

Liberation Theology+Nature

[Not final in ERN]

Liberation theology emerged in Latin America during the late 1960's as a theological and religious movement among Roman Catholic clergy. The following decades saw the swift spread of its method among both Roman Catholic as well as Protestant Churches, especially in less affluent, southern hemisphere countries. These diverse practitioners were attracted by the specific approach and method of liberation theology, which can be defined as non-dualistic, biblical-based, praxis rooted in the experience of the poor. This theology was consciously developed in reaction to traditional European theology that focused on intellectual challenges to religion, was focused on a clerical elite, and both spiritualized the Gospel and romanticized poverty. The term liberation is drawn directly from the record of Jesus' first sermon in Luke 4: 18–21, where the text states that Jesus had come “to liberate those who are oppressed.” Here the text recounts acts of salvation that encompass both the spiritual and the material dimensions of existence. This new theological movement found its manifesto in the book *Theology of Liberation* by the Peruvian Roman Catholic theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. In this book Gutiérrez focused on trends that emerging both from Latin American socio-political realities and from the experiences of Church renewal initiated and theologically legitimated through the second Vatican Council, (such as the renewal in Catholic biblical studies), and the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM). This new approach to theology was spread by Roman Catholic theologians including Hugo Assmann, Leonardo Boff, Clodovis Boff, José Comblin, Virgil Elizondo, Ignacio Ellacuría, Francis Hinkelammert , João Alberto Libânio (Frei Betto), and Jung Mo Sung, and the Protestants Miguel Bonino and Rubem Alves.

Liberation theologies stress the example of Jesus of going first to the poor and oppressed and emphasize doing theology in specific social, political, and economic contexts, contrasting this approach with theologies that prioritize the formulation of abstract doctrine. The methodological priority on the poor was, liberation theologians claimed, what both the example of Jesus in the Gospels and the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM) insisted upon at its meetings at Medellín (Colombia, 1968) and Puebla (Mexico, 1979). This priority was coined the “(preferential) option for the poor.” The basic theological method was provided by the three-step practical prescription developed by the Belgian (Later Cardinal) Joseph Cardijn, for the specialized Young Christian Workers of Catholic Action, and summed up in the slogan “see, judge, act.” The Brazilian theologian Clodovis Boff transformed these terms into liberation theology’s three methodological phases of the “social analytical,” the “hermeneutical” and the “practical-pastoral” mediations, respectively. The first mediation is probably the most striking, in that it proposed to use not the traditional theological partner of philosophy, but rather the social sciences, and in particular Marxist sociology, as this social science, it was felt, better described the actual material condition of the poor under capitalist economies in the third world. After analyzing the actual sociological condition of the poor, the Scriptures would be examined, their message interpreted in the light of the current situation, and then applied.

Liberation theologies’ stress on the social, economic and political dimensions of religion reflect the influences of European political theology on its first articulators, Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff, both of whom completed graduate work in Germany. Political theology emerged roughly a decade earlier than liberation theology, in post world war Europe, and reflecting that situation, stressed the public nature and political relevance of religion. Hope for a better future became central feature of both the Catholic theologian Johan Baptist Metz and the Protestant

theologian Jürgen Moltmann, whose respective works *Theology of the World* (1967) and *Theology of Hope* (1964) became widely influential. Moltmann has been especially critical of Western individualism and capitalism, which divides people from each other and desacralizes nature. While liberation theologians drew on political theology's emphases on the social and material dimensions of spirituality, they criticized it for its critique of the present that did not offer concrete political alternatives. They pointed out that without specific political choices, political theology remained as abstract and theoretical as the Western European Church situation it criticized. Therefore liberation theology claimed to make not only an option for the poor but also one for socialism and socialist political platforms as the ones offering justice in the social and economic realms. This focus on the economic and political dimensions, and the centrality of Marxist social analysis, was to change over the next two decades. First, liberation theologians recognized that Marxist analysis had failed to recognize other forms of oppression outside of the economic and political, such as sexism, racism, and that of nature. Second, the dramatic collapse of existent socialism in 1989-1991 (and with it the Cold-War) threw the political left into crisis and the collapse of any practical socialist alternative.

Consequently, by the early 1990's the concept of liberation as only a historical, social and political process had been re-conceptualized as part of a broader paradigm that included liberation not only from material poverty, but also from all forms of discrimination. The close involvement that these theologians had with the urban and rural poor brought to the fore the environmental degradation caused by poverty and the consequent effects on all humans and living beings. This experience led liberation theologians to recognize not only the similarities between the poor, but also the interdependence of both and the necessity of common action. The issue of mass poverty thus became not only a political and religious issue, but also a pressing

ecological issue. The importance of ecology in Latin America and the prominent role of religion and voluntary associations was highlighted in 1992 by Rio de Janeiro hosting the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development.

The term ecology, (coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866) is defined as follows: “Ecology is the study of the interdependence and interaction of living organisms (animals and plants) and their environment (inanimate matter).” This definition refers not just to nature and humans, but also to varying levels of human and non-human interactions. To put this even more concisely, Leonardo Boff, who draws on Haeckel’s work, states “everything that exists, co-exists.” At the human level, this “nature of things” calls us from narrow disciplinary foci to study in an interdisciplinary fashion, from a narrow class-based politics to one based on alliances, from exclusion, to inclusion. Such an approach comes from an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things, as Boff states, “ecology has to do with relations, interaction, and dialogue of all living creatures... among themselves and with all that exists.” This awareness is expressed in diverse ways by differing liberation theologians: Leonardo Boff, drawing on the work of Haeckel and Jan Smuts, speaks of a “holism”, and José Ramos Regidor of a “profound ethical ecology.” Liberation theologians and ecologists emphasize the ethical, political, and social dimensions of the ecological crisis. In much of Latin America, this recognition has provided a point of contact for alliances between civil servants unions, workers unions, religious groups, human rights organizations, student groups, minority groups, and indigenous groups. As ecology is a shared concern of both North and South, ecology has the potential to serve for both regions (and the world) as a bridging concept and structure for dealing with poverty.

Not surprisingly, given that Brazil comprises over half of the South American landmass and includes the Amazon basin and rainforest, the most significant work on liberation theology and

ecology has come from Brazilians. The two most prominent, whose contributions will be outlined, are the (ex-) Franciscan Leonardo Boff and the eco-feminist Ivone Gebara. This is not to diminish the significant work done by other Brazilian theologians such as José Comblin, by others on the continent such as the Uruguyan Eduardo Gudynas of the Franciscan Institute in Montevideo or by José Ramos Regidor in Italy, or those in Africa or Asia. However they follow the basic paradigm set out by these Brazilian theologians.

As early as 1976, Leonardo Boff applied the political interpretation of liberation to the ecological issue in an article relating Franciscan spirituality to the ecological crisis. In this article Boff declared that humans are faced with the choice of relating to things as “over things” or as being “with things.” In choosing the former option he argued for a unitive and relational mysticism with all things, based on an Augustinian relational model of the Trinity or Christian concept of God. By the nineties, Boff sought, in a series of works on ecology, “to connect the cry of the oppressed with the cry of the earth.” In his understanding, an ecological liberation theology is a multi-dimensioned project, including the western technological, political and social projects (in liberal or socialist forms), related in turn to the ethical, intellectual and spiritual dimensions. His work, outside of the theological, draws upon two major streams of thought. These are the evolutionism and biological research of Ernst Haeckel, whose definition of ecology Boff utilizes. The other is the concept of holism, primarily drawn from the scientific and philosophical work of the South African statesman and philosopher, General Jan Christian Smuts. Thus, according to Boff, the science of ecology is the recognition that humanity is part of the intricate web of life, and that men and women are its custodians and so responsible for the ongoing evolution of all life.

Boff’s approach is described fully in his 1995 work entitled *Ecology and Liberation*. He

relates ecology, defined as “the art of relations and of related things,” to the Christian understanding of God as Trinitarian, understood thus as the paradigm of the relational. Adopting the holistic perspective already described, he links ecology and global consciousness and proceeds to argue for a new society that assumes the worth of every person and being. Participatory democracy as a universal value is the only polity that can ensure such rights and participation. Such a polity ensures that the material and social rights of the poor and of the ecological systems are addressed. Without this, environmental balance is not possible. Boff thus widens the scope of the “option for the poor” to include the environment. Humans need to recognize, he notes, that they are a center, not the center of creation, which comprises many living beings with diverse ends. Humans then have an ethical responsibility to recognize that they are a part of a greater whole, a recognition that in turn implies the reciprocity and complementarity that exists among all things. Boff’s conception thus expands liberation theology’s utopian social vision through a profoundly holistic conception of the inter-relatedness of all being. Finally, spirituality for Boff is that attitude which places life at the center and defends and promotes life against reductionism and death in all its forms.

The writings of Ivone Gebara, the Brazilian feminist theologian arise out of her experiences in working with peoples in the more rural and underdeveloped Northern states of Brazil. She argues that while liberation theology has certainly raised the critical question of how God is understood in the midst of human poverty and misery, it has failed to address the patriarchal presuppositions upon which much of Roman Catholicism rests. Drawing on the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Fritjof Capra and Thomas Berry, Gebara questions liberation theologians almost exclusive focus on justice and economic issues. She seeks to widen the scope of liberation theology’s conception of the poor, and to draw new connections to traditional theological doctrines such as the Trinity. In a

similar move to Boff's she argues for a broader concept of life, for a holistic paradigm that includes her eco-feminist principles. Liberation thus includes a commitment to ending poverty as well as patriarchy. The ending of economic poverty, she argues, should go together with restored gender and social relations and the ending of ecological degradation. Gebara views liberated humans as the agents of such transformation, not as the masters of earth, but rather as the earth's conscious reflection upon itself. This self-consciousness is then related to Gebara's study of the Trinity. She understands this doctrine as the Christian way of describing the inter-connectedness, communion and diversity evident in all life. The distortions of such relations are evident in poverty, ecological degradation, and violence.

Although liberation theology did not begin with an ecological concern for the earth, their later works (as exemplified by those of Leonardo Boff's and Ivone Gebara) recognize the basic inter-relatedness of all reality. They thus call for a holistic paradigm that includes all the projects and dimensions of life. In addition, Boff has democratized the ecological question and argues for a planetary ecological and social democracy that comes with a salutary warning to critically evaluate the ecological effects of the process of globalization. This holistic and relational paradigm advocated by many liberation theologians, while powerful, can only succeed by avoiding the nostalgic search for community that cannot exist (at least in traditional forms) in the social conditions of late modernity. The conundrum of modernity is that precisely the advance of globalization is destroying those very links that make for holism and a viable planetary ecology for the future. In their attempt to situate the ecological issue within the context of the poor, liberation theologies indicate the mutual interactions between the social systems and the ecological systems, and that as "we cannot separate social justice and injustice from ecological justice /injustice" we must continue to be the "voice for the voiceless."

Iain S. Maclean, James Madison University

Further Reading

Boff, Leonardo. *Ecology & Liberation. A New Paradigm*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995.

Boff, Leonardo. *Cry of the Poor, Cry of the Earth*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

Gebara, Ivone. *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

Gebara, Ivone. "The Trinity and Human Experience." In *Women Healing Earth: Third world Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996, 13-23.

Gutierrez, Gustavo. *Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973.

Maclean, Iain S. *Opting for Democracy. Liberation Theologians, the Catholic Church and the Struggle for Democracy in Brazil*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.

Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of hope; on the ground and the implications of a Christian eschatology*. Translated by James W. Leitch. London, SCM Press, 1967.

Moltmann, Jürgen. *Creating a just future: the politics of peace and the ethics of creation in a threatened world*. London : SCM Press, 1989.

Ricardo Rezende. *Rio Maria: Song of the Earth*. Translated and edited by Madeleine Adriance. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.