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Gender and Human Rights in Latin America

The winds of change for women's emancipation in the Christian West, and in Latin America in particular, did not blow initially from inside the churches. They came from within the lay process of secularization through concrete and mundane struggles (for the right to vote, wages, working hours, sexuality, and rights of the body). Through these struggles women began to extricate themselves from the domestic private space where they had been confined and move into the public space, as political and economic actors engaged in changing social structures and in economic and cultural production.

The voice of women, heard in Latin American Christian communities, does not date back more than five decades. After the great event of the Second Vatican Council, the female voice began to be heard more and more, effectively occupying spaces inside the church. Women coordinated communities at different levels, questioned the denial of women's access to priestly ministry, and produced theoretical reflections about religious experience and the doctrinal contents of Christian faith. The fact is, today it is not possible to do theology in our continent without taking into account women's contribution.

This chapter covers the main steps of this itinerary by demonstrating that each step of theological growth was, at the same time, both a feminist struggle and a struggle for wider human rights. First, we see how theology built by women in Latin America was, in its initial phase, very close to liberation theology, connected to the question of the poor and to their struggle to assume their rightful place as agents of history. Second, I show how, in a second phase, women theologians started in our continent to do the work of rereading Christian theology more widely, not just from their experience as women, but vindicating, through their right to be different, the authority to pronounce a different theological word. Third, I show how advances in feminist theology and in gender reflection altered the direction of Latin American theology. Fourth, I also show how the question of feminism and the rights of women in feminist theology are intertwined with the question of land and ecology, thus generating the important theological stream named ecofeminism. Finally, I reflect on the empowerment of women, which entails many delicate but inescapable themes, such as embodied life, reproductive rights, and the question of ordained ministries.

The Poor as the Cradle of Theological Work for Feminist and Liberation Theologies

Theology produced by women in Latin America originated around 1968, when the Latin American bishops conference gathered at Medellín to evaluate the reception of Vatican II within the continent. The key to this conference was the inseparability between the announcement of the gospel and the struggle for justice. Medellín's three steps were the connection between evangelization and the struggle against oppression and injustice; the connection between theology and critical analysis of socioeconomic and political reality; and the formation and strengthening of base ecclesial communities inspired by their reading of the Bible in order to transform unjust social conditions. These steps opened new ways for theological reflection to find, in the poor and marginalized of the continent a new subject as starting point.

Building on this, during the 1970s Latin American women began to explore theology within the Latin American churches from the point of view of their strong interdependence with the poor and the preferential option for the poor. They drew inspiration from their sisters in the North, who were opening up discussions about the possibility of thinking and speaking "beyond God the Father" and the patriarchalism that was dominant in theology.¹ Latin American women theologians saw, as a strong and beautiful challenge, the possibility of inaugurating a theology in which they could participate as producers, not only as consumers. Nevertheless, Latin American theology done by women was not identical to feminist theology done in the Northern Hemisphere. It was inseparable from the preferential option for the poor.²

The women who, in those years, began taking theology courses and undertaking the adventure of creating their own reflection about God's mystery and revelation, were not moved only by their personal desires. Those early pioneers were driven to dare the impossible, to venture into a world that had been dominated by men and, almost entirely, by celibate clergy. This was a world where feminine thinking and presence only had an indirect entry. This was the world where the "crazy" ones of that first moment began to articulate their reflections and dared to take their first theological steps.³

However, there was also the challenge of reality. Women who intended to do theology in this initial moment had their eyes turned to the reality of the poor, and they perceived that theology should be done in a close dialogue with the social sciences. They also recognized

a reality that was later called the feminization of poverty.⁴ A poor person, who is also a woman, is doubly poor, since her female condition adds to her marginalized condition, making her life even more complex and difficult. Thus, a new solidarity emerged in Latin America, one that linked women theologians with poor women who were in grassroots communities.

Starting with desires and dreams, the status of women theologians began to take on a concrete reality. Besides their presence in grassroots ministry, women gradually developed space for their work in universities and institutes of theology, obtaining the academic degrees that enabled them to have an equal voice with their male colleagues. This represented a whole journey, a search for recognition, presence, and visibility in spaces that had been predominantly masculine. It was an attempt to attain citizenship and legitimacy through a different and alternative way of doing theology—a way in which hearts, minds, and bodies were united in a fertile and harmonic dance, resulting in a fresh reflection about faith.

During the 1990s, Latin American female theologians felt the impact of the fall of utopias and the crisis of liberation theology, their cradle. Socioeconomic and political questions dominated their agendas. Like all intellectuals in that historical moment, they had to confront reality and try to search for new directions in their method of doing theology. They did so. Faithful to the originating intuition—that faith and justice go together and are inseparable—female theologians were sufficiently perceptive to realize that times were changing. The context of that moment showed it was necessary to pay attention to other fields of learning and science, such as anthropology, philosophy, and natural sciences, in order to find appropriate partners for their reflection about revelation and faith.

Rethinking Theological Concepts from Women's Perspective

The result of this process was the desire to rethink the full range of major theological themes from the perspective of women. Ivone Gebara, in what she has identified as a second stage in the trajectory of Latin American feminist theology, calls this the “feminization of theological concepts.”⁵ Although there was an increased presence of women in the spaces of academic reflection, theological concepts remained patriarchal. Women sought a theology with a feminine face, soul, and configuration, that is, a female perspective of theology able to stress the importance of rediscovering God's feminine dimensions. Here began a more fruitful and solid stage of publications, with women theologians trying to revisit and to rethink the great treatises of dogmatic theology and the Bible itself, always from a point of departure in women's experience and feelings.⁶

Latin American women theologians acknowledged their debt to the work of their North American sisters. However, they also identified an important distinction. They were not motivated primarily by the fight for equality and against sexism. Instead, they struggled to build an inclusive discourse rooted in the distinctive experience and perspective of women. In this stage of the process there was a tendency to avoid the words *feminism* and *feminist*. Preference was given to expressions like *theology from the perspective of women* or *theology made by women* or *theology from women*.⁷

Many doctoral dissertations and academic papers were produced along these lines. In the area of systematic theology many works reflected on Jesus' relationship with women; on the maternal face of God; or even on an inclusive and participatory model of church, in which women would be seen as agents, producers of symbolic goods, and not only as passive consumers.⁸

This way of doing theology continues. It is not isolated from the theological work of women worldwide. It finds conceptual affinities with some European theologians of the same generation and moves among the key concepts of reciprocity, non-duality, and relationality, always pursuing dialogue with male theologians and the theological community as a whole.⁹

The claims of this kind of theology no longer aligned with early feminism, whose main struggle was for equality. Latin American women sought another right: the right to be different. Even in dialogue with the work of women in other areas of knowledge,¹⁰ women theologians emphasize the identity of the woman as “other,” different from men. Women who claim this identity, even in the way they feel and think about God, produce a theology that differs from a feminist theology built on the paradigm of equality.

Another stream of Latin American theologians wished to take a step beyond the discourse of difference and reciprocity. They felt the need for a more fundamental critique and a radical change in the concept of God and its relation with women's identity. These theologians took the position that the emphasis on women's difference reinforced stereotypes of women as maternal, sensitive, weak, and frail.

Inside that movement, in discussions around the issue of female identity, there were two possible directions: the first insisted on the affirmation of difference, and the second sought to resist the idealization or essentialization of those differences, understanding them as arising within a particular culture and history in which they continue to operate, and in which they are maintained. Debates over these issues contributed to the next stage in Latin American women's theology.

Taking Gender Perspective Seriously

Latin American feminist theology in the second half of the 1990s faced major challenges that forced it to review some of its presuppositions. One of these came from the need to bridge the gap with feminist theology elsewhere in the world, as well as with Latin American feminist reflection as it was developing in other areas of knowledge.¹¹

At this stage theologians were challenged to rethink issues of female identity, anthropology, cosmology, and theology, which had

been historically dominated by patriarchal discourse. Feminist theology arose as a radical change to the way we reflect on the data of revelation and the texts of scripture, but also to the way we think about the world and relationships among people, nature, and divinity.

It became clear to the new generations of theologians that it was not possible to build a theology recycled out of old patches without triggering the birth of something truly new. In feminist theology (now that we are no longer afraid to take that name), the intention is to bring forward fundamental questions that challenge the very structure of theological thought as it has developed up till the present. This was not a theology from the point of view or the perspective of women, presented as an addendum or as a separate subdivision of official theology, as defined by male theologians, but a substantive challenge to all dominant theology.¹² Thus, Latin American women theologians have introduced new methods of addressing the Bible, revelation, and dogma.

As liberation theology widened the range of interest to include other issues that were not strictly socioeconomic and political, but included issues of ecology, culture, the crisis of modernity, gender, race, and ethnicity, so Latin American feminist theology found, through the gender perspective, a most appropriate angle from which to build its reflection and discourse. The commitment to include those on the margins of society was not lost. But the problem was, perhaps more than ever, to challenge mainstream theology. “The poor” as object of reflection and investigation, who had been the quintessential theological subject in Latin American theology in the 1970s and 1980s, were now identified as those excluded from the benefits of social progress and welfare. These excluded ones now have more diversified faces than before and form a much larger and complex picture that challenges theology in multiple directions. Ivone Gebara, a major voice of this new phase, says: “Liberation theology, offering a collective vision of God and emphasizing the social nature of sin did not change the patriarchal anthropology and cosmology on which Christianity is based.”¹³

What became necessary was a qualitative leap in order to achieve the liberation of half of humanity. Gebara defined that leap in feminist theology:

To speak of God and of gender issues is to make a double claim: first, it is to say that what we say about God is connected to our historical experience, our life experience. Then, our same idea of God, and our relationship with him/her or his/her mystery, is marked by what we call . . . the social and cultural construction of gender.¹⁴

That is how other feminist struggles—those present in first-world theologies, in Latin America, and in social and human sciences—became interesting to theologians.¹⁵ Topics such as embodiment; sexuality; and morality, including all those hot and sensitive issues in reproductive rights and all that pertains to Christian morality (the mystery of the human body, its functions, its vocation, and its mystery created by God). All of this became part of the agenda of Latin American feminist theology. In that field, we must recognize that Protestant theologians, whose church structures are very different, took larger steps than their Catholic sisters.¹⁶

That is also how ecofeminist theology emerged and developed at a continental level.¹⁷ Currently, in Latin America, only a few theologians have written extensively about ecofeminism.¹⁸ However, openness and attention to this new interdisciplinary field of reflection has enabled Latin American feminist theology to dialogue with all areas of environmental studies: philosophy, social sciences, environmental law, and so on. The whole area of ecology promises tremendous growth for the future. Any reflection on ecology in relation to land rights and nature is spliced with reflection on women’s rights. Since ecofeminism means the end of all forms of domination, theology cannot avoid the concomitant debates; neither can feminist theology, which is becoming the key to liberating women from all forms of oppression.¹⁹

Women and the Rights of the Body²⁰

The theological reflections on woman’s sexualized body and gender questions are always important themes in the theological work in Latin America. In a universe where the body is so visible and mainly male, women enter as a troubling factor. It is this—their body being “other” than the body of man—that expresses and marks the experience of God, the thinking and talking about God, in another and distinctive way. The feminine body becomes an important entry point for women’s reflection on spirituality, mysticism, and theology—despite the fact that this body has been, on many occasions, a source of discrimination and suffering.

Discrimination against women within the church concerns deeper matters than simple physical power, intellectual formation, and the ability to work. The church is still molded by a strong patriarchal identity. This patriarchal identity underlies the belief in male superiority, reflected not only in an intellectual bias, but also by what we might call an ontological bias. Feminist theology tries to overcome this discrimination through its discourse.

This discrimination is associated strongly—in the field of theology—with the fact that the woman is considered responsible for the entrance of sin into the world, and consequently, the cause of death. Although Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical, *Mulieris dignitatem*, officially denounced this theology, its effects continue. This also explains why mystical experiences of women are regarded with mistrust and suspicion. Many rich mystical experiences of women, touched by God’s grace with very intimate messages, remain ignored or in the hands of a few. Examples such as Teresa of Avila are exceptions that confirm the rule.

In the history of the church women were kept at a prudent distance from the sacred and everything surrounding it, such as liturgy and ritual objects, and away from direct mediation with God. While all this required a “pure” body, there was strong doubt that women could

aspire to such purity. Despite all progress made, including participation of women in several levels of ecclesial life, there remains a stigma attached to woman as a seductive source of fear, sin, and a threat to male chastity and clergy celibacy.

This terrible fact demands very serious reflection within the church. If it is possible to fight against intellectual discrimination and professional injustice, what can we do with our female bodies? Should women be obliged to deny and ignore our own bodies, our own special bodies created by God, in order to enter into profound communication with the Creator and occupy our proper space in the church? These are questions that demand theological attention.

As it turns toward these concerns, theology enters into dialogue with the wider field of gender studies. Feminist thought, for a long time, has been posing questions connected with woman's body, not only in the area of violence against women, but also in relation to questions regarding reproductive rights and autonomy of the body.²¹ In fact, it is a very difficult and delicate field, but a most important one. Feminist theology has been increasingly challenged to act decisively, especially in the field of moral theology, with contributions from women moral theologians opening a new way.²² Nevertheless, it must be said that this field still has far to go, advancing with creative fidelity and, above all, boldness.

Feminist Theology, Power, and Service: Time for Empowerment?

Although the word *empowerment* only recently entered the vocabulary of Latin American feminist theology, it is becoming increasingly important.²³ The empowerment of women is a fact in society.²⁴ Feminist theology in all latitudes, including in Latin America, is incorporating this principle in its thinking and discourse.²⁵ Talking theologically about power and empowerment implies, of necessity, the question of women and church ministries.

The question regarding ministries is crucial for Christians today, especially for women, who are always and necessarily lay persons, with no access to ordained ministries. The fact that the Roman Catholic Church does not ordain women—and does not entertain the possibility of doing so, even officially barring debate on the subject—feels like a slap in the face to women who embrace a passion for building the kingdom of God and have a radical dedication to ecclesial service. This impediment, on the one hand, and the enormous needs to which these women are dedicated, on the other, are passionately felt, and they are a source of keen suffering. At the same time the Spirit inspires these women to undertake urgent reflection and action.²⁶

The new ecclesial paradigm, which substitutes a church centered on the dualism of clergy-laity with a constantly renewed community and with new dimensions for charisms and ministries born of the Spirit, will allow contemporary women to find a space to realize effective and greater service to the people of God.

In the 1980s, when the fruits of Vatican II began to mature and the church in Latin America had assimilated the conferences of Medellín and Puebla, women dared to challenge an ecclesial situation marked by constant injustice and oppression. Many of them started to take over ministries in their communities. Women assumed responsibility for the coordination of their communities and liturgical celebrations, and they rendered countless services, living out a model of the church in which power is freely shared and decisions are taken more collectively.

The occupation of such an open space began to outline a new paradigm for the church, one that was highly positive and welcomed by the people. In the 1990s, these routes were deepened. The services women rendered testify to the leap, under the inspiration of the Spirit, that has taken place in their ecclesial consciousness.

The Latin American bishops at their 2007 assembly in Aparecida, Brazil, recognized explicitly the contribution of women. The document of Aparecida mentions the importance of women in different ecclesial services, stating for the first time that women should have access to higher levels of decision making in the church.²⁷

There is a rich vein for reflection on the future direction of women's ministries. In the awakening of reflection about empowerment, feminist theology may find new ways to enable women to live powerfully in service to God and God's people. For this, it may help to follow another track that has begun to be evident in feminist theology in Latin America: the retrieval of women's historical testimonies and research on their lives, experiences, and thoughts. Increasingly, both male and female theologians are choosing to engage in reflection on the writings and biographies of the great mystics of yesterday and today. Their lives and writings scatter seeds of the Spirit in history, always posing a subversive challenge to the establishment. Reflection on these personal stories speaks of a profound and radical experience of the divine that is certainly one way to empower women. Rather than a theology of texts, a theology of testimonies can become a rich challenge for Latin American feminist theology in its attempt to rescue and empower women, who have been marginalized and muted by every social institution.²⁸

Conclusion

Feminist theology in Latin America finds itself, today, in a rich and promising moment, nourished by many projects that help and stimulate its growth.²⁹ In addition to these projects there is a proliferation of graduate programs, with many female students, following feminist lines of investigation. This shows that this theological stream is alive and is a powerful sign in the world and the church.

One thing, at any rate, is clear. Theological reflection of Latin American women has a long road ahead. Even as it is called to communion with sisters from other latitudes, and learning from reciprocal and fertile friendships, it will always bear the mark of its origins.

Consistent with its origins, Latin American feminist theology will remain, as before, the reflection of women on their faith in relation to their identity and being as women: their condition, their bodies, their configuration, their feelings, their thinking, and their speech. However, as all of that happens in a context marked by conflict and injustice, it is also a reflection on ecclesial belonging that remains inseparable from citizenship—a tireless effort to connect faith with theology, understanding theology as a human word illuminated by the word of God. This is the way that feminist theology tries to contribute to a more humane world, where human rights are ever more respected and practiced.

Notes

- ¹ See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy for Woman's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).
- ² Silvana Suaiden, "Questões contemporâneas para a teologia—Provocações sob a ótica de gênero," in SOTER [Brazilian Society for Theology and Religious Studies], *Genero e Teologia. Interpelações e perspectivas* (São Paulo: Loyola, 2003), 147.
- ³ Crazy in English translates the Spanish *locas*. I allude here to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who were routinely dismissed by the dictatorship as "las locas."
- ⁴ The introduction of this concept is given by the North American thinker Diane Pearce in an article published in 1978. For her, the feminization of poverty is a process that develops when women, without the support of a husband or partner, must assume responsibility for the care and well being of their children.
- ⁵ Ivone Gebara, "III Semana Teológica—Construyendo nuestras Teologías Feministas," *Tópicos 90—Cuadernos de Estudios* (Chile: Ediciones Ruhue, September 1993), 71–124.
- ⁶ Relevant publications are too numerous to cite; for an extensive bibliography, see Maria Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Note also the extraordinary work of Elsa Tamez, who has not only thought about the Bible in a new way but has organized several publications to make known the work of her fellow Latin American theologians; see Elsa Tamez, ed., *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).
- ⁷ See Tamez, *Through Her Eyes*.
- ⁸ A. M. Tependino, *As discípulas de Jesus* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1990); M. C. Bingemer, "A perspectiva da Trindade na ótica da mulher," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira [REB]* 46 (1986): 73–99; D. Brunelli, *Libertação da Mulher: Um Desafio para a Vida Religiosa na Igreja Latino Americana* (Rio de Janeiro: Publicações CRB, 1988).
- ⁹ I identify among European theologians influential names such as Giulia Paola di Nicola, Georgette Blaquierre, Kari Elisabeth Borresen.
- ¹⁰ I think, for instance, of R. Darcy De Oliveira, *Elogio da diferença o feminino emergente* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1991).
- ¹¹ See Maria Carmelita de Freitas, *Genero e teologia: Interpelações e perspectivas* (São Paulo: Loyola, 2003), 23.
- ¹² See Silvia Regina de Lima Silva, "Teologia feminista LatinoAmericana," in Portuguese at <http://ejesus.com.br>. See also Ivone Gebara, "Entre os limites da filosofia e da teologia feminista," in SOTER, *Genero e teologia*, 153–70.
- ¹³ Ivone Gebara, "Teologia Cósmica: Ecofeminismo e Panenteísmo," in *Folha Mulher, Projeto Sofia: Mulher, Teologia e Cidadania* (Rio de Janeiro: ISER, n. 8, Ano IV, 1994): 70–75.
- ¹⁴ Ivone Gebara, *Rompendo o silêncio: Uma fenomenologia feminista do mal* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2000), 218.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, Maria Pilar Aquino and Maria José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).
- ¹⁶ W. Deifelt, "Derechos reproductivos en América Latina. Un análisis crítico y teológico a partir de la realidad del Brasil," in *Población y Salud Reproductiva*, ed. Manuel Quintero (Quito: Ediciones CLAI, 1999), 31–49; "Temas e metodologias da teologia feminista," in *Gênero e teologia*, 171–86; Marga Ströher, Wanda Deifelt, and André Musskopf, eds., *À flor da pele: Ensaio sobre gênero e corporeidade* (São Leopoldo Sinodal/CEBI, 2004). See also the more ecumenical work of Paulo Fernando Carneiro de Andrade, ed., *Corporeidade e Teologia* (SOTER/Paulinas, 2007) and many issues of *Revista de Estudos Feministas* from Universidade de Santa Catarina, Brasil.
- ¹⁷ *Ecofeminism* reflects the synthesis of environmentalism (or ecology) and feminism. It is the theory that seeks the end to all forms of oppression. It relates and connects the domination of race, gender, social class, and domination of nature, of the "other" (the women, children, the elderly, the indigenous). This will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.
- ¹⁸ See Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999). See also Mary Judith Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).
- ¹⁹ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 135–42; idem, *Gaia and God: A Feminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994). These works have had considerable influence on Latin American feminist theologians.
- ²⁰ A substantial part of this section was presented at the World Catholicism Week of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, at De Paul University, Chicago, in April 2010.
- ²¹ See Mary John Mananzan et al., eds., *Women Resisting Violence: A Spirituality of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); and Hogan and Orobator, *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics*.
- ²² See Maria Ines Millen, "Os acordes de uma sinfonia. A Moral do Diálogo na Teologia de Bernhard Häring (Juiz de Fora, Brazil: Editar, 2005); idem, "O corpo na perspectiva do gênero," *Horizonte Teológico* 3/5 (2004): 35–56; Maria Joaquina Fernandes Pinto, "Alteridade e bioética: Um novo olhar sobre o outro e sobre a vida," *Repensa* [Rio de Janeiro] 01/01 (2005): 49–65; idem, "Jesus Cristo e a vivência da afetividade:

Implicações para vivermos a nossa,” in *A Pessoa e a Mensagem de Jesus*, ed. Mário de França Miranda, 76–83 (São Paulo: Loyola, 2002); Norma Falcon, *Recuperación de lo femenino* (Buenos Aires, San Benito, 2008).

²³ Empowerment means an approach to work that looks at the delegation of decision-making power, autonomy, and participation. It involves the sharing of power, decentralization, and the challenge to entrenched concentrations of power.

²⁴ See Maria Conceição Correia Pinto, “Empowerment: Uma prática de serviço social,” in *Política Social* (Lisbon: ISCSP, 1998), 247–64.

²⁵ See, for instance, the thesis of Luisa Etsuko Tomita, *Corpo e cotidiano: A experiência das mulheres de movimentos populares desafia a teologia feminista da libertação na América Latina* (São Paulo: PUCSP, 2004).

²⁶ The apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (May 1994) reaffirms, through the words of Pope John Paul II, that the church has no authority to ordain women to the priesthood. It further states that this doctrine is based on the continuous tradition of the church. On November 18, 1995, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a response to the question raised in many quarters about whether this issue belonged to the deposit of faith. The response of the commission does not attach an ex cathedra status to the pope’s statement but says it is doctrine “founded on the written Word of God” and was “from the beginning constantly preserved and put into practice in the tradition of the church,” besides being “presented infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.”

²⁷ English: CELAM, *The Aparecida Document* (August 5, 2013), no. 458.

²⁸ See Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003). Sobrino has written extensively on the need for a “theology of witnesses rather than a theology of texts.”

²⁹ For instance, see the project of *Teologanda in Argentina*, available on the <http://www.teologanda.com.ar> website; or the position of chair for feminist theology at the Universidad Iberoamericana, in Mexico City.

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4. The Poor and the Earth

The world was made to be a garden and the vocation of human being is to be a gardener.

—RUBEM ALVES

As we have noted, liberation theology spread widely during the 1970s and 1980s. After 1989, in light of the great changes in the world, liberation theology experienced a major crisis. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of “real socialism”¹ affected many lay Christians, who were inspired by their faith to commit themselves to the social and political struggle. In Brazil, coincidentally, it was in this same year that the progressive candidate Luis Inácio Lula da Silva lost his first bid for the presidency. Many militants were deeply affected by these facts and entered a cycle of depression.² This was also the time when the Vatican was voicing great concern about liberation theology; many theologians came under suspicion, and some were subjected to critical notifications or even silencing.³

To many, it appeared that the socialist utopia had received the negative judgment of history, leaving only one possible model for society—the capitalist one. Without the alternative represented by the socialist world (the Second World), it was difficult to imagine a way for the so-called Third World to exist apart from the logic of the market economy and a consumerist society.

Now, with historical distance, I think we can evaluate this crisis in a positive sense. It forced liberation theologians to expand their hopes and their perspectives, and to see that the liberation process not only had to do with poverty at a socio-economic-political level, but also at an anthropological and cultural level—with respect to gender, race, and ethnicity. Moreover, liberation came to be understood as not only for human beings but for the whole of creation. Ecological concerns and struggles came to be seen as inseparable from economic and anthropological themes. Ecology, sustainability, and concern for the life of the planet were thus included in the liberation theology agenda. Building a habitable world became a challenge that coincided with empowering people to become subjects of their own history.

This movement began with the conviction that to build justice implied building a sustainable world. In addition, there was a realization that everything that does harm to human beings is harmful to the planet as well. Moreover, it was recognized that if the human race continued to destroy nature and life in all its manifestations, soon human beings themselves would cease to exist. The inseparability between the struggle for justice and the struggle for nature and biodiversity became a central component of theological concerns.

The ecological cause is natural to the spirit of liberation. Liberation theology understands human beings to be in communion with the whole cosmos. The same God of life who privileges the poor also reveals the sacred status of creation, which is otherwise emptied and violated by a consumerist society. Liberation theology pleaded then for a new cosmic and solidarity covenant, thus rejecting all domination and exploitation. It gave birth to a true pantheistic spirituality—God present in all things.⁴

Traditional Christian theology, even in its more open and current models, such as liberation theology, was accused of fostering an overly anthropocentric conception of the world and human life in it. The traditional interpretation of the Genesis mandate to “grow and dominate the earth” was considered responsible for this anthropocentric understanding, and thus for humankind’s greedy attitude toward nature and creation. Theology was tasked with reversing this picture. In addition, the Christian conscience became increasingly sensitive to the connection between respect and reverence for the earth and the cause of liberation proposed in the Bible and the gospel of Jesus.⁵

Throughout the 1990s there was a growing awareness of rising threats to the planet. These threats were not simply theoretical; they had urgent, practical implications. This situation gave rise to new awareness of the dangers facing the earth and all humankind. This prompted concern for reforms leading to lifestyle that were simpler and healthier: in short, a need for sustainable living. The concept of *sustainable living* refers to an individual or societal lifestyle that can be sustained with limited reduction of natural resources. Its adherents most often hold true sustainability as a goal or guide and make lifestyle compromises with respect to things such as methods of transportation, housing, energy sources, and diets, in ways that favor sustainability.⁶

Along with individual measures, there is recognition of the need for structural changes. Modern society, after all, is founded on an ideology of unlimited growth. Ecological consciousness, however, calls for a change of paradigm.⁷ Emphasis on growth, along with an increasingly fast-paced life is replaced with slowing down and downsizing. This approach has economic implications, to be sure, but also ethical and political dimensions. It was formed during the 1970s, partially based on Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen’s *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*.⁸

This posits the idea that economic growth—understood as a constant growing of the gross national product (GNP)—is ultimately unsustainable for the global ecosystem. This idea is opposed to the dominant economic paradigm that directly correlates a higher standard of living with growth of the GNP and thus maintains that a constant increase in the level of production should be a permanent goal of