money to travel through Asia before going to Sri Lanka. I went to Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia and finally to Sri Lanka. This was for me a great discovery. There I learned a great deal about the Oriental cultures, especially the Asian religions of Buddhism and Hinduism. During the following 13 years I went to Sri Lanka every year.



Finally, I decided to do my PhD on Sri Lanka, which I had never thought of doing before.[\[8\]](#)

I had done some work on American Catholicism in Chicago, but I did not present it as a thesis because that time I was not thinking of a university career and I was working in Brussels with the Bishops' Conference and was occupied with socio-religious research. Later on the Research Centre was integrated with the Catholic University of Louvain.

### **Finally, CETRI[\[9\]](#)**

In Old Louvain I was responsible for the Research Centre for the Sociology of Religion. The scientific studies took place throughout the city of Louvain. I had at my disposal a very big house, where I could do my work for the University and the rest of my work at large, namely, solidarity work with different social and liberation movements. Then New Louvain came into being! But when we moved to Louvain-la-Neuve all the University functions were unified and I had no space for my wider work. Not only that, but the atmosphere in the University was very conservative after 1968, so I was thinking of another space not only from a physical perspective, but also from an ideological point of view. That is why I founded the Tricontinental Centre (CETRI) in 1976 - to continue the solidarity work with social movements and forces in the South.

Q: How do you connect your priesthood and mission of the Church with being involved in larger world issues?

A: That has been for me a fundamental question. First I wanted to be a missionary

and that was my dream always ever since I was ten years old.[\[10\]](#) I had correspondence with missionaries in India. During secondary school, I was involved with the work for the missions. But when I wanted to enter the seminary my father was opposed, not because I was going to the seminary but because I was thinking of becoming a missionary. He said you are the eldest of fourteen children and you must remain in the country. I was very disappointed, but then I met a cousin of my mother who was an auxiliary Bishop of Malines and I asked him what to do. He proposed that I go first to the diocesan seminary for basic education in philosophy and theology. It was good training, he said, and after that I would still have the option of becoming a missionary. Well, thereafter I opted to study social sciences because of my interest and discoveries with Young Christian Workers (YCW) concerning social reality. But I never thought that going to the seminary would end up giving me the opportunity to work all over the world. The first reason for my position is that social commitment is a part of an active

Christian commitment. My experience with the Young Christian Workers helped me greatly to come to this understanding. Then I gradually discovered the social teachings of the Church as a basic ground in this regard.

Working with Canon Cardijn personally was another reference for this commitment.



The question became more difficult when I began to work against war in Vietnam because that was a political matter. I took to the streets for demonstrations and meetings. For a priest at that time that was not normal. I was attending international conferences and having press conferences and being interviewed by radio, television, etc. Finally I was called by the Rector of the Catholic University!

He was a very good person. But he said, "I ask you not to use your title as professor of the Catholic University of Louvain for any matter in connection with Vietnam, because I have had lot of complaints." I said, "I do not use it but when the media people interview me they use it". Then he asked me to explain my commitment against war in Vietnam. I explained for an hour. He listened and finally his conclusion was, "Okay, go on, but do not use the title of the University and, finally, between Ho Chi Min and Johnson<sup>[11]</sup> (Johnson was the President of the USA at that

time), my chromosomes bring me nearer to Johnson than to Ho Chi Min." It was in fact a political statement, but it showed me the degree of social awareness of a Rector of the oldest Catholic university in the world!

Then came the issue of the struggle against continuing colonialism, especially with the Portuguese colonies. <sup>[12]</sup> On this issue I had to take a position against the local Church, which was fully allied with the Portuguese government.<sup>[13]</sup> I was invited to a solidarity meeting in Sudan with South Africa and the Portuguese colonies. I wanted to reflect on my commitment as a priest and I thought that if just because I am a priest, I cannot participate in solidarity with struggles for justice, and then there is something really wrong in that form of Christianity. I said to myself no, I am not going to stop. I must go to solidarity movement meetings. I decided to go to Khartoum and if my Bishop or the Holy See were think that what I was doing was not compatible with the priesthood, I would assume responsibility. I continued my work in Vietnam, Angola, Mozambique, South Africa, Cuba and with resistance movements in Latin America. Of course, this was not without difficulties and twice the Holy See tried to put me out of the University. But on these occasions the main protection came from the state. Professors of Louvain University are paid by the state and they cannot be thrown out on just anyone's initiative. It is necessary to organise a juridical commission and to prove that the person concerned has committed a grave professional mistake. They could not use such an argument in my case and, luckily, to a certain extent, I was protected by the state against the Church.

Another factor in the Roman Curia being against my activities was that my sociological approach was based on Marxist analysis. I was very close to the liberation theologians in Latin America and Asia, especially to Sebastian Kappen from Kerala (1924-1993).<sup>[14]</sup> I was also closely involved a lot in developing Marxist social analysis methodology (for security reasons, we called it structural analysis) in Asia. This took place in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Bangladesh, and, lastly, at a three-week seminar in Baguio, in the Philippines. <sup>[15]</sup>



This kind of analysis was the best instrument to understand the major social problems of capitalist societies and that is why I do not see any contradiction with the Christian teachings. On the contrary. But it was a move against the mainstream currents in the Church. Theologically there was no fundamental objection for me, knowing, of course, that social reality, social struggle and the struggle for liberation are never totally pure. We Christians agree in general with revolutions for social justice, but with one condition, that is that they be made by the angels! But no revolution is made by angels, 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 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. Being constructively critical –that is something I have always tried to do! Most people accept such position, but only if they know you are committed. External criticism, they tend to believe, is in service of the enemy.

Let us give an example: the resistance in Iraq against the invasion by the United States and the United Kingdom. It was just last week that I attended the World Tribunal on Iraq in Istanbul after having presided over the Brussels Tribunal on the same issue<sup>[16]</sup>. There are all kinds of problems involved with the resistance. Of course, Iraqis must resist, but at the same time we cannot accept the killing of innocent people in order to create terror. When I discussed the matter with Fidel Castro in early 2005, he told me, “We cannot accept any kind of terrorism. It must be absolutely condemned and we cannot tolerate it, even coming from the Chechens, the Palestinians and the Iraqis.” Of course, we agreed also that if the ethical judgement must be radical, it does not accept a political judgment that does not put on the same level state terrorism as a policy and terrorism by peoples in a desperate situation.

**Q:** Can you explain how you became a Canon of the Roman Catholic Church?

**A:** It was a folkloric event. Actually, there are two types of Canons in the Catholic Church: The true ones and the honorary ones. True ones are the counsellors to the Bishops celebrating the offices in the cathedral. Honorary ones are the priests who receive this title for their services. It is like Monsignor in other countries. The rule was that when a priest is appointed a professor of a Catholic university, he automatically receives the title of Canon. That is how it happened.

I said to the Bishop that I did not want this title. But my request was not listened to. The decision was taken in my absence and a ceremony was planned for the installation. We were four to be installed. But when the date approached, they could not reach me, because I was not in Louvain. I was in Moscow! They could not reach me. When it became known that I was in the Soviet Union, there was a scandal. This was in the early sixties! In fact, I had gone to Moscow because I had been participating a meeting on the sociology of religion in Sweden. During the first session of the Vatican II Council, where I had been working as an “expert”, I had met the special envoy from the Academy of Sciences of Moscow. He had said that whenever I had time I would be welcome at the Academy. I spent about two weeks in the USSR, taking part various visits and meetings, in particular with the Orthodox Church in Leningrad and Moscow. From Sweden, I came back through Moscow. So the Diocese of Malines had to organise a new ceremony for me.

**Q:** What was the historical context when you entered the training for ministry?

**A:** The historical context was very specific because it was still during the war. Five days after the commencement of the academic year, we had to leave the seminary and go home. We were dispersed, because the

Germans wanted to recruit us for work in the German factories to take the place of young Germans who had been recruited for the war. So we were sent back home. Courses were organised in different places, like Catholic hospitals, high schools, etc.

During that period I spent several months with my grandparents for security reason. That was very interesting for me as my grandfather had been prime minister. He was the founder of the Christian Democratic Party in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Belgium and had served as Chairman of sessions of the League of Nations in Geneva. He had had great political experience and was also a writer. It was thus a very interesting experience for me to be with him.

After that I went to the countryside for some time and there I joined the guerrilla resistance to the German occupation and Nazism. This was also very important for me as later I got involved in anti-war activities.

Q: What were the intellectual currents at the time you were in postgraduate studies and who were the key players who attracted you most?

A: During the seminary formation Marie-Dominique Chenu, Jean Danielou, and Henri de Lubac were the most important French theologians; Canon Jacques Leclercq, professor at the Catholic University in Louvain, was very important both in sociology and in Natural Law. In sociology, it was Emile Durkheim, and Gurwitsch,<sup>[17]</sup> the latter of whom was still alive at that time. I went to the University of Chicago especially for the study of urban sociology. It was a great school; Parker and Berger were both associated with it.



It was only in Sri Lanka that I discovered Karl Marx. When I was doing my thesis I began to work with the theories of Max Weber. Then I gradually discovered that the Weberian approach was not enough, though Weber was interesting. Although I already had an introduction to Marxism, it was only in the Kandy Library of the University of Peradeniya that I began to read Marx and Marxist literature in earnest. At that time all the walls of the campus were full of Marxist and Leninist slogans because of the student movement. I spent hours and hours in Kandy Library in extremely hot weather. I read *Grundrisse* and finally I adopted a Marxist approach because I found it was the best approach for understanding pre-capitalist societies. I also read Althusser and Bourdieu at that time.

**Q: What about your participation in *Gaudium et Spes*?**

A: There were commissions preparing the different documents of the Council and there was a sub-commission for the *Gaudium et Spes* introduction. I had been invited to go to Rome for the preparatory work of this document during the four years prior to the Council. Shortly after the opening of the Council I was asked to be the secretary of the sub-commission for the redaction of the introduction. Cardinal Karol Jozef Wojtyla (later Pope John Paul II) was also a member, and there were some other interesting theologians present: de Lubac, Chenu, and Karl Rahner. The text was based on a book that I had written with the title ***The Church in the World***, a small book, which had been translated into several languages (Spanish, Russian, etc.). My position was that if the Church wanted to prepare a document on the Church's presence in the world, it should start with the question of what the world is. That is why the introduction started with a certain description of the world, though not a real analysis, because such an analysis would not have been accepted by the Bishops. That is why the document was titled: Joys and Hopes. We worked together with the other countries' representatives for four years' time. It was



the subject of great discussion because these texts belonged to one of the two major documents (constitutions) of the Council, the other being *Lumen Gentium*.

To begin such a document with a new approach was not an easy thing, because up to that point in the history of the Church, the approach of conciliar documents had been a deductive one, which characteristic of a theological perspective. They start with the Word of God (revelations) and then go to reality. The whole training of the clergy at that time in theology was highly dogmatic. In this traditional approach the first thing is the Word of God that must be understood and then communicated to the people.

In *Gaudium et Spes* it was completely the other way around. We took an inductive approach and that was not in line with the long ecclesiastical tradition of Church documents. So some theologians were not at ease with that the kind of approach we had taken. I remember one member of the Theological Commission, a French Cardinal, saying after reading it, "This text seems to be written by a sociologist and not by a human being." So up until the end there was no assurance that the Council would accept it and we had to do a lot of redaction. At least it was accepted in the final plenary session.

**Q: What is your relationship with the Protestant churches?**

**A:** I have been involved with the World Council of Churches (WCC), before, and after the Vatican II Council. I participated in the Programme to Combat Racism. I often went to Geneva then. I also have been involved with Frère Roger Schutz and the Taizé Community in France . After the Council, I became involved in dealing with various social issues.

**Q: Was Nicaragua a turning point in your thinking process?**

**A:** I had been in Nicaragua in 1954 when I made my first visit to the YCW in Latin America. This was during the Somoza dictatorship. But at that time I had not established any specific links with the country. When the Sandinista revolution took place I was still working in Vietnam . I had continued to work with Latin American countries, but not as intensively as previously. I had friends in Nicaragua , some Jesuits and some Franciscans who were very close to the Sandinista revolution. When I had finished the main part of my work in Vietnam , including the training of a good number of the members of the Institute of Sociology and with the study of the Vietnamese commune of Hai Van in the delta of the Red River in North Vietnam . Friends in Nicaragua wanted me to come there, so I decided to go. The Nicaraguan experience was extraordinary because it was a society in which a revolution was taking place. One of the questions was how to relate to culture, religion and sociology of religion in particular in that situation. One thing that impressed me was the commitment of Christians. There was not so much theological thinking as such, as people in Nicaragua were more practically than intellectually oriented but there was a living Christianity within a revolutionary process. It was a very complete experience, wherein, for example, the liturgical transformation was very important.



The *Missa Campesina* (the peasant mass) was rich with the songs taken from the Nicaraguan folklore. People participated with great enthusiasm and faith. It meant a renewal in the life of the Church. Though the *Missa Campesina* was later forbidden by the Church authorities, many continued to practise it. There was also a new approach to the Bible. [18] From the point of view of the faith, it was a very important spiritual experience. I was happy to witness it. I founded a social research centre

affiliated with the UCA (Central American Universities) and also worked with the Sandinistas on different aspects of social research. Whenever I went to Nicaragua I was able to stay few days in Cuba and since 1953 I have been there quite a few times. I had long discussions with several friends, intellectuals on issues of religion, revolution, Marxism, etc. Because several of them were in touch with Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, where many Christians were involved with revolutionary movements and also with the liberation theologians, they began to think that it was inadequate to repeat as dogma that religion is the opiate of the people. After two or three years they proposed that we organise a course on the sociology of religion. They knew I was using a Marxist approach and they finally convinced the Central Committee of the Communist Party to invite me and my colleague Genevieve Lemercurier for an intensive two-week course. This was held in La Havana in the school of diplomats. About 50 people attended the course, including those responsible for Party ideology and professors of philosophy and one Colonel of the army in uniform. It was as in 1986, after years of Soviet domination.

Our message was: If you are Marxists you cannot look at reality in a dogmatic way. You have first to look at the reality. Is religion necessarily the opiate of the people? Let us study the facts. The course studied historical situations and various religions, including Christianity. The conclusion was that some times religion is the opiate of the people and sometimes it is not. It can be the inspiration for social commitment and liberation. They agreed and a year after the clause in the rules of the Communist Party saying that it was forbidden for a believer to be a member of the Party was suppressed. The contents of the course were published under the title *The Sociology of Religion*. All this happened thanks to Nicaragua where I found many Christians, together with Marxists, among others, people like Ernesto Cardinal, very committed to social change.

**Q: Would you comment on the impact of your seminars [\[19\]](#) in Southern India and in Sri Lanka , especially with regard to theological education and social movements?**

**A:** In fact, Genevieve Lemercurier and I had conducted many social analysis courses in the Philippines , Thailand , Malaysia , India , Sri Lanka and Pakistan . Our main aim was to help understand the society especially for the people engaged in social movements and community development work. I went back to Kerala in 2004 for a seminar with people from all over India at the Orthodox seminary. There were also people from Socialist and Marxists parties, social activists, theologians and Christians from different traditions. A professor from Madurai told me that our social analysis was used in most of the Protestant theological colleges and seminaries in the training of ministers and laity. This was the case with the Tamil Nadu theological seminary in Madurai. This was the work of Bastiaan Wielenga and Gabrielle Dietrich. I was very pleased with this news because it meant the method had been used for social activism and for ministerial training. In the Philippines it was used in wider social and ecclesial movements and action groups, and student movements after the Baguio Seminar of 1976.

That is why a year later when I came back to the Philippines with Genevieve Lemercurier for a seminar for the major superiors of the women's congregations of Asia, I was expelled by the Marcos. I could not enter Manila anymore, because I was denounced and put on the list of persons prohibited from entering the Philippines (blacklisted). The police had the order to send me back on the same plane I came on, but it was going to South Korea . There also I had some problems with the military government. I had been invited by the Buddhist University, for a seminar on Buddhism in the modern world and I discovered on the spot that it was a political endeavour. The military dictatorship of South Korea had thought to get some ideological support from the Christian Churches for their anti-Communist work. They could not get it. Happily, in South Korea the Protestant and Catholic Churches were opposed to the military dictatorship, though many had suffered for this. Being well acquainted with the Cardinal there, Cardinal Kim, I went to visit him. The first thing that he asked was; "Do you think that you have been followed?" He took me with him to his private apartment because he feared there were

microphones hidden in his office and talked about the situation for one hour straight. The event at the Buddhist University had been organised by the military. The rector was a general. They wanted to use Buddhism as the ideological background to justify the military regime in South Korea and to fight against Communism. They asked me to give a talk on Buddhism in the modern world and modern Buddhism in south Asia. When I understood the whole matter, I completely changed my speech during lunchtime and took a very different path and talked of the failure in using Buddhism against Communism in Thailand . They were furious. They tried to stop my speech. So I was not eager to be sent back to South Korea .

At the Manila airport the head of police told me “I cannot wait any more; I am ready to send you to Bangkok but not to Seoul!” One month later I was in Malaysia for a seminar and the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Manila given the reasons for my being expelled from Philippines . He gave four reasons: Firstly: I was very dangerous because I was using false names: sometimes I was known as Father Houtart, sometimes Abbé Houtart (Father in French). They did not understand that these were the same. The second thing was that I had been in the guerrilla in Colombia ; they had mistaken me for Camillo Torres. The third thing was that I had criticised the Pope. Lastly, my writings were the bible of the Leftist Catholics in the Philippines . So for those four reasons they expelled me. Anyway, this shows that our sociological method had been very fruitful.

**Q: Who were the leading figures in the Philippines ?**

A: Carlos Abesamis and Bishop Xavier Labayen.

**Q: How do you explain the move in the sociology of religion from a confessional approach to a professional approach?**

A: When I came back from Chicago I was invited by (Canon) Jacques **Leclercq**,[\[20\]](#) who founded the International Conference of Sociology of Religion (Conférence Internationale de Sociologie Religieuse or CISR, now the SISR), to become the secretary general of this conference, a position I subsequently held for ten years. An important question was raised: Is sociology an ecclesiastical discipline? Of course you can use it for pastoral purposes, but this is not the purpose of sociology. The sociology of religion is a part of sociology. As a matter of fact, the first name of this conference was religious sociology. Finally, after much debate and a clear move towards a scientific approach, it became the sociology of religion.



The same thing happened with *Social Compass*,[\[21\]](#) the international journal of the sociology of religion. It was originally a Dutch journal[\[22\]](#), which was instituted in the service of the Catholic Church. When I became the editor of the journal[\[23\]](#) my position was that it should become a scientific journal. The same controversy took place at the Catholic University of Louvain where the research centre I was in charge of was part of the Faculty of Economic, Social and Political Sciences, but the research was conducted for the purposes of pastoral work. That led to a conflict with the Rector of the University, who was a Monsignor. He wanted the centre to be under the Faculty of Theology and told me that sociology of religion is at the service of the Church. My position was that it should remain a scientific activity within the social sciences at the University. Later, when a layman became Rector, there were no more problems. As the editor of the journal I first opened it to non-Catholic Christians and then to people of other faiths and finally to all those who present their research in a scientific manner. So this was how we moved from a confessional to a professional approach.

**Q: Tell something about your association with the journal *Concilium* and the COELI Bulletin.**

**A: *Concilium***[\[24\]](#): I have been with the council of *Concilium* since the beginning. I have written several articles. Now I do not have much time, but continue to receive their programmes. Initially I was associated with the Flemish theologian Edward Schillebeckx.

**COELI Bulletin**[\[25\]](#): I have been on the board since the beginning. They have meetings in Brussels and when I am here I go. I saw the impact of it on theological thinking in Asia, Latin America and Africa. It was very much associated with the Christians for Socialism in the beginning. The magazine has been important in continuing the path of the liberation theology during the restoration period initiated by and Paul VI [\[26\]](#).

**Q: What was your motivation for starting CETRI (Tricontinental Centre)?**

**A:** The kind of work that CETRI is doing now had already existed when I was in Brussels and in the context of Louvain University. When I was working with the research centre for the sociology of religion, because of my travels in Latin America and Asia I had many contacts, and my preoccupation was solidarity with the so-called Third World and solidarity with the people and communities who were struggling to change society. In Louvain I had enough room in the University building assigned to the centre for both activities, but when the University moved to Louvain la Neuve, (New Louvain), the main problem became the physical space, because University activities were concentrated. But also an autonomous ideological space became necessary after the reaction to May 1968. I took the challenge positively and thought that it was a good opportunity to organise the Tricontinental Centre.

I had some inheritance from my father, but that was not enough and my mother and some friends came forward and CETRI was founded in 1975. It was built with enough space for accommodation for postgraduate students from Asia, Africa and Latin America. A documentation centre was established to house the many documents I had been receiving from Third World countries. I also had exchange of journals with *Social Compass*. Soon we realised that we did not have enough space for this at CETRI. Happily, the University was very willing to cooperate and the documentation centre was integrated into the Social Science Faculty. After some time, it became partially financed by the Belgian Ministry of Development Cooperation.

We also thought of having a journal of our own. It began as *South-South Bulletin* in English, Spanish and French. For two years we focused on the resistance movements in Southern countries. Finally I decided to begin *Alternative Sud*[\[27\]](#) to give an opportunity for the voicing of the ideas and critical thinking of the South. This goes together with our concern to share the Southern views with the North.

So CETRI could be a meeting ground for the three continents of the South and also a place to continue with the common work of thinking and research.

**Q: In what directions is CETRI currently moving? In other words, how would you describe CETRI in 2005?**

**A:** CETRI continues to disseminate the critical thinking of the South by way of the documentation centre and the journal *Alternative Sud*, which has been translated into various languages, such as Spanish, Italian and Arabic. A new focus is on the convergence of social movements and the globalisation of resistance. This all began with the organisation of the meeting that came to be known as the *Other Davos* ( Switzerland ) in 1999. Representatives of

social movements (peasants', workers' and women's movements) from various parts of the world all came together with analysts of worldwide renown, such as Samir Amin, for the common goal of proving that is "alternatives are possible". The Brazilians picked that idea up and paved the way for the World Social Forum. Actually the original idea was given at the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CETRI in 1996, when Ernesto Cardenal and Samir Amin were present. I made a speech mentioning that we should organise a counter Davos to dominant World Economic Forum. That became the World Forum for Alternatives.[\[28\]](#)



Now actually CETRI has been somewhat institutionalised with its documentation centre, the journal (*Alternative Sud*), and with other publications on resistance. So currently CETRI is at the service of globalisation of resistance.

One of the main issues is finance, because there is practically no structural financing. The danger is to be absorbed in fundraising and realising contracts. My hope is that CETRI will not be forced to become reformist because of this. I do not want to leave a place that we have built through the years for more radical positions, shifted to less clear commitments. Of course, CETRI has built up a partnership network throughout the world. This is a great hope. But, again, to maintain partnerships we need funds. You need to communicate and meet; so, for the moment, I keep those contacts because I do not have to be paid. But others just remain here and sometimes they do not even have money to go to the Social Forums. There are real needs but you do not have finances, so the system is killing you! This is an important question we have to face.

**Q: Please describe your emphases in the different periods from 1950s.**

**A:** In the fifties the main emphasis was on the fact that the working class in continental Europe was quite opposed to the Church and even against religion. On this I reflected in contrast with the Gospel's choice of justice and identification with the poor. One of my main preoccupations at that time was to try and explain why such a contradiction existed. Precisely the people who are suffering more from the economic system were the ones who did not believe in the message of the Gospel and a good part of the bourgeoisie was nearest to the Church. I remember the study I made in Brussels showing that the working class neighbourhood had less than ten percent regular religious practice and in the bourgeoisie neighbourhood it was more than fifty percent. I did more empirical research about this. Of course, at that time already more or less we knew the reasons, as it was part of industrialisation process, which created the class opposition between a new class and the bourgeoisie. But what I discovered was that during the whole period of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, the Catholic Church was not institutionally present with the people. It was not only an ideological position, but even the pastoral structures were lacking precisely in the places where the working class was established. That was my main preoccupation in the fifties and that is why I went to the USA [\[29\]](#) and finally to Latin America.

At the end of the fifties my interest was Latin America, which was the most Catholic continent in full demographic expansion, with very deficient pastoral structures and also with quite radical social movements. The Church and the ecclesial structures were quite far from the major problems. That is why I began extensive research on all the countries Latin America. I proposed it to the Holy See but at that time but there was absolutely no interest at that level. However, I am thankful to a great friend of mine Msgr. Luigi G. Ligutti, who was a North American priest, and the observer of the Holy See at FAO[\[30\]](#) who helped me financially to organise that research, which took four years. That was my main preoccupation at that time.

After that came the Vatican II Council. In 1962 the Council was announced. I was involved with it and in the sixties I had the hope that a real transformation would happen in the life of the Church from all points of view: theological, liturgical, pastoral and social. That was a unique opportunity to realise necessary transformations to meet the expectations and the needs of the modern world. I invested substantial time in that and participated in many conferences and meetings. I continued the work of the Research Centre with the same preoccupation so that research was not a just a scientific activity but applied research in order to give a better instrument to action, social and pastoral and to contribute to a better realisation of the role of the Church in the modern world. I also was involved with the WCC at that time regarding these issues.

At the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, though I continued doing the same kind of work, my main preoccupation was international affairs-the war in Vietnam, the liberation struggles in the Portuguese colonies, the struggles of Africa and Namibia I gave many talks on those issues in a great number of countries and to a wide variety of audiences. I was involved with the leaders of those movements. Some of them became very good friends. I was also preoccupied with the way that the Church was reacting or responding to those events, and denounced the fact that, for a while, the American Churches defended the American role in Vietnam, and that the Portuguese Catholic Church supported colonialism as a part of the struggle against communism in Africa. That was in the seventies.

I founded CETRI. In 1976 my preoccupation was to have an instrument with a sociological approach in order to realise solidarity with the Third World countries and also to bring about a more scientific basis for the Third World studies- research, knowledge, and communication. It was also during those years (since 1968) I began to discover Asia and Asian religions, especially Buddhism. I wrote my PhD thesis on the sociology of Buddhism in Sri Lanka in 1974. Of course, it often concerns extremely different societies and cultures, but I work with the same focus: the idea of trying to explain the role of religion in society and how much it contributed to building cultures and so orienting the general shape of societies. What I understood was that religion is part of society but also the fruit of society. This time I wanted to apply my approach to other faiths: how religion was functioning in Eastern societies. I had worked in Europe, North America and Latin America and now began to work in Asia.



In the seventies and eighties, I also had quite a lot of contact with the socialist world. That was also one of my preoccupations after my contact with Vietnam and the liberation movements in Africa. I began to visit several socialist countries.

I had been to Poland before but more for religious reasons and in the Catholic milieu, rather than for social or political purposes. I began to have more contact with the Soviet Union, with Cuba and with Vietnam . My preoccupation was why these socialist countries were so radically anti-religious.

My feeling was that one of the failures of the socialist system was its anti-religious position. To force very believing masses of people, like those in Latin America or Asia, to come to an atheist position almost as a must before becoming a socialist was, I found totally wrong. So I had many discussions with different groups of Marxists in Sri Lanka, in India, in Vietnam, in Cuba and the rest of Latin America, and, of course, in Europe. I organised a few conferences on that topic in socialist countries and hoped to do some research on the topic in socialist countries. That was more or less the end of seventies and the beginning of the eighties.



In the eighties my main preoccupation was Nicaragua , precisely because I found there a meeting place between socialism and Christianity. Because so many Christians were committed in the revolution, many of my friends asked me to go there. I had finished a substantial part of my work in Vietnam . My desire was precisely to collaborate with a social revolution, which did not deny the importance of the role of Christians or the importance of the Gospel as an inspiration for the transformation of the society. I did research in Nicaragua for the Sandinista Front and for the progressive part of the Church. I then began to go quite often to Cuba and gave a course on the sociology of religion with my colleague Genevieve Lemercinier. That was, I would say, the preoccupation of the eighties.

In the nineties [\[31\]](#)the preoccupation was the question of globalisation, because the neo-liberal model was imposing itself more and more and socialist countries in Eastern Europe exploded. The Tricontinental Centre was a good platform for exploring this issue. Globalisation of the capitalist system was the basis of the increasing social differences in the world and an obstacle to real solutions. So I began to work on that and the journal *Alternative Sud* focused on analysing the various aspects and faces of globalisation. It began in 1994. In 1996, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of CETRI, I proposed the idea of organising a counter Davos conference in order to build the forces of anti-globalisation. This became the alter-globalisation movement, which means another kind of globalisation. The first meeting at Davos in Switzerland in 1999 was one of the origins of the World Social Forum. Since then I have been very much involved in this, not only participating in the Forum but also in the thinking process, empirical and theoretical, on the meaning of the World Social Forum and developing a critical approach to the constitution of a new historical subject.

It was also in 1996 that Genevieve Lemercinier died. She had been my collaborator at the Socio-Religious Centre in Brussels, my assistant at the Catholic University in Louvain and, later on, my colleague. She was also the co-founder of CETRI. She completed a PhD in Sociology, writing a thesis on ideology and religion in Kerala. She accompanied me during my travels and work in Asia and Latin America for more than 30 years. Her contribution was theoretical and methodological, completing my approach, which had been more philosophical. Her scientific contribution, her political commitment and her profound religious conviction were a fundamental contribution to the work of both the sociology of religion at the University and of CETRI for over 20 years.

1. **How can we build another force to transform the main orientation of thinking and of practices of the economic political field?**
2. **How can we as Christians contribute to that?**

This is the concern of the journal *Alternative Sud* and also of recent publications in *Globalising Resistances* in collaboration with Samir Amin. This has been for me extremely important for the general approach of the work, as everyone knows that Samir Amin is a Marxist and an atheist. We are able to collaborate and to create a united front in all that we are trying to achieve. His theoretical approach is one of the most profound and brilliant of the moment and has great importance for the development of the resistance to global capitalism. Recently, I have also been impressed by another issue, the fact that many revolutionaries, in the new situation where revolution is not at the door, have changed and adapted their ways of thinking. I do not speak here of those who have abandoned the struggle, but those who are discovering the spiritual dimension of life. After having encountered many deceptions in their own struggles they see a way to continue rather than abandon this quest. Such an approach is religiously plural, but a new dimension of the Christian faith is part of it.

The only way to meet the challenge of capitalist globalisation is to join forces to de-legitimise it and to organise the popular movements and organisations to propose and bring about alternatives. The Social Forum does a lot on this path, but a great deal remains to be done.

**Q: What is the relationship between the globalisation of capitalism and the question of culture today?**



**A:** Globalisation today is not only a technical problem. The type of globalisation we have today is the globalisation of the accumulation of capital, which is orienting and influencing all the decisions of the international economy, and also political and military fields. 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. And that transforms attitudes and mentalities, in other words, culture.

The consuming culture is important because if you do not consume you do not contribute to the accumulation of capital and you are useless. That is why, for example, the continent of Africa, which is consuming very little, is just left over. It is because they are useless. That creates a whole approach to life, which is also ultimately influencing the culture of the people. This is why we have to work also from a cultural point of view. In the same line of thinking, the role of religion is quite important. Such an approach gives the possibility of being critical and proposing other aims in the social organisation of life.

**Q: Please describe the path that led you to the Marxist approach to the sociology of religion.**

**A:** For me the main problem was to explain the social functions of religion in society. Therefore I had to use an ontological instrument. I found that the sociology proposed by Marx was the best tool for understanding societies and so for understanding the role of religion in society. Of course, it is a tool and not a dogma. The reasons for this are four:

First, the totality of the approach, in the sense that when you study one element of society you have to put that within the context of whole of society in order to understand it. Religion or family is not something in itself; it is always a part of the totality of society.

It is also an historical approach, you do not understand the situation of today if you do not know its genesis, and how it has been constructed.

Thirdly, it is dialectical approach. Sociology is not a natural science, rather it is about interactions between acting people. When one social group acts another group reacts. Reality is proceeding not in a linear way but in a dialectical way. That is very fundamental in Marxism.

Finally, the theory of historical materialism is central in the sense that if you do not go into the way that people are organising themselves, to produce their means of existence, you are unable to understand the constitution of a society. It is not dogma. It is the result of empirical research. We find that everywhere.

So the idea is not that religion comes from the economy. That is stupid! But definitely the great religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, etc., have appeared when the people were able to produce some surplus which gave the possibility that a priestly or a religious group would appear, not being required by necessity to work to produce material goods. It is only when society is producing enough means of existence, so that some people are not obliged to work with their own hands, that you can have a religious institution. The same can be said about artists or philosophers. Religious beliefs and practices exist of course, but it was part of the group and not an institutionalised matter as such. All the great religions are based on a philosophical approach to life, but they only become institutions when society has produced enough means of subsistence.

Q: Where do you stand in relation to Otto Maduro, Anthony Mansueto and Antonio Gramsci?[\[32\]](#)

A: The great contribution of Gramsci was to introduce into Marxist thinking aspects which had been neglected by the Marxist tradition, especially culture, the role of intellectuals, role of religion and certain aspects of the political dimension. That has been very important for Gramsci. That is why his approach was also rejected by some of the most Orthodox Marxists at that time.

As far as the others are concerned the preoccupation of Maduro and Mansueto is more of a religious preoccupation and they worked quite a bit along that line. Maduro was attracted by the psychological aspects of religion but Mansueto is more a philosopher but both are quite preoccupied by the Christian basis of their thinking, so their contribution is interesting. Sometimes, though I do not agree with them as a whole, it was very important to see people coming from a Catholic background and a keeping religious preoccupation while adopting a Marxist approach and try to work on certain coherence in both approaches.

**Q: What do you see as the relationship between a Marxist analysis of society and a Marxist analysis of religion?**

A: For Marx there was no difference, because he came to the idea that religion is part of society and if you analyse society you have to analyse religion. He was preoccupied not only by scientific analysis but by constructing the tools for action. He said very clearly that when religion plays a role against the emancipation of human beings you have to fight against it. This is an empirical position Marx developed when he became primarily interested in the socio-economic analysis of capitalist and pre-capitalist societies.

In the first part of his writings, when he was more a philosopher than a social analyst, he influenced by the views of Feuerbach, whose philosophical approach was that religion had to be rejected and destroyed, as a matter of principle. Marx later changed his views quite radically and was involved in a controversy with the disciples of Feuerbach. They were called fundamental atheists, whereas Marx came out with the view that it was useless fight against religion as an abstraction. He said doing so was employing theological discourse in reverse. He wanted to observe the role of religion in different types of societies because religion is part of society and if we want to change society we have to look at its foundations. That is why when he analysed the role of religion in Prussia, he said the first thing was to fight against religion because the religion was, in this case, one of the main institutions maintaining the system. It was not a matter of principles, but of empirical reality. It is also interesting to remember that when Marx is quoted as saying that religion is the opiate of the people; it is just one part of the



sentence. In the rest he also says that religion is the inspiration of the oppressed people. Of course, opiates help people live through sad situations, but they do not lead them to enter into the struggle to change the situation. That was his observation.

In sum our message to Marxists is to take religion seriously and our message to theologians or religionists is to take society seriously.

**Q: What is the current context of this Marxist approach?**

**A:** Since the fall of the Soviet Union there has been a strong reaction against Marxism, not only politically but also intellectually. Marxism was seen as negative and dogmatic against a real scientific approach.

About fifteen years after the fall of the Soviet Union there was a renewal in Marxist thinking. Many publications have emerged. There are new approaches in social thinking, which are again taking Marxism seriously, even if the mainstream is still neo-liberal in economics and, to a certain extent, postmodern in philosophy and in social sciences. But there is a new approach with a revised vision of what the Marxist approach can bring, though the majority consider it a question of the past and think that if you are a Marxist, you are a dinosaur and you do not understand the changes taking place in society.

It is easier now because during the time of the communist regimes in Europe there was a “reduced type” of Marxism that was intellectually difficult to accept and was associated with the politics. Now is the time for a better analysis of the socialist societies of Eastern Europe and the causes of their failure. [\[33\]](#)

**Q: What about your Utopology?**

**A:** The struggle for Utopia is a struggle for hope, and that means that it is not a struggle for something impossible to attain. Capitalist logic is killing all Utopias. That is why Mrs. Thatcher said –TINA[\[34\]](#) and Francis Fukuyama speaks about the end of history. That means that any utopia is impossible! What can you hope for in a world of inequalities and oppression?

Struggle against the type of globalisation that we have today is fundamental for the definition of Utopia and the struggle for Utopia is also fundamental for the opposition to the present day globalisation. It is the search for another type of globalisation.

**Q: What sources inspire you most in this Utopian thinking?**

**A:** The struggle for Utopia is a struggle for hope, and that means it is not a struggle for something impossible to get, but with the idea that “something which does not exist today could exist tomorrow”. So that is the way that I define Utopia. A French Protestant Philosopher Paul Ricoeur, talks about necessary Utopia because of the fact that globalisation of capitalist logic is killing all Utopias. There are alternatives possible. Otherwise it is pointless to talk about Utopias. In the World Social Forum we have discovered that alternatives exist in all sectors of the collective human life. That is extremely important. We can talk about three levels of alternatives, the long-range, middle-range and short-range. There are alternatives and there are people working for alternatives. That means that the Utopia is possible and it is not just a dream.

We must also find enough motivating force to struggle in order to realise Utopia. There may be various types of sources of such force. One would be the humanist perspective that we find in many people committed to struggling for justice. This is a very fundamental basis for Utopia. Marxist militants, people who believe that it is possible to transform society, find motivation for commitment from this humanist conviction. If we take the believing community, for example, in Christianity, it is clear that the Bible reflects a process of liberation, and that the prophets speak about a possible future. In the Gospel we see the struggle against injustice and the hope in the Kingdom of God. All of this is very coherent. It means that we have to believe in Utopia. The next step is to be committed to the search and the struggles for such a Utopia.

**Q: What is the relationship between resistance and the alternatives at the ground level?**



**A:** This is of course a very concrete question raised also at the World Social Forum. It is all right to protest, but what do you propose instead? What do you bring about with your protest? And I must say that we are very conscious of that in the Forum. The fact that such forums exist is already progress, and all the things happening during the forums and surrounding the forums are important steps forward. But it is true that the relation between resistance and what has to be accomplished is not an easy matter. It is easier to protest than to construct, than to build the Utopia. The protest is necessary to de-legitimise the system, because if you are not convinced that the system is not just and has to be changed, how will you mobilise people to change it? Here also we can talk about three levels, the economic, the social and the ethical protest. Such a step is necessary, but it is only one step in the building of alternatives. We also have to show that it is possible to organise the economy, social relations, political life and culture on another basis. So that is the relationship between resistance and alternatives and for me it is impossible to separate them.

**Q: In your recent thinking you have given emphasis to human solidarity and respect for nature in the context of primal religions. Could you elaborate on this?**

**A:** Having worked with indigenous peoples at different meetings and also having been involved in research into the autonomy of the primal peoples in Latin America, I have discovered the richness of the religions of those peoples. Generally, we think only in terms of the great religions, which have elaborate philosophical bases, like Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, etc. and we do not take too much into account the religiosity of indigenous peoples. Personally, I have discovered two main pillars in the primal communities:

1. The symbiosis between human beings and nature. Of course, this is expressed with a non-analytic culture and way of thinking, so immediately we tend to link them with witchcraft. But for me this is secondary and it is normal in the kind of culture in which indigenous people live. They express such a fundamental value in their own language with their experience, and we have to express this in our language with another type of thinking.

With modernity, we have separated human beings totally from nature. Man has to dominate and exploit nature, in function of its necessities. We see the result of that kind of attitude that does not hesitate, for to experience immediate necessity is to forget about the future. This the first pillar in all the traditional religions: the symbiosis between nature and man is fundamental; man is part of nature and is not separated from nature. So to destroy nature means to a certain extent to destroy humanity. Think of the way that we treat animals. Each year seven

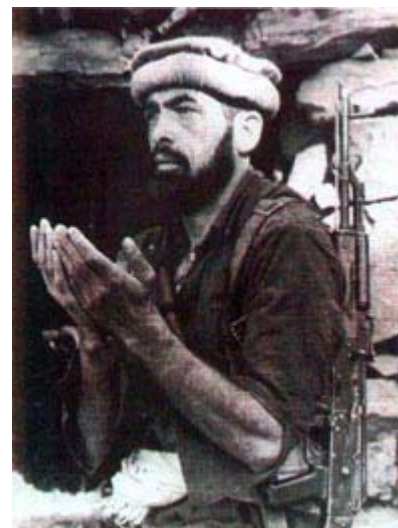
hundred thousand animals are killed for scientific purposes in Belgium alone. Is that a human way of relating to the living world and nature? There is some horrible treatment of animals: if we take the issue of industrial production of chickens, for example, it is utterly dehumanised. Capitalism has produced and promoted ways to use nature as a commodity and not to worry about any other aspects and dimensions of nature. The idea of respect for nature was also well developed in the Oriental religions.

2. The second pillar is human solidarity. That means that man is not just an individual but he is part of a group, of a community. Capitalism has developed an extreme individualist vision of the world. On the contrary, human solidarity is quite central in indigenous religions. This functions as a criticism of individualism and puts emphasis on the collective necessities of mankind and the social dimension of human life. That is why the rediscovery of primal traditions is quite important.

The difficulty is that they express these views in their own culture and we have our own culture, which has been deformed by capitalist logic and thinking, but which is also a step forward. We are interpreting reality not in function of myths, but using knowledge of the functioning of nature and society. But that does not mean that we have to use this knowledge for the exploitation of nature and human beings. That is why the valorisation of traditional religions has meaning.

**Q: How do you look at the question of terrorism?**

**A:** Terrorism is the use of blind violence to kill innocent people. In ethical terms it has to be condemned. I told you of my conversations on the matter with Fidel Castro, who said that terrorism, have to be condemned in any case. He also said, "I can say that during the war to re-conquer Cuba , we never killed a civilian. That is totally against all ethics. Today even if it comes from the Palestinians or the Iraqis, terrorism has to be condemned," and I agree with that.



But the fact that terrorism is a concept so connected with ethics makes it subject to manipulation. That is what political leaders from the USA and other countries are doing when they call everyone who is not in agreement with them a terrorist. Now people like Eva Morales in Bolivia and movements of landless peasants in Brazil are being called terrorists. It immediately raises the image of something that is ontologically wrong in order to mobilise people against them. Calling every enemy a terrorist is a manipulation of the vocabulary.

I remember during the war when I was involved in the resistance myself, at the end of the war I was with a small commando of two or three others on a farm where German soldiers were sleeping, exhausted from the long retreat from Normandy. The first word that they said was terrorists! And we said, "No, we are not here to kill you!" But that was their reaction and they believed that any person in the resistance was a terrorist.

Now there are two things to add, politically speaking. Terrorism used by people who are really oppressed, not knowing what to do, is completely different from the kind of terrorism used by the state. State terrorism is used systematically and scientifically by states or by political organisations. This is not the same thing. As Monsignor Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador said: "The violence of the dominant class to defend their privileges is not the same as the violence used by the victims even if you condemn violence." As I said at the anti-terrorism



meeting in La Havana in 2005, of course we have to condemn terrorism, but at the same time we cannot abandon political judgment. This is precisely what we are discovering at the tribunal on Iraq . State terrorism is used by the USA and the UK . But what about car bombs killing people in the markets and mosques? Such methods cannot be accepted, but the condemnation of these forms of resistance should not obscure the primary terrorism brought about by the war. And we must not enter into the logic of the Americans and British calling every resistance terrorist!

**Q: What about your work on people's tribunals?**

**A:** Opinion tribunals have moral and ethical force instead of juridical force. I remember that I assisted the Brussels tribunal on the war in Vietnam , more than thirty years ago. It was perhaps the first one, with the judges were Jean-Paul Sartre, Bertrand Russell and Lelio Basso, an Italian senator, who later founded the permanent people's tribunal in Rome. He asked me to be a member of the tribunal and I participated in about fifteen different sessions on topics such as Nicaragua , Guatemala , El Salvador , Eritrea , Afghanistan and multinationals. I was president of some sessions, such as the one on immunity in Latin America in 1991. Lately this idea expanded. Now tribunals have been formed in different parts of the world. I have chaired sessions of the tribunal on Iraq : one in Brussels in 2004 and the other in Barcelona in 2005. I was also the chairperson in Mexico for the tribunal on American policy on Cuba . The work of the tribunals is of a very serious type, with lawyers, economists, theologians, sociologists in the jury. It must be very strict in order to be credible. The formal aspect shows the difference between a tribunal and an act of solidarity. The form of the tribunal includes a specific charge, witnesses, prosecutor, defence and jury. I think even if is the tribunals are only of an ethical character, they may have a certain impact and ability to de-legitimise some situations.

The other purpose of the tribunals is to help the evolution of international law. Therefore, it is important to have international jurists who can really speak from the juridical point of view. So those are the two major functions of tribunals: to de-legitimise a specific situation and to promote some kind new orientation in the field of international law.

**Q: What is your reaction to the concept of democracy?**

**A:** Democracy is a very fundamental issue and it should not be a long-term aim only but something, which is also used within the struggle and in the functioning of social movements. The concept of democracy as it is used today by Western society is totally insufficient. There is only democracy in those countries in formal political life, but not in economics. We must add that an electoral democracy is not a participatory democracy and so we have to enlarge the concept.

**Q: What is your response to the idea of reconciliation?**

**A:** Is the love of neighbour compatible with class struggle? I have written a text on this topic[\[35\]](#): There exists a concept of reconciliation, a concept that is used by the dominant classes. In Nicaragua since 1990, when the big landlords came back from Miami, the whole discourse of the political system has been about reconciliation. What does that mean? That means the poor peasants have again to accept being dominated by the landlords. They have to give back the property received as a result of land reform. So we have to recognise that reconciliation has been used in a very ideological way. Reconciliation is necessary but it can only happen if you recognise the faults of the past. Then you can have reconciliation. It is not just saying that reconciliation can be achieved, and we forget the past as in the cases of Argentina , Chile , Cambodia , Burundi and Rwanda .

**Q: What is the relationship between reconciliation and liberation from a socio-political and a theological point of view?**



**A:** From a political point of view, in order to have real reconciliation and reconstruction, which is a social process, there have to be conditions. Otherwise it does not work. One of the main conditions is the recognition of the wrong done, as I have said. If this does not happen, after one or two generations the matter will come up again. We see this, for example, in Turkey with the genocide of the Armenians at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more than one hundred years ago. Turks always refused to admit that there was genocide and now with the third or the fourth generation the matter is coming back again. We see this also in Latin America. After the military dictatorships came the laws of amnesty. Well, this did not solve

anything because it was like saying that nothing had happened. In fact, things have happened and as long as this is not recognised and condemned, the matter will never die but will remain in the memory of the people. So, from the purely political point of view, in order to solve such situations, it is necessary to go through a social process of recognition of the wrongdoing and legal condemnation. After that, reconciliation can take place. But you cannot pardon something, which has not been recognised. You can pardon it if it has been recognised as a wrongdoing by the people who are responsible. Then you can say okay, in order to build society we have to bring about a process of reconciliation. That means the possibility of living together again. Let us consider the example of co-operation between the Germans, the French and the Belgians after the Second World War. New Germany recognised the wrongdoing and paid for it. Now the relationship between Germany, France and Belgium in spite of all that has had happened is excellent, and it has been possible to build on a reconciliation process. That is from a political point of view.

From the ethical point of view and even the theological point of view, this is all the more true. Because there is also, you see, an ethical aspect; reconciliation is a value recognised in the Gospel and is found in other religions as well. Such an ethical value has a special meaning for Christians in the work of constructing the reign of God. So it has a very fundamental dimension. But, again, this dimension is possible on the condition that the party who has been guilty has an ethical attitude. For example, the military in Argentina, South Korea, the Philippines and Haiti all refused to recognise any wrongdoing. How can you reconcile? In this sense reconciliation from an ethical point of view is meeting the same goal as from the political perspective. Finally, reconciliation means also a certain type of compensation; it may be material or it may be moral, but compensation is also necessary.

The victims can eventually renounce material compensation if they want to, but they have to decide, not the ones who were responsible in the past or the state. Of course, from the Christian perspective, pardon is very fundamental and very important and it is only possible when the wrongdoing has been recognised.

**Q: What is your critique of the “common good” approach?**

**A:** Theoretically, the “common good” is a positive concept, but we have to see how it is applied in practice. It has been used by the social doctrine of the Church, at least the Catholic Church, as the main fundamental concept for the organisation of society. However, it very often remains abstract, without taking into consideration the real existence of the social relationships which are structural ones and not simply a superimposition of different types

of social status without structural links. In this way, the general vision is that the different social strata in society have to collaborate for the common good. Each one of them has its place and a role to play within that place.

But the problem is such a vision does not challenge the place. In fact, in industrialised society, there is a [bourgeoisie](#) and there is a proletariat. Today we have a capitalist North absorbing the riches of the South. To create a common good is not just a matter of superimposing different strata in social life but to recognise that society is structural: the [bourgeoisie](#) cannot live without the proletariat. World capitalism cannot exist without the mechanism to absorb the riches produced by others. In most instances, the churches just call for raising consciousness: “Be aware and be preoccupied with the poor,” but they do not challenge the organisation of society to any great extent. In this sense the concept of achieving common good by asking each stratum of society to collaborate on moral grounds for the construction of a better society is an illusion, if you do not say at the same time that you have to transform the structures of society. Society is not just a superimposition of social strata, but a structural organisation of classes, and classes are structurally related. That is why I am critical of the type of analysis of society in terms of strata and not in terms of class. Such a position is not necessarily conscious. There is always an implicit analysis of society; you cannot elaborate a social doctrine without it. This is not only true for the Catholic Church or the Christian churches, but for all religions. That leads to a call for a moral attitude but not to a structural change of society and this has political consequences. For example, Christian democracy asks everyone to collaborate for the common good without challenging the place of different social groups. In Vietnam, when I made a study of a Catholic commune in the North, the peasants told me, “Thanks to communism now we are able to live the Gospel, because now we are equal. Before there were some landlords who were exploiting us, but we had to respect them because they were Catholics. Now there are no more landlords. We are more or less equal and so we can live the values of the Gospel.” It was very interesting to hear that! How can we think of a Christian approach when you have the distribution of revenue in which 10% of people in Latin America absorbed 40% of the riches and almost half of the population is living below the poverty line? Then you preach reconciliation, you preach charity you preach common good. But first contribute to changing that, because otherwise you will be unable to apply your principle.

**Q: Do you view ethics as a social construct?**

**A:** Ethics in a tribal society is not the same as ethics in an industrial society. In this sense it is a social construction because it has to be adapted to the concrete situations, otherwise it remains just an abstract. You can elaborate all the great principles of ethics, but if they are not applied then they are just useless. I do not say that a theoretical approach is not necessary; I do not say that the fundamental issues like respect and the dignity of every human being as the basis of the construction of ethics are unimportant, but the concept of ethics, in the concrete sense of human life and in the history of humanity, is a social construction, because it must constantly be adapted according to place and time.

**Q: Is this approach different from the traditional Roman Catholic natural law approach?**

**A:** Absolutely. Of course the whole idea of natural law has been very greatly developed in Louvain by philosopher and sociologist Canon Jacques Leclercq, who I worked with and I knew very well. Because he developed the approach of natural rights and sociology simultaneously, he made a real contribution. Otherwise, the concept remains an abstraction, which has very little real social consistency. In a discussion about the market with the director of the IMF in Washington, I asked, “How it is possible that all your theories which seem to be perfect and logical, when in reality in the South they are transformed into catastrophes. Do you not think that the market is a social relation?” He was furious and he said, “No! You are wrong.” When you believe that the market is a fruit of

natural law it becomes almost a divine institution and all the rest is logical. Then the dogma is the freedom of the market and you do not think that the market is a social relation where the powerful have advantages over the less powerful.

**Q: What is your response to eco-justice concerns?**

**A:** Of course, the problem of ecology is the destruction of nature and the climate, etc., but it is also a social issue. It is not just a natural issue, because that situation is the result of a certain economic and social system and a certain vision of development. This has to do with our type of human relationship with nature, and, of course, it goes together with the exploitation of human beings. Ecology is not something in itself. We have to defend nature with a consciousness of the social conditions at the origins of its destruction. It is the logic of the type of development brought by capitalism (which has also been assumed to a certain extent by real socialism) that has brought such fundamental contradictions. So eco-justice is a part of the whole vision that we have to develop by introducing a social approach.



**Q: What was your relationship with Ernesto Cardenal?**

**A:** I met him in 1982 after the Sandinista revolution. Ernesto was the Minister of Culture and I proposed to him some work on the cultural aspects of the revolution. He was interested and we had many discussions. We became very good friends. He left the Ministry ten years later after the fall of the Sandinistas. He went back to writing and sculpture. For the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of CETRI I asked him to make a sculpture for us and he created the *Sanatio*. It is a black bird found in Nicaragua, which he called the proletarian bird, because he has no colour and is a common bird that country.

**Q: What was your relationship with Paulo Freire?**

**A:** I know Paulo very well and of course I was very impressed by his methodological approach. To a certain extent he was also coming from the same tradition as the YCW.

He was further influenced by Cardijn's approach of See, Judge and Act. I met him several times and adopted some aspects of his thinking on social analysis. Finally, he had to leave Brazil because of the military dictatorship. He worked with the WCC (especially on adult education). When he was forced into exile and could not establish direct contact with his family in Brazil, I served as an intermediary.

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[1] The first of the interview series. This interview was held in Louvain-la-Neuve respectively on 6<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. July 2005 at CETRI.

[2] Houtart calls this phenomenon: De-Christianization of the working class (my correspondence with Houtart on 23 February 2005).

[3] Houtart maintained a journal when he was in Chicago in 1952.

[4] Francois Houtart, The Meaning of Camillo Torres' Choice, Unpublished article in CETRI archives, Louvain-la-Neuve (Ref: FH Doc 3.Bis/36)

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

- [6] Tissa Balasuriya is an Asian Liberation Theologian based in Sri Lanka and a founding member of the EATWOT: Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians.
- [7] The YCS Movement was also inspired by Cardinal Cardijn.
- [8] François Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, Bangalore: TPI, 1974. (One of the recommended works for the courses and the research in Understanding Society and Culture for the Undergraduate and Graduate courses at the Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa, Sri Lanka which is a Protestant Ecumenical Theological School in Sri Lanka that is affiliated to the University of Serampore, West Bengal, India.)
- [9] CETRI (The Tricontinental Centre) is situated in the city of Louvain-la-Neuve. As the name indicates the institution works with Latin America, Asia and Africa.
- [10] Referring to the year 1935.
- [11] <http://www.vietnampix.com/intro2.htm> ; <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/lj36.html>
- [12] For an overview on Houtart's relationship to colonialism see: François Houtart, *Colonialism* (written in the form of a dictionary article for WCC, 1990.) 1-9.
- [13] For an analysis of the religious justification of Portuguese colonialism see: François Houtart, *Religion and Ideology in Sri Lanka*, Bangalore: TPI, 1974.101-171.
- [14] For a description of Fr. Kappen's work, especially regarding the development of a counter-culture, see Bastiaan Wielenga, *Liberation Theology in Asia*, in The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology, ed; Christopher Rowland, CUP, 1999. 52-53.
- [15] See <http://eapi.admu.edu.ph/eapr005/f-claver.htm>
- [16] See <http://www.brusseltribunal.org/> and [http://www.worldtribunal-nyc.org/world\\_tribunal\\_sessions.htm](http://www.worldtribunal-nyc.org/world_tribunal_sessions.htm)
- [17] Gurwitsch was a French sociologist of Russian origin.
- [18] Houtart refers to the type of approach as presented by Ernesto Cardenal in *The Gospel in Solentiname*, Orbis, 1985. (in 4 Vols.)
- [19] The first of seminar this kind was held in 1973 in Bangalore India . The Baguio seminar was held in the Philippines in 1975 and the report was published in 1976. Francois Houtart, "Religion and Development", *Religion and Development in Asia*, Baguio Feres Seminar Report, n.p. 1976.
- [20] See <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/Leclercq.htm>
- [21] See <http://www.sagepub.com/journal.aspx?pid=170>
- [22] *Social Compass* was founded in 1953 by George Zeeger, director of the Catholic Social-Ecclesiastical Institute (KSKI), the official research centre of the Dutch Catholic Church.
- [23] Houtart served as its Editor for forty years (1960-1999). See *Social Compass* 47(1), 2000, 5-6.
- [24] See <http://www.concilium.org/>
- [25] COELI is published by Liaisons Internationales in Brussels.
- [26] See [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/)
- [27] See <http://www.cetri.be/Exploreur4/Frameset.html>
- [28] See <http://www.social-movements.org/en/book/print/285>
- [29] Houtart was attracted by American Functionalism school at that time
- [30] Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations.
- [31] The context was the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992.
- [32] Neo-Marxist thinkers
- [33] See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl\\_Marx#Education](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Marx#Education) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall\\_of\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_the_Soviet_Union)
- [34] There is No Alternative
- [35] Francois Houtart, "Compassion Love of Neighbour and Social Predicament", in Encounters with the Word: Essays to Honour Aloysius Pieris s.j. Ed.Robert Crusz et al. EISD, Colombo, 2004, 587-596.

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