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Nancy Pineda-Madrid

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NEW PERSPECTIVES; NEW QUESTIONS

Where Next for Liberation Theology?

By Nancy Pineda-Madrid

Liberation theology endeavors to speak of God from the perspective of the poor and suffering of the world and to reconsider the enduring themes of Christian life (i.e., God, Jesus Christ, the Church, sin, grace, salvation, discipleship, etc.) from this radically changed perspective. This approach to theology denounces human suffering caused by unjust political and socio-economic structures as opposing the reign of God and resulting from social sin. Liberation theology begins with the question of how God is manifest in the experience of people who know poverty and oppression. It recognizes the poor as privileged members of the reign of God. The poor, given their condition of poverty, are subjected to lives contrary to what God wills for them. While “the poor and suffering” of liberation theology has been variously interpreted, this phrase originally referred to the economic, materially poor. Gustavo Gutierrez’s *A Theology of Liberation* (1971) launched this new approach to theology.

While the beginnings of liberation theology are most often attributed to its Latin American roots, this perspective is short-sighted. In the 1960s the United States saw the accelerated growth of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., which sought racial equality for blacks. Black theology emerged in response and as a critique of how white Christianity in United States is racist and has led to the dehumanization of blacks. James Cone’s book *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) advanced a black rejection of white racist definitions of blacks and affirmed the gifts and contribution of blacks to Christianity. The civil rights movement of the 1960s also helped to foster groups committed to a feminist consciousness. This contributed to a women’s move-

ment that identified and critiqued sexist and patriarchal social patterns in society. In 1968 Mary Daly published *The Church and the Second Sex*, which advanced a sharp critique of the Catholic Church as sexist and patriarchal. These three threshold books, written within a few years of each other, placed liberation theology on the map as a new way of thinking. For over four decades liberation theology has grown enormously diverse, silencing the naysayers who announced its death during the 1990s. Liberation theologies will continue as long as there are poor and oppressed persons.

Liberation theology will now need to address more intentionally and critically the ways in which market capitalism continues to function as the unquestioned ideology of the globalized world and as the imperial economic system. Certain international organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), safeguard an ever-increasing profit margin for wealthy stakeholders at the expense of the economically poor and destitute. These two have institutionalized a neoliberal market ideology. In our increasingly globalized economic world, nation states have become much more beholden to market interests and far less accountable to their citizenry. Liberation theology needs, as Joerg Rieger has argued (*No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future*, 2009; and *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key*, 2009), to rethink the context in which we do theology, recognizing empire and economics as part and parcel of the air we breathe. We need liberation theologies to be in

Nancy Pineda-Madrid is an associate professor of theology and of Latino/a ministry at Boston College.

conversation with economists like Amartya Sen to rethink the nature of the systemic evils that give rise to poverty, famine, and trauma. In the early days of liberation theology, theologians argued about the possibility of the economic development of poor nations and about the value of a Marxian analysis. Today, empire and economics set the agenda for the conversation.

Initially, Latin American liberation theology focused narrowly on class and economic hierarchies. Obviously these remain essential. Today, however, the flourishing of liberation theologies is to be found in work that takes seriously not only classism but also its confluence with sexism, racism, heterosexism, anthropocentrism, and ethnocentrism, among others. Of particular importance is the way these various social sins overlap with one another in several settings. Liberation theology must continue to seek out more adequate ways of addressing the complexity and confluence of social sins. For example, the books of Ivone Gebara masterfully critique poverty, sexism, and ecological devastation as it is experienced by many Brazilian women as well as women throughout Latin America (*Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, 2002; and *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 1999). Similarly, the writings of Silvia Regina de Lima Silva take up not only classism and sexism but also racism, as can be seen in her claim that the bodily experience of Brazilian black women helps us to understand Jesus Christ ("Dialogue of Memories: Ways Toward a Black Feminist Christology from Latin America" in *Feminist Intercultural Theology*, 2007). The philosophy of interculturality, which is today being used by many liberation theologians, offers an intellectual vision and way of life that can guide this theology's response to the confluence of social sins. Interculturality foregrounds the historical context of distinct groups of people and then values how these groups might "live together" transnationally, not in a spirit of mere toleration but rather out of a call to grow precisely by being in relation with one another. Consider the theoretical work of Raul Fornet-Betancourt on interculturality (*Filosofar Para Nuestro Tiempo en Clave Intercultural*, 2004).

Finally, for liberation theology to retain its prophetic edge, as Marcella Althaus-Reid argues, it must discover its foundation in "an epistemology *from* the poor," in other words, the knowing that emerges out of the daily



Regis University.

struggles of people who are poor, the knowing that comes from their desire and effort to provide food, shelter, and education for their children, the knowing that comes from their drive to participate in collective decision-making about what matters most in their daily life; and the like ("*¿Bien Sonados? The Future of Mystical Connections in Liberation Theology*," *Political Theology*, no. 3, 2000).

This kind of knowing is vital because, failing this, liberation theology ends up privileging the idea of poor people more than poor people themselves. The option for the poor, accordingly, becomes a romantic abstraction, one that glosses over, erases, and renders alien the historical experience of poor people. The constant challenge for liberation theology is to figure out how to stay grounded in the concrete life of poor people. For example, much of Latin American liberation theology still does not take the insights of feminist theology seriously in its economic analysis even though the majority of poor people in Latin America are women. The concreteness of poverty in Latin American has not been allowed to challenge the patriarchal mindset that still dominates so much of Latin American liberation theology. Obviously, the work of theologians like Ivone Gebara and other Latin American feminists are an exception to this, but their contributions are still not integral to the work of the overwhelming majority of male Latin American theologians. For the most part these theologians are still blind to their own androcentric bias.

Liberation theology in the decades to come will need to address these and other challenges if it is to remain faithful to its ground-breaking insight, that is, to write theology as if poor and oppressed people mattered. ■