

booklets

THE REVOLUTION OF EVERY DAY
Christianity, Capitalism,
and Post-modernity



155

Joan Carrera

THE REVOLUTION OF EVERY DAY
CHRISTIANITY, CAPITALISM, AND POST-MODERNITY

Joan Carrera i Carrera, sj.

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1. THE WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE

Trying to describe the world in which we live inevitably results in a simplification since, if there is anything that characterizes this «world,» it is the huge diversity of cultures and mentalities that exist within it. Even so, few people question F. Fukuyama's thesis¹ affirming the end of history and the complete triumph of the capitalist economic system at the global level.

The so-called process of globalization has progressively extended this system to almost all countries, with only a few residual exceptions. There are no longer any adversaries that are able to compete with capitalism. Despite the wounds the system suffered as a consequence of the last economic crisis and despite the multitude of criticisms and partial alternatives that have arisen, the fact is that we still cannot speak of a global alternative to the consolidation of capitalism.

1.1. The capitalist culture

Every economic system highlights certain elements whose effects are transferred to other spheres of society, labor, family, etc. In other words, we can say that every economic system creates a culture.² One of the important elements of any culture is the ethical system, understood as the hierarchy of values that come into play when decisions are made and that end up permeating the whole of our lives (social and family

relations, etc.). That is why it is important to become aware of the values on which our economic system is founded and to understand what values the system applies when dealing with questions as significant as personal happiness and success. When we speak of the values of an economic system, we are referring to whatever the system considers a priority when it comes to guiding people's behavior, especially in the economic sphere. Often the established priorities conceal the real interests of particular groups and function as a de facto ideology³ so that the economic system is presented as the most rational structural solution for the creation of prosperity and justice. In other words, the system *relies on and appeals to* the values that are desired and accepted by the majority of people.

Obviously, in the eyes of a different ethical system (whether of a religious tradition or of another culture), these values are perceived as counter-values.

1.2. A global, neoliberal capitalist system

In the next few pages we will try to analyze these values, not to pass judgment on the economic system (regarding how wealth is distributed, which countries are most benefited, what inequality is created, what kind of labor relations exist, etc.), but to see how the hierarchy of values on which the system rests has gradually infiltrated many other spheres of life, sometimes spheres that are far removed from the economy. Despite the compartmentalization of our lives, what we experience

in one sphere (the one to which we dedicate most of our time) ends up influencing the others. This is the case, for example, in familial and personal relationships that have been affected by the way people understand work and their relation to work. The Gospel, to be sure, says it very decisively: «Where you treasure is, there your heart will also be» (Matt 6,21).

We will focus our attention on the system as it exists now, in the first decades of the 21st century, and not in that early stage described in Max Weber's writings on the spirit of capitalism and the cultural values associated with the capitalist system. Nor will we dwell on the second phase, that of the welfare state, when the earlier form of capitalism borrowed elements from the socialist and Christian Democrat tradition, such as social rights and the conception of a state that regulates the economy and redistributes wealth. In the present day we find ourselves with still another kind of capitalism that takes elements from the earlier phases and can be characterized with two adjectives.

a) Neoliberal, because it insists on maximum freedom of the market, gives the state a very reduced role, and limits the extent of social rights.

b) Global, because it is characterized by a free global market with no commercial or financial barriers.

Certainly it would be pretentious of me to try to list all values of such a system, and doing so would result in a certain simplification insofar as it failed to take into account the many variations

in the system. Capitalism that preserves some of the elements of the Nordic welfare state is quite different from the new state capitalism found in China or Russia and also from the neoliberal capitalism found in the U.S. and some other countries. There are many different variations and sensibilities within the system itself. Nor is everything new: some of the values we describe were found in early capitalism, but they have now become more accentuated. Let us take a look, then, at what these values are.

1.3. One system, several values

a) A successful life, closely connected to economic success. One way of understanding success is in terms of its material components: it is strictly linked to possession of goods and titles. The material goods make it possible for a person to attain other more intangible goods, such as status, identity, or membership in a specific social group.

b) Private property as a central value of the system. This has been the case from the beginning. The raw materials and the means of production (land, machinery, etc.) are in private hands, and maintaining this type of ownership is seen as the best way to produce wealth. There is a steady tendency to privatize more things with the idea that privatization will fix the «dysfunctionalities» that prevent the system from functioning optimally. Whatever is commonly or collectively owned receives little consideration within this system.

c) Another value that modernity has promoted is individualism, as opposed

to communitarianism. It is the individual alone who must achieve something in society. The emphasis is placed on the individual person and the rights –rather than the duties– that each person has with respect to others and to society. The role of the state is to guarantee and protect those rights. This conception places great value on the initiative of the individual, who has to enter into competition with others. When this is carried to an extreme and when the «guiding» institutions have lost their influence, the individual is thrown into a process of constantly making choices; his own life is based on making decisions. In the economic sphere competitiveness takes priority over cooperation, and where cooperation exists, it serves only to reinforce competitiveness (of my business and my ideas... against another business and its ideas). The educational system reinforces these values even when it tries to justify them or disguise them by using words like personalization, creativity, and initiative –words that *should* include a social or cooperative dimension. This doesn't mean that cooperation doesn't exist, only that it has been reserved to specific spheres of activity, such as the family, religion, NGOs, etc. Not even these spheres, however, have remained immune to the more individualistic or competitive elements of the system.

d) Another very important value in the dominant economic system is the drive to maximize profit. In order to do that, values associated with labor, political, or environmental rights are sacrificed to values that are directly

prejudicial to human rights. In order to maximize profits which benefit only a few people, there is no hesitation in sacrificing whatever must be sacrificed –always in the name of progress. Perhaps the only brake or limit on this type of exploitation is the fear of upsetting the stability of the system; the important thing to allow the exploitation to continue as long as possible.

e) Another value is that of utility, understood in the economic sense, which considers only the functionality of the means without ever asking about the ends. Utilitarianism can lead to great effectiveness and efficiency, which are positive values in themselves, but in the process many other values are sacrificed.

f) Quantity is also given priority over quality. Present-day capitalism has extended the reach of consumer society by marketing a multitude of products. The objective is to promote compulsive consumption, which is the principal fuel for the capitalist system of production. Many of these products are of dubious quality, and they are designed to wear out quickly so that they can be replaced by new products. The whole system requires excessive consumption of energy, squandering of natural resources, and production of tremendous waste.

g) Another value is the effort put into work. This was value characteristic of early capitalism, but it has become more and more irrelevant, especially since the West has developed a decidedly hedonist culture and the financial world has made it possible to obtain profits without exerting much effort.

h) The system has placed ever more value on short-term gains rather than long-term benefits, thus threatening the sustainability of production and contributing to environmental deterioration. Very few people are conscious of what the consequences of their present actions will be for future generations and for the environment, so that these consequences play little role in the planning of economic activity.

1.4. Capitalism and post-modernity

In order to understand the western world from an axiological viewpoint, we must be able to comprehend as well a) the values related to so-called post-modernity or advanced modernity and b) the liberal political values related to modernity, such as the rights of the person, democracy, dialogue, and freedom from tyranny. Both the sociopolitical values and the values of post-modernity have been modified by an economic system with which they have often been in conflict (think, for example, of the power of non-regulated markets). Unfortunately, when social and cultural values have vied with economic values, the former have taken a beating. The democratic ideal that was once guaranteed by the classical nation-states has been mortally wounded by the global markets that are regulated by no one.

Some postmodern cultural values had their origin precisely in people's discontent with the values of modernity, others arose as a reaction to the values of the economic system, and still others were promoted by the constellation of values undergirding the eco-

conomic system itself, for the sole purpose of reinforcing those values. For example, the emphasis on the self and on emotional well-being reinforces the image of the individual who is completely dedicated to consuming in the marketplace and whose ideal is the perfectly healthy, muscular body. The loss of a liberating utopian vision, which resulted from disillusionment about the power of human reason, provoked all kinds of wars and disasters in the twentieth century. Society has thus produced individuals who are totally centered on themselves and who refuse to believe that the economic system can change; they believe that there are no alternatives and that mobilizing for change is futile. All this contributes to the development of neo-conservative social movements that do not question the economic system.

Post-modern individuals no longer believe in science as savior because they realize that science has brought with it potential disasters, such nuclear meltdowns and ecological calamities. Nevertheless, they continue to use technology, and they seek happiness by consuming all kinds of hi-tech products. The weak convictions of post-modern individuals make them more tolerant of what goes on around them, but also less involved, so that they live in their own world and are not much concerned about others. Their tenuous convictions also make them more vulnerable to the manipulation of marketing techniques and misinformation. These are only a few of the post-modern values which either reinforce the values of the economic system or are compatible with it

to the extent that the system meets their needs for new consumer items.

Post-modernity does contain some values that are clearly contrary to the values of the capitalist economic system, such as «hedonistic presentism,»⁴ the lack of commitment, and the unwillingness to make an effort.

1.5. Some «counter-values» to the system

Finally, some values originating in the new social moments have managed to penetrate western society. They are critical of capitalist values and act against them, or at least they have modulated some of the extremes of this economic system. I speak, for example, of feminist consciousness, which has elements quite incompatible with many capitalist values. There is also ecological consciousness, which is unfortunately often very superficial; rather than question the productive system and propose radical changes, it simply proposes patchwork solutions that are of an esthetic nature.

Many of the values we have mentioned, especially those related to so-called post-modernity, are deeply rooted in the West and have less influence in other cultures, although globalization has propagated them extensively, especially among the well-connected elites. In this regard, it would be interesting to analyze non-western societies to see what influence the capitalist system has had on them and how it has evolved. There are still societies into which post-modern values have penetrated little; they have maintained their more tradi-

tional values. It would be interesting to study the influence of Confucianism or Maoism in modern-day Chinese society or to investigate what is unique about Japanese or Korean capitalism because of the influence of their traditions. It

would also be worthwhile to examine how western societies like those in Latin America are influenced by the indigenous cultures which preserve communal elements in their economic and juridical systems.

2. HUMANIZING TODAY'S WORLD. CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

In this section we will try to show what Christian ethical reflection can contribute to the world of today and to Christianity itself. In other words, we want to see what aspects of our faith can help to humanize our present-day world.

To be sure, other religious and secular traditions can also contribute something, since the fundamental traits of Christianity, as found in the central ethics presented in the New Testament, are not exclusively Christian but have been found in other traditions as well.

2.1. The community dimension

European society has become the ultimate expression of egocentric individualism. The ideal is the ever more isolated individual who is focused on

personal fulfillment defined in terms of emotional well-being. Such an individual has lost a sense of community and has ceased to be involved or even interested in the *res publica*, preferring to leave everything in the hands of professional politicians. The community dimension is reduced to its minimal expression (family, partner, children, friends). The consequence of this has been the worsening of social atomization, which is increasingly seen as a root of many social pathologies. Christianity can help us to recover a certain sense of

community; it can help us achieve greater harmony between the importance given to individuals and the sense of community that fosters solidarity and commitment that go beyond the limits of our familial and cultural circles, so that the person is fulfilled both individually and socially at the same time.

The project of Jesus is thus presented as universal and as compatible with a great diversity of cultural forms. Every person is considered worthy of belonging to a universal fraternity which is realized in communion (= common union). Other traditions, such as the Buddhist, speak of the same ideal but use instead the language of universal compassion or interdependence, concepts that can contribute to a more just globalization.

Unfortunately it must also be said that the sense of community has been devalued even within the Christian religion, especially in the West, with the result that a person's relation with God is more individualist than communitarian. The decline in the celebration of the sacraments has been one of the signs of this, though not the only one.

2.2. Life as gift

If we learn to appreciate as a gift given freely and not just as a personal achievement, then we will appreciate more the gratuitous dimension of human relations and of our own lives. We will often discover that we owe much those who, when we were weak, loved us and expected nothing in return. Not everything in life is subject to contracts or based on selfish

interests. Often the need arises in our society to highlight clear instances of gratuity, such as volunteering. But such gratuity should also be present in areas that are controlled by some kind of contract. I am thinking of work and also of leisure time, which has been progressively commercialized to the point where it has an almost functional relationship to work. Leisure time has become preparation for work, or perhaps simply a time of rest that allows us to keep working more. We should reclaim our leisure time as the space for freely relating with other people; it should cease to have a purely economic character and be instead a time for play, a «waste of time» as far as productivity goes.

The introduction of a dimension of gratuity into our contractual relationships would give them a different, more human quality, and it would perhaps help us realize that, without the definite values proper to the sphere of gratuity, our contractual relationships inevitably end up getting degraded and destroyed. There is no question but that mutual confidence and the sharing of ideas about the common good do not harm the contract but rather reinforce it.

2.3. Ability to discern

Christianity should help people to develop a capacity for discernment, for we live in a world in which every person has to make options constantly about how to proceed in life. Discernment presupposes a capacity for interiority, silence, and calm which allow persons to make decisions from deep

within, decisions that are based on reality and not on conditioning factors or pure illusions. Modern-day sociology observes that there has been a weakening of the guiding institutions which in earlier times provided assistance for the decisions people had to make: family, social class, school, religion, etc. This observation is true, but at the same time other, more subtle conditioning factors have appeared, such as the market forces that we sometimes absorb unconsciously and that influence our lives more than we would like to believe. Since the influence of these forces is not noticed, we have the impression that we have made a free choice, but there is only the illusion of freedom. We think that we have decided what to buy, what clothes to wear, what computer or cell phone to use, but all these preferences have basically been induced within a definite social sphere.

Orienting our lives from the perspective of the discerning self means not letting ourselves be influenced by omnipresent lures or by noisy distractions. We need to learn to cultivate a freer self that knows how to listen and is more aware of its feelings and its attractions. There are many practices that help us cultivate this freer self. Indeed, the traditional ascetical and religious practices are oriented mainly toward training us to be free with regard to things. Orienting our lives from within means recognizing our own disordered affections and trying to order them in the direction of who we want to be. The practice of meditation, understood simply as concentration, can also prepare our human conscious-

ness to make choices in an environment which is filled with an excess of stimuli and fragmented information.

Christianity presents Jesus as the ideal model of detachment from self. He is the fully free person who is not attached to material things or even to his own Jewish religion as it was practiced in his day. Jesus was a model of listening and discernment. Insofar as it is reflection on human action in the spirit of Jesus, Christian ethics is open to the Spirit of God when it offers overarching principles but allows personal and community discernment to make decisions in each concrete situation. This flexibility is necessary in complex undertakings where there are always conflicting values. Christian ethics offers a path between «fundamentalist ethics,» which offers security by simplifying reality and strictly monitoring people's behavior, and «emotive ethics,» which holds that human behavior should be guided by pure feeling even when such feeling is fragmentary and fleeting. Neither type of ethics can offer any help to persons who are discerning. Neither type is able to help to find solutions to the common but complex problems that now afflict humanity, especially solutions that do not simply redound to the benefit of those who are already privileged.

2.4. The hope factor

Christian ethics contains a hope factor. Christian faith maintains the hope that human fulfillment is always possible. Even the small steps taken in a solidarity project are not useless; even if

immediate results are not seen, our efforts are not in vain. Such hope is in no way naïve for it is strong enough to break through the discouragement of those who think they can do nothing. The dominant ideological systems privilege certain collective enterprises and present themselves as the only possible solutions to existing problems; they provide recipes that are credible but biased. In the past such ideologies spared no violence or repression in their efforts to impose themselves on those who refused to follow them. Nowadays, especially in democratic societies, these ideologies have abandoned their more violent forms, but they still present themselves as hegemonic, thus perpetuating the idea that there are no other options. They also promote fear about any change affecting the status quo that does not proceed from themselves. Utopian hope is a good antidote against such ideologies and against fear for it makes it possible for us to imagine that another world is possible and that real social change can come about.

2.5. Participation in the common good

Our western society has interiorized the value of democracy, that is, the participation of all citizens in the making of decisions about society or at least in the election of those who will make such decisions. There are movements throughout Europe that are seeking reforms that will make democracies more authentic. The financial crisis of 2007 has shown the weakness of political power (which comes through

elections) with respect to transnational economic power (which comes through markets rather than elections). It would take a long time to enumerate and explain all the formulas that have been proposed for the reform of democracy, as well as to describe the great resistance to reform that has been mounted by the classical party apparatus and the large transnational economic groups. In summary, though, this whole process has progressively weakened the confidence that people have in political power.

These reform movements are very much in need of a solid set of values, either those provided by a «human rights ethics» or those that come from the great religious traditions. True democracy is founded precisely on these values: the basic rights of the person, human dignity and equality, freedom, the right of participation, freedom of conscience and belief, etc. If these values are not interiorized, democracy can stumble and easily decline into demagoguery. We see this happen when democracy is not practiced at the basic levels of society (neighborhood associations, schools, unions, etc.). We see it also in those countries where formal democracy exists (there are regular elections) but where there is no equality of opportunity and where oligarchic groups effectively hold all the power. In our world today religiously based ethics can motivate people to defend these basic rights by creating a framework of solidarity as the foundation for democracy. The religious traditions have often been accused of having little commitment to democracy, but it is forgotten that

extreme liberalism has led to a type of individualism that ends up fragmenting our societies. A democratic system can function only if people have a minimum consciousness of community. People must feel that they are involved in a common project in which their duties toward others do not derive simply from legal obligations. Rather, they must be convinced that cooperation is the best way to promote the good of all and to bring about the personal fulfillment that all desire. Extreme individualism leads people to be concerned about themselves alone and not about what happens to their neighbors, and that is a sure sign of the eclipse of true democracy.

2.6. The political factor

Christian ethics must be aware that it is proposing values that are often considered unessential in societies where they in fact need to be developed and put in practice. This is true even in societies with a Christian tradition. Living in a Christian manner is not easy in pluralistic societies; it requires constant discernment whenever decisions are made. It is true that pluralistic societies allow Christian values to be practiced as long as the other norms of civility are observed. Dissent is expressed in the way we live when we practice the values that are important in our lives, even while recognizing that those around us may have another type of ethics and other visions of the world.

Christians can and should play a certain denunciatory role when they believe that the social ethos violates values they consider important. Denun-

ciations, as we have said, are best expressed by living authentically or by dialoguing with those who think differently. The advantage of democratic societies, not always sufficiently recognized, is that they provide forums in which questions can be discussed and the different ethical options present in a society can be heard. Often Christians can appeal to the ideal values of their own society, values that are recognized but often not respected, such as those formulated in terms of human rights; in this way they can provide support for many critical social movements. In all societies, including the most democratic, the rights of minorities and the rights of the poor are often endangered; in such situations the prophetic and denunciatory role of Christians should play an important role.

2.7. A positive vision of authority

During the twentieth century the concept of authority lost much of its value, having been weakened by various types of totalitarianism and by the world wars. Authority was badly abused by those who held power. There is now widespread suspicion of authority, which is seen as the exercise of power by an elite few, even when it is legitimized by regular elections and exercised within the limits of a state of law.

This crisis of authority exists not just in the political realm but in all areas of society, including family, school, and church. The church existed for centuries during which the faithful never disputed the authority of bishops or theologians. Nevertheless, when the magisterium

(pope, bishops, theologians) gave theological and rational reasons for their pronouncements, the faithful trusted more in the authority that was issuing the pronouncements than in the reasons given. Today all that has changed because of the diversity of opinions that has come with modernity.

Moreover, the ecclesiastical institution itself was affected by an exercise of authority that was not very evangelical. Christian ethics must therefore be very conscious of what it contributes and how it contributes to society; simple appeal to authority can be counterproductive if authority has previously been abused. The church has been tempted and continues to be tempted by power, by the desire to possess wealth, and by the belief that it possesses all truth. There exists the temptation to exercise power in order to impose the church's ethics and truth and thus to extend the Kingdom of God. In Christianity authority must exist for the service of others; authority stoops down to wash the feet of the neighbor, as Jesus did. The authority of Jesus was most clearly shown in his extreme descent onto the cross. It is this *kenosis* that will give credibility to the church. When the church serves and when she becomes the servant of those who are poorest and most needy, then she will be exercising the power of powerlessness. This way of understanding authority can be a tremendous contribution to our societies. In our Christian communities we should remember the words of Bernard Häring, who defined the «magisterium» of the Church in the *Dictionary of Moral*

Theology in this way: «The first magisterium is exercised by the saints.»

2.8. Recovering and rethinking the Tradition

Another reality related to the theme of authority is that our world has been «detraditionalized,» that is, traditions have lost their meaning. They have not disappeared, but they have lost their stability and are constantly being adapted. As a result, they have entered into crisis since by definition a tradition is characterized by the stability and permanence with which it is repeated over time. In the past traditions helped people to make important life decisions because they provided security and at the same time slowed down social changes. The fact that our industrial and technological society has become detraditionalized has greatly affected religious institutions, which partly depend on traditions. Nowadays we have to learn to live in a society that is constantly changing. We need to learn to distinguish what is perennial (Tradition with a capital T) from what must be adapted or changed (traditions with a small T). There has been tremendous resistance to change in the Church, where traditions have had great force and where fidelity to Jesus has easily been confused with fidelity to traditions. Actually, traditions are simply historical realities that are good and necessary but that in the course of time can become hindrances for the institution itself. If we look at history, we are surprised at the extraordinary capacity for adaptation that the Church has shown. From

the beginning she experienced very deep cultural changes, the principal one being the incorporation of Hellenic philosophies into theological reflection on the message of Jesus.

Consequently, the Christian community should not be afraid to rethink the current traditions in its effort to respond to social changes and the emergence of other non-western cultural forms. Christians should not be afraid to shed the added things that were good but were expressed in forms determined by western culture. The Church was one of the first institutions that became globalized and that

inculturated herself in many countries, thus becoming a model of how to make universality compatible with particularity. In the realm of ethics, Christianity contains excellent principles regarding human fulfillment, but the meaning of a full human life has changed over the course of history and has assumed constantly different forms. The great ethical principles can guide us, but they must be adapted to the times and to concrete situations. A paradigmatic example is the way the commandment «not to kill» has been understood in the history of the Catholic moral tradition.

3. SIGNS OF THE TIMES THAT HELP US LIVE AS FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS

Since the beginning Christian communities absorbed ethical values from their cultural environment, adopting intuitions of Stoicism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, etc. In modern times also, some of the values that were a central part of Christianity (and in the course of time have grown weaker) were paradoxically recovered by secular opponents and so came to form part of modern culture and contemporary ethics. The Christian community needs to discern these signs of the times and see what it can learn from them and what it can incorporate (or re-incorporate) into Christian practice.

3.1. Fine-tuning discernment

Discernment means knowing how to decide what values are good in the sense that they are humanizing. We ask therefore: what values express an evangelical morality that can be applied to the new situations that appear in our world, and what values work against the humanization of the person? The task of discernment is not an easy one; it requires great prudence in order to

avoid facile condemnation of values that are mixed with elements which may seem strange to our Christian language and our manner of doing things but which actually convey a Christian vision and make it a reality in important ways.

At the same time, discernment should refuse to recognize other values that enjoy widespread social acceptance but are not compatible with Christian

ethics. Discernment has always been a difficult task that requires the help of the Spirit of Jesus, for only the Spirit can help us to know how to apply the great evangelical principles to particular situations that are often unprecedented. With regard to this kind of ambivalence, we should recall the words Benedict XVI addressed to the Bundestag when referring to the Green Party of Germany:

I would say that the rise of the ecological movement in German politics, starting in the 1960s, even if it has not opened windows, nevertheless has been and is a cry for fresh air, a cry that cannot be ignored or discounted as something irrational. Young people realized that something was wrong in our relationship with nature; they understood that matter is not just material for us to use; rather, the earth possesses its own proper dignity and we must follow its indications. (Berlin, 22 September 2011)

3.2. Amidst sectarianism, dialogue, and dissolution

In the western Church today two different stances are taken. They are perhaps not extreme in the form they take, but they do reflect tendencies anchored in the past and closed off to the signs of the times, even though both stances contribute positively to the Church. It is not a question of judging them but of noticing how little attention they pay to the signs of the times. They are failing to intuit the new inspirations of the Spirit.

3.2.1. Nostalgic reminiscence and restorationism

The first tendency longs for past epochs when the Church was respectfully heeded and had great social influence. This tendency in the Church has made it difficult for her to adapt to the modern era and even now causes her to be unduly disturbed by the irruption of post-modernity.

The tendency gives rise to a desire to return to pre-modern forms, some of which are commendable⁵ but others of which are anachronistic and incapable of responding to the new challenges of present-day society. The danger in this tendency is that it inclines people toward sectarianism; it makes them feel persecuted and despised by society so that they take on the fundamentalist attitudes of a mistreated minority. This tendency is especially attractive to persons who are disoriented or insecure since it offers them clear and distinctive guidelines. The problem is that it fails to consider the complexity of situations and perceives reality only in black-and-white terms. The tendency also runs the risk of falling into a certain disembodied spiritualism that emphasizes types of devotion that have little consciousness of social morality but instead are preoccupied with a rigorist morality in matters of sexuality and bioethics. This rigorist mentality causes many people (including believers) to become alienated from the Church and to join the ranks of those whom the sociologists call «non-religious believers,»⁶ a category of people that has grown continually in Europe in recent years. This tendency is also in danger of being

manipulated by conservative political interests that see in religion a socially cohesive force that allows them to achieve greater visibility in the public forum. This is what has been happening with the neo-conservative movements. It would be unjust to fail to appreciate the positive values of this tendency, for it is what prevents the Church from becoming diluted in contemporary society and losing its unique identity. It represents a longing for a Church that is able to confront society without fear or anxiety and to deliver a message that no one else can offer.

3.2.2. «Progressive Christianity»

The other tendency in the Church groups together ecclesial movements that are more concerned about social questions. These movements are strong in denouncing injustice and defending poor people against structures that are violating their rights. Our present time still needs the voice of these movements since the globalizing world has generated great wealth but has also considerably increased inequality both at the international level and within countries. But these movements must be attentive to the new signs of the times, to the new forms of inequality and injustice, and to the new forms of social exclusion and marginalization, such as those affecting the environment and cultural minorities. These ecclesial movements can no longer continue to offer models that were valid in the 1970s but are now insufficient or inappropriate. We believe that they must listen carefully to the new social movements and to young Christians. In

other words, they should leave behind the old schemas of the classical left and grasp the complexity of the problems of justice in a globalized world. Moreover, they should not be afraid to manifest their Christian identity in a society which no longer sees it as allied with political power and which is becoming more conscious of the value and the importance of spirituality and of the new forms of religious experience and discernment that can help people to discover the new frontiers of marginalization.

Without pretending to be exhaustive, I want to offer some examples from our modern world –actions, words, and ideas– that are worth considering.

3.3. Signs of the times, evangelical signs

3.3.1. *Against the idolatry of the market: the concept of interdependence*

As church teaching has often denounced, there exists in our world an idolization of the «market god,» with all that that implies. In response to this, alternative spaces of solidarity have been created, such as responsible consumer cooperatives, fair trade programs, ethical banking, socially responsible investing, exchange of services among specific groups, etc. Never before have there been so many examples of alternative economic spaces! It is interesting that many of these movements have been promoted within religious settings. In some countries these alternative economic forms are beginning to have a certain weight in the marketplace;

such is the case with fair trade and with organically produced foods. Proof of this is seen in the quantity of these products that are becoming available and can even be found in conventional markets.

The ecological problematic resulting from unsustainable consumption and the alarming data we are receiving with regard to climatic change are making people more aware that we cannot continue this way. It is becoming increasingly evident that we need to seek reconciliation with creation on the basis of a new understanding of the theology of creation and of our relation to nature. There is also greater consciousness of the need for intergenerational solidarity; we are becoming more aware that our neighbors include those who will come after us, our descendants, since our present actions will affect their lives or at least the quality of their lives. Therefore, our idea of *who our neighbor is* becomes more inclusive, no longer limited to the man we see on the road to Jericho, whose distressed face appeals to us for a compassionate response. Rather, our neighbors are also the persons we do not see either because they're on the other side of the world or because they will be born in later generations.

Consequently, it is extremely important to preserve a diversity of animal and plant species, not only because of the intrinsic value of diversity but because of the intimate connections among all the living beings of the planet. By safeguarding animal and plant life now, we are protecting not only present-day human life but also

the human life to come (that of our descendents). Let us remember that diversity will allow us to adapt more successfully to whatever new habitats may appear as a result of climatic change. There is a basic value in the interdependence and the intercommunion of living beings with one another, as we are reminded in paragraph number 26 of *Gaudium et Spes*. Unfortunately, however, the prevailing culture encourages us to think first of ourselves, and it fails to promote consciousness of the reality of interdependence among all beings, that is, of how we are all interrelated and how much human life depends on other beings. We don't experience our reality as a gift from others and for others so that when we relate with them, we often treat them as mere objects. We are not aware of what they think or what they feel; we do not experience their suffering as our own. Rather, we relate to them as if they were objects to be observed and manipulated without imposing any obligation on us. We have interiorized the idea that the individual self can thrive all on its own; whatever it needs from others is made into an object in function of itself. We need, then, to begin to relate to others in terms of interdependence and thus begin to understand that the good of the individual and the good of the collective are inseparable. Failure to understand this has condemned three-quarters of humanity to suffering, and it has placed nature itself under great pressure. Consciousness of interdependence should result in an ethics of universal compassion that allows all

living beings to thrive, especially those which are weakest and most threatened. Only we human beings can take on this great responsibility; we must behave as if we were the conscience of the planet. We must be capable of responding with compassion both to the members of our own species and to the members of other species since we all have a common destiny in this great biosphere.

3.3.2. *Austerity*

Our comments in the previous section assume an appreciation of the value of austerity. There exist today movements which promote more austere ways of life. The movement advocating slower growth⁷ has given rise to an interesting debate about this question. It advocates «living with less» so that those who come after us will have a planet that is more habitable. Austerity requires a series of behaviors and attitudes that become concrete in a different sort of daily life:

a) Consuming responsibly and sustainably, not leaving our norms for consuming in the hands of the market and its advertising strategies.

b) Paying special attention to the traps set by the market, such as the programmed obsolescence of many products, thus favoring continued consumption.

c) Re-educating and restraining our desire to have more and more, a desire whose only objective is attaining a certain social status or identity.

With regard to this last idea, we should note that the market does not limit itself to offering products that

satisfy our material needs; by its different product brands and logos it also offers imaginary ideal worlds that give us a sense of identity and meaning. As a result, we are urged to acquire our sense of identity and meaning through what we buy and consume. Our identity seems to come less from our family or our social class and more from what we consume and how we dress. In this way we create collective identities that give us status or that identify us as athletes, as rebels, as young people, etc. Our consuming habits and the brands we buy introduce us into a particular sub-culture which give us an identity and therefore a certain security. These are identities that are not imposed on us but can be freely chosen. As a consequence, they are seen as acceptable since they allow us to exercise freedom of choice even though in a superficial way.

This can be seen more clearly with regard to adolescents since they are highly influenced by the group or the faction to which they feel closest. Adherence to or rejection by the group determines their identity. We depend on our identity to protect us against insecurity and fear of failure. Identity satisfies our desire for recognition and our need for affection. The persons most susceptible to the attraction of certain brands are precisely those who feel most needy, and adolescents are vulnerable in this regard. They are seeking a personal identity, and their eager consumption corresponds to the physiological and psychological changes they are experiencing. They are especially malleable and are in constant need of being accepted and of belonging to a

group. They satisfy their needs mainly by controlling external things such as the clothing they wear or the music they listen to, but they also place much importance on the physical shape of their bodies and so engage in dieting, sports, and exercise. This sector of the population is so important that some commentators speak of the «global adolescents» who are independent of any culture –they prefer Coca-Cola to local products and Nikes to sandals. There is little doubt that for some decades now companies have stopped producing things and have dedicated themselves instead to producing «brands.»

Returning to the signs of the times, the ecological crisis has given birth to a movement that speaks in terms of «environmental justice.» That is because the poorest countries are those that suffer the worst consequences of climate change,⁸ such as droughts, migrations, floods, and the exhaustion of food sources (e.g., fishing). This movement reveals how poverty is related to ecological problems, and it helps us to realize that distributive justice cannot be separated from ecology. In the West we are often made aware that ecological movements have the most strength precisely in poor countries and the so-called emerging countries. Many Christians and many Christian communities are working for the defense of the environment and environmental justice.

3.3.3. *New spiritualities*

In the midst of a western culture that is predominantly hedonist and materialist there is a resurgent interest in new forms

of spirituality. Despite the ambiguity inherent in these new spiritualities, they reveal people's profound dissatisfaction with the status quo and their desire for something else. Although many of these new spiritualities are extremely centered on the inner self, their emergence in society is a symptom of something that we should not deride. Some authors speak of a post-materialist era that is seeking to replace the materialist culture that dominated the West soon after the Second World War ended.

It is important to ask why the spirituality offered by the Catholic Church and Christian churches in general is so little accepted in the West, especially in Europe. Sociological data reflect a strong decline in religious observance in Europe, although the decline has slowed down in recent years.⁹ We should also analyze here the post-modern forms of religiosity with all their ambiguity (some authors even talk about «the return of the witches»¹⁰). Our analysis should avoid considering these forms to be anti-religious or purely negative (manipulative, self-centered, emotional, etc.). We should concentrate instead on the symptoms that give rise to them, such as dissatisfaction, and on the characteristics that make them attractive to many people. Without seeking to undertake an in-depth analysis, we believe that these new forms of religiosity often offer a valuable critique of certain religious forms to which the Church has long been wedded. We have inherited a very rationalist religiosity that is centered on argument; it is excessively ethical, minimally celebratory or aesthetic, and highly individualistic (or

at least lacking in community spirit). Such religiosity has always viewed any expression of feeling as highly subjective. This implicit critique should be taken seriously by the Church to see if there is any truth in it. The Church should now take the same attitude that the Council was advocating when it spoke of atheism (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 19-21). The context that the Council was then addressing in the West was different from what is happening now. It was focused on the increase in practical atheism and the prevalence of atheistic, materialist systems that viewed God as a impediment for the progress of the human race. *Gaudium et Spes* therefore insisted that the Church has to perform her own examination of conscience: «Believers themselves frequently bear some responsibility for this situation. For, taken as a whole, atheism is not a spontaneous development but stems from a variety of causes, including a critical reaction against religious beliefs, and in some places against the Christian religion in particular. Hence believers may have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism» [GS 19]. Still, the document continues, the Church «strives to detect in the atheistic mind the hidden cause for the denial of God. Conscious of how weighty are the questions which atheism raises, and motivated by love for human beings, the Church believes these questions ought to be examined more seriously and more profoundly» [GS 21].

A similar effort needs to be undertaken by the Church and Christians generally with regard to the new spiritualities.

3.3.4. *The recovery of local culture*

The homogenizing tendency of globalization is causing people to be concerned about recovering and revalorizing the diversity of local cultures. This development presents a challenge to the Church, especially in Africa and Asia, where the Church is growing fastest and where there are more conversions and vocations to religious life. The challenge is how best to inculturate the faith among peoples who do not have the western philosophical tradition, even as the Church is suffering a significant loss of influence in the western world that has that tradition. The challenge, in other words is how to situate the Church between universality (as catholic) and respect for what is local. This challenge is by no means new but has become all the more urgent with globalization and the development of better means of communicating and traveling. It is quite possible that today more than ever we are conscious of cultural conditioning and of the need to inculturate the faith in ways that will allow it to grow and expand.

3.3.5. *The recovery of values in key sectors*

There are signs that people are concerned that the market and the new technologies not be guided solely by the goal of economic profit. Never before have there been so much discussion of values in the areas of politics, business, finance, or medicine, but the fact is that there are still many practices that fail to consider any values at all, and these have brought us to the

extreme of treading on the dignity of many persons, especially those who are most vulnerable. True concern for values is still just getting underway, but it is real. In the field of bioethics, for example, steps have been taken to introduce the study of values into the curriculums for medicine and nursing, though this kind of reflection is still very scarce in Catalonia and Spain. It is more difficult to introduce reflection on values into the curriculums of business schools, perhaps because such reflection inevitably leads students to question the values of the present system. Because of the present economic crisis, the worst since the crisis of 1929, some of the major economics faculties are beginning to examine what they are actually teaching in their classrooms. They are increasingly aware that the training they currently impart is what gave rise to a business culture that produced dishonest financial speculation and paved the way for the present crisis. This process of rethinking the economic model and its unsustainable character is very slow, however. In the end it will be the emerging countries that will set the norms for this kind of ethical reflection in the coming years.

3.3.6. *The horizon of a global ethics*

Faced with the many problems of our world, the great religious traditions have made an effort to show that they are bearers of peace and graciousness among peoples and that they can help prevent conflict. They have facilitated ethical agreements that show that they are in favor of world peace, respect for the environment, and a just economic

order. Some of the values the great religions share can be seen, for example, in the «Declaration Toward a Global Ethic» that was issued by the Parliament of the World's Religions at their 1993 meeting in Chicago.¹¹ This Declaration has contributed greatly to the creation of a world ethics. The Parliament of the World's Religions proposed that a new world order is not possible without a world ethics, understood as «a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitudes. Without such a fundamental consensus on an ethic, sooner or later every community will be threatened by chaos or dictatorship, and individuals will despair.» Let us recall what the Declaration tells us in Part 2 of its introduction:

We all are fallible, imperfect men and women with limitations and defects. We know the reality of evil. Precisely because of this, we feel compelled for the sake of global welfare to express what the fundamental elements of a global ethic should be—for individuals as well as for communities and organizations, for states as well as for the religions themselves. We trust that our often millennia-old religious and ethical traditions provide an ethic which is convincing and practicable for all women and men of good will, religious and non-religious.

At the same time we know that our various religious and ethical traditions often offer very different bases for what is helpful and what is unhelpful for men and women, what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. We do not wish to gloss over or

ignore the serious differences among the individual religions. However, they should not hinder us from proclaiming publicly those things which we already hold in common and which we jointly affirm, each on the basis of our own religious or ethical grounds.

The Magisterium of the Church has also commented on the need for a universal ethics in a document issued by the International Theological Commission: *In Search of a Universal Ethics*. The Church, conscious of the need to seek common norms for living together in justice and peace, wants to share with the other religious and philosophical traditions of our time the concept of natural law, a concept which, despite some biased interpretations, is in no way static or determined only by definitive and immutable precepts. To the contrary, the natural law is a source of inspiration that arises precisely from the search for an objective foundation for a universal ethics (no. 113). It does this by appealing to what is universal in every human being and by inviting the other traditions to do the same while drawing on their own sources. It is, therefore, an attempt to win a common acknowledgement of universal moral norms that are founded on a rational approximation to reality. This urgent task goes beyond our particular religious convictions and our diverse cultural presuppositions in order to gain the mutual recognition and peaceful cooperation of all members of the human family (no. 116). The document reminds us, though, that «Christianity does not have a monopoly on the natural law. In fact, since the natural law is

based on the power of reasoning that is common to all human beings, it provides a solid foundation for collaboration among all persons of good will whatever their religious convictions» (no. 9). «The nature and the extension of these tradition can vary considerably, but they bear clear witness to the existence of a patrimony of moral values that are common to all peoples, no matter how these values are justified within a particular vision of the world. For example, the ‘Golden Rule’ is found in one form or another in most of the world’s wisdom traditions.¹² Moreover, the different traditions generally agree that the great ethical norms do not apply only to particular human group but have universal validity for every individual and for all peoples. Finally, many traditions recognize that these universal moral behaviors are required by the very nature of human beings» (no. 12).

In the concrete case of the Church, she has acted as mediator and reconciler in many conflicts and has helped opposed parties to find reconciliation and forgiveness.

3.3.7. «*Networks of indignation and hope*»

Finally, for some time now in Europe we have seen the beginnings of social movements that have been called «networks of indignation and hope.»¹³ This label sums up very well these movements which, like all social mobilization, appeared first as a cry of indignation but then little by little began to present concrete proposals for alternative policies. These movements have

had great success in mobilizing people in the face of a world that is desperate crisis. As Manuel Castells explains, small groups of people began to communicate through the social networks, and that communication led them to occupy the streets and propose concrete measures that were opposed to large-scale economic and financial interests. This movement bypassed the existing political structures and distrusted the mass media that were controlled by economic interests. The different aspects of the movement were not highly organized, but they had many things in common. They were determined to work for new forms of participative democracy, and they showed a clear distrust of politics and the democratic game as portrayed in the social networks.

In a relatively short lapse of time the movement spread around the world. In Tunisia and Egypt we saw the so-called «Arab Spring,» in which people cried out for democracy and protested against autocratic governments. In the United States we saw the «Occupy Wall Street» movement, which started in September of 2011.¹⁴ In Spain we saw the protests of the *Indignados*, the «indignant» demonstrators of the 15-M movement. The alternative proposals put forward by these different movements have already been analyzed in an earlier booklet of this same collection.¹⁵ I would like to stress here, however, a reality that I consider important, namely, the ability of these movements to mobilize people of all ages and to give

them hope. Contributing to the dynamism of these movements were popular manifestos such as «Real Democracy Now!»¹⁶ and S. Hessel's *¡Indignaos! [Get Indignant!]*,¹⁷ which gave its name to the movement in Spain. Anyone reading proposals such as those of the «Sun Assembly»¹⁸ held on May 20th will see that they are requesting very realistic measures, ones that many political analysts and social organizations have been proposing for a long time now; they are measures that include making democracy more effective, working for greater economic equality, and developing an economy that is more sustainable.

There were many Christians among the young people who were setting up camps and leading demonstrations, because many of the proposals of the protesters coincided closely with the principles defended by the Church's social doctrine. For example, the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* of Benedict XVI (2009) touches key issues related to the unjust character of present-day globalization, and its proposals coincide with some of the proposals of this movement. It is true that, like any movement, this one includes people of every sort, and there is need for very careful discernment. We should keep in mind, however, that serious efforts to discredit the movement are being made by the minority elements that control the financial sector and by parties that are afraid of losing their privileged positions.

4. BY WAY OF SUMMARY

The main objective of this booklet has been to invite the reader to reflect on the values we find around us and to become conscious of them. We all live and move in a twofold axiological matrix: a) that of our society (the social *ethos*)¹⁹ and b) that of our religious faith (e.g., Christian, Islamist, or Buddhist ethics) or of an ethical system of a non-religious nature (such as human rights). When a person acts or has to make a decision about some question, he is influenced by this double matrix and by his personal experience of how the two ethical systems intersect. We have focused on western society, which possesses a political and social tradition of a liberal democratic character but whose *ethos* reflects the capitalist economic system –and all of this is situated in a context of post-modernity. Our aim has simply been to take note of some of the values of these contrasting ethical systems.

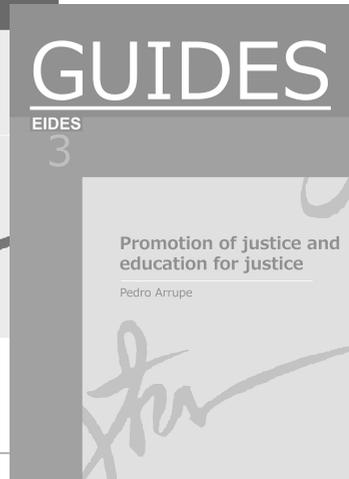
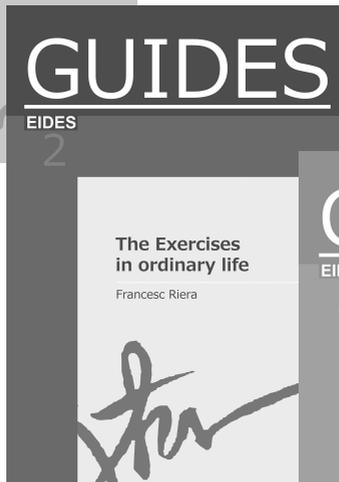
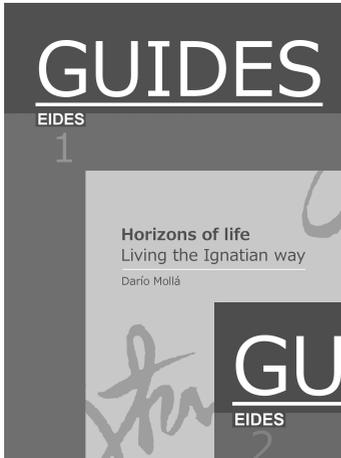
Our second aim was to comply with the demand of the Second Vatican Council that we reflect on what values Christian ethics can contribute to society. Accordingly, we have entered into an ethical dialogue in a sincere attempt to humanize the society that we all experience and share. The reader can surely add many other points to this dialogue since it welcomes the contributions of all.

Finally, we have tried to describe the signs of the times which reveal to us where the Spirit is calling our western societies, and we have tried to do this from a vision centered within the Christian community even as we realize that believers work and interact with members of society who are not believers. The signs of the times and the movements of the Spirit need to be embraced by the Christian community since they respond to the problems of our world; they make proposals and offer solutions that are not foreign to Gospel values despite their secular character. Our final section is also an invitation to see the «new signs of the times» and to discern them in community in order to determine whether they truly respond to the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth.

1. Francis FUKUYAMA, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1989.
2. Culture can be defined in many ways. One definition, inspired by the classical sociological treatise of G. Rocher and modified by J. Miralles, sociology professor at ESADE, is the following: «culture is the whole complex of forms of feeling, acting, and thinking shared by a society which allows members of the group to survive, provides them a sense of identity and belonging, and gives their lives meaning.»
3. The classical definition of ideology is the one found in G. ROCHER, *Introducción a la sociología*, Barcelona, Herder, 1982: «A system of explicit and generally well organized ideas and judgments that serve to describe, interpret, or justify the situation of a group or collectivity; the system draws its inspiration from a set of values and gives a precise orientation to the historical action of the group or collectivity.»
4. The expression was coined by J. M. MARDONES, *Neoconservadurismo, la religión del sistema*, Cuaderno Fe y Secularidad, Santander, Sal Terrae, 1991, p. 10.
5. This tendency understands the importance of the family as a positive factor in the process of socialization and as an integral component of Christian community, but it needs to avoid an idealization of the patriarchal family of earlier centuries, in which the father had excessive power and the woman had to be submissive. Such a model of family is not evangelical. Also, this tendency should refuse to idealize the morality of earlier societies which upheld the norms of the noble class and the bourgeoisie and imposed on others a type of obedience that depended more on mechanisms of social control than on an evangelical, and therefore autonomous, sense of responsibility.
6. For further information on this question, see M. ARROYO MENÉNDEZ in *Tendencias en identidades, valores y creencias*, Madrid, Sistema, 2004
7. One thinker who gave great force to this movement in the 1990s was Serge Latouche. The movement's origins go back to the mathematician and economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, who in 1971 published *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, which elaborates his theory about the bioeconomy. Other influences include critics of the industrialization that took place in the decades of the '50, '60s, and '70s, such as Günther Anders (*La obsolescencia del hombre*, 1956), Hannah Arendt, (*Condición del hombre moderno*, 1958), and the Club of Rome (*The Meadows Report*, 1972).
8. See, for example, the critique made in the UNDP Report for the year 2007-8.
9. In our Catalan context it is interesting to see, for example, the data offered by T. MELLÉN, «Religió i valors» in Javier ELZO and Àngel CASTIÑEIRA (dir.), *Valors tous en temps durs: La societat catalana a l'enquesta europea de valors de 2009*, Barcelona, Barcino, 2011, pp. 279-298.
10. The expression is from a book with that title PAUWELS and J. BERGIER, *El retorno de los brujos*, Barcelona, Plaza Janes, 1981. It is cited in GONZÁLEZ-CARVAJAL, *Ideas y creencias del hombre actual*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 1991, p. 173.
11. The declaration can be found at http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf.
12. «The Declaration Toward a Global Ethic» of the Parliament of the World's Religions (Chicago, 1993) is based on the Golden Rule as formulated in the great religious traditions. The Golden Rule as found in the Gospel of Matthew reads thus: «Do unto others the same as you would have them do unto you» (7,12).

13. This is the title of a new book by sociologist Manuel CASTELLS, *Redes de indignación y esperanza: los movimientos sociales en la era internet*, Madrid, Alianza editorial, 2012.
14. <http://occupywallst.org/>
15. See O. MATEOS and J. SANZ, *Cambio de época. ¿Cambio de rumbo?* [Change of Epoch. Change of Direction?], Barcelona, Cristianisme i Justícia, Cuadernos 186, 2013.
16. <http://www.democraciarealya.es>
17. Stéphane Frédéric Hessel (Berlin, 1917 - Paris, 2013), *Indignez-vous!*, 2010. Published in 2011 in Spanish and Catalán.
18. The proposals may be found at <http://madrid.to.malaplaza.net/2011/05/20/propuestas-20-mayo/>
19. Within the social *ethos* (which consists of the values that float in the environment and are accepted *de facto* by a good part of society as guides for their conduct) we can also find two other sources of moral orientation: the laws of a country and the professional codes of conduct that are specific to a particular occupation or business. As can be imagined, this social *ethos* and one's personal morality can enter into conflict.

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