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Complex and Alive

Recent Developments of the Theology of Liberation

[German Version](#)

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The times, when over here the Latin American "Theology of Liberation" was common talk are long past. But the way of pursuing theology, summarized under this heading, is still alive in the churches of Latin America. Today liberation theology turns out to be a manifold and complex thing and takes up new challenges.

It is now 35 years that *Gustavo Guitiérrez* with his book "Teología de la liberación" gave its name to a then new theological movement, established its method and suggested its consequences. At that time and in the following years liberation theology was common talk in Germany as well. In the last years over here the interest in current theological developments in Latin America seems to be declining.

But whoever observes them attentively cannot close her/his mind to the lasting fascination of the Latin American theology of liberation. For under the changed political, social and church conditions of the past decades it developed steadily, faced new challenges and topics, was taken up by new social subjects and confronted with new questions - and nevertheless remained what it was from the outset: the theological reflection on the commitment in favour of the liberation of the poor and from the viewpoint of the poor, which is increasingly exercised by the poor themselves.

Particularly in the last ten years some new theological movements developed and consolidated, which can be assigned to the theology of liberation and give a new

face to the theology in Latin America. New generations of theologians already grew up in the way of thinking of the liberation theology, and now shape it in their own way. Besides social and church developments have brought about that today theology has a rank different from that it had only some years ago. The theology of liberation is still a theology full of life, which exerts influence in different ways, and has importance that reaches far beyond Latin America.

The Years of Many Quarrels Have Left Their Marks

The numerous hostilities the theology of liberation experienced in Latin America have left their marks. Compared with the seventies it has evidently lost in significance particularly within the Catholic Church. Many outstanding liberation theologians, as *Leonardo Boff*, have been impeded in teaching or even removed from their offices. Women as liberation theologians anyhow had - due to their sex - smaller chances of development in the Catholic Church. Numerous dioceses the bishops of which had adjusted their pastoral activities to the liberation theology got - as in the case of Hélder Câmara - after their retirement a new bishop, who represented a different pastoral line, and who pretty often cancelled important decisions of his predecessor. Many a theological institution, which was oriented towards the theology of liberation, was dissolved. By these and other means the hierarchy succeeded in limiting the influence of the theology of liberation within the Catholic Church, and to some extent in urging it back.

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A consequence of these hostilities was that the theology of liberation has now become *more ecumenical* and *more Protestant*. In the past two decades particularly within the reformatory churches in Latin America, as the Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist churches, influential liberation-theological movements with characteristics of their own have developed. Important centres of ecumenical co-operation are - apart from numerous institutions in all Latin American countries - the *Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones* and the *Universidad Bíblica Latinoamericana* in San José (Costa Rica).

The impediment of the theology of liberation by church authorities could not prevent the pastoral work oriented towards this theology. As in the years of the establishment of the liberation theology it is therefore until today advocated by very many laymen, nuns and priests, who are active in pastoral care or in pastoral education. But also, an increasing number of Christians from basis communities, people who are economically poor and belong to a fringe group, now represent the theology of liberation and develop it. The wide range of topics reflects this development: Beside the classical theological treatises now also questions which in the church are pushed to the margin, such as homosexuality, racism, syncretism, and the human body (Körperlichkeit) are on the agenda.

A further consequence of the hostility from within the church, but also of the technical and social developments is the increasing importance which fell to the *Internet* for the development and circulation of the theology of liberation in Latin America. Countless forums, Internet services, mailing lists and publications in the web make possible the continent-wide and global exchange on theological and socio-political topics. An important example that can be mentioned are the *Servicios Koinonía* (www.servicioskoinonia.org), led by *José María Vigil*, which have besides numerous on-line publications, different mailing lists and a detailed link collection many further services and special sides at their disposal.

Not the developments inside the church are the most important reason for the further development of the liberation theology, but the social and world-political ones. Today the suppression and exploitation of women is recognized as social problem throughout Latin America. Racism is still denied in many countries or made light of, but on the whole continent at least the affected today have become aware of the problem of discrimination of people because of the colour of their skin. This leads to self-confident and powerful movements of the Afro-American and indigenous sections of the population.

The decline of work organized by trade unions, due to the neo-liberal economic development throughout the whole continent led to new organizations of the unemployed, of working children, informally employed persons, people who own no land, and homeless people. The post-modern turning away from institutional religion, and the various awakenings of new and old religious movements opened the rather religion-critical classical theology of liberation to plural and complex religious experiences.

Due to these complex developments the Latin American theology of liberation too today is manifold, multicoloured and ambivalent. Often the label "liberation

theology" is even rejected for these new developments, because it may suggest a limited and, in the meantime, obsolete approach to reality. But it speaks for the continuity of the Latin American theologies under the well-known brand name that most of these current movements still refer to important figures of the classical liberation theology. Oscar Romero, Pedro Casaldáliga, Samuel Ruiz, Leonidas Proano, Hélder Câmara and other representatives of the church, who had been pushed to the margin or even persecuted by the institutional church, are topical examples of the option for the poor, of an up-to-date and appropriate to the current challenges spirituality as well as of the picture of the church, as it could have been and in many ways has become after all.

The Option for the Poor - Lasting Basic Experience of the Theology of Liberation

The starting point of these current Latin American theological movements still is the concrete life experience of the poor, and of people who become committed to them, and so decide to share their life. The resolution to make the life of the poor the starting point of one's own experience and of one's speaking about God, since the days of the Medellín Conference is termed 'Option for the Poor'. This option can clearly be recognized as the root of most of the current theologies in Latin America.

This above all is the justification for speaking of theologies of liberation at all. Even when the option has usually taken on a concrete form by changing into an option for the suppressed women, for the indigenous population, for the impoverished children, for the coloured, etc., the life of the poor, the experience of their faith and of sharing their life and faith remain the 'Sitz im Leben' of the Latin American theologies.

The concrete experiences of the poor have changed under the conditions of globalization, post-modernism, and neo-liberalism. They are also noticed more sharply by a theology which has become more concrete and has focused on definite living conditions. But they remain the experiences of the poor, of suppressed,

exploited, and impoverished people. Often their experiences are worse today than 35 years ago. Also, today's theologies of liberation grow on this basis: starting with the experience of the poor they renew themselves and develop.

What is new now above all is that the situation of poverty is analyzed, in a more differentiated way and that so - out of the experiences of different poor people also differentiated theologies develop. This differentiation is already perceptible since the middle of the eighties of last century. But at that time, it was above all important to take up *different* topics, and to cast a look at *other* poor people. But women, indigenous and Afro-American fellow human beings were to a large extent seen as *others*, since theology at that time was mainly taught by white men often coming from Europe.

Nowadays happens what at that time at best was wished, or demanded: theology is in fact formulated by women, by members of Afro-American and indigenous cultures, by homosexuals, by emigrants *from their own experiences*. The others are no longer seen as problems which must be handled by theology, but they look upon themselves as starting point of theology which is corrected, developed, and unfolded by them.

Life Experiences of Women as Starting Point

Meanwhile the *feminist theologies* of Latin America might be the best known theologies in Germany. In the first years their representatives were often accused of copying foreign categories in Latin America, and of putting last the apparently more important fight against economic poverty and social exclusion. But meanwhile the theology from the point of view of Latin American women has been established as an important motor within the liberation theology.

In recent years important developments can be noticed, which are moulded by the dialogue with other feminist theologies world-wide, by discussing new questions in Latin America such as Afro-American and indigenous cultures, sexuality, migration, ecology and spirituality, as well as by new experiences stemming from

the concrete basis work with women in the suburbs and in the country. They are so many, diverse and complex that it appears appropriate to speak of feminist theologies in the plural.

It is typical of the majority of Latin American feminist theologies that they put the concrete life experience of women (but also of men) in the fore and unfold the speaking about God starting with these experiences. The everyday life of women in a slum area, the biography of an indigenous migrant, the creed of an Afro-American woman, which integrates traditional religion and Catholicism: Feminist theologies in Latin America are built on such concrete experiences and are the basis for criticism and de-construction of traditional theologies. An important role also play Bible scientists as *Elsa Támez* and *Nancy Cardoso Pereira*, who confront specialized exegetical knowledge with the experiences of today's Latin Americans, and thus contribute to a new understanding of the Bible texts.

In recent years the influence of eco-feminist theologians, such as *Ivone Gebara* from Brazil, and some theologians related to the Chilean magazine "Con Spirando" is growing. Their conviction of the unity and connection of all things is taken up by indigenous and Afro-American theologians, and placed into the context of traditional cultures. In this way in many places the dialogue with representatives of traditional medicine, political basis organizations and religion succeeds. Hence feminist liberation theologies in Latin America are not a mere academic discourse, but by practical basis work are usually in a lively exchange with 'marginalized' women and their experiences.

Participation of the Indigenous Communities

Particularly in the years since 1992 *indigenous theologies* have become established in Latin America. Not only in countries with a strong portion of indigenous cultures, like Mexico, Guatemala, Brazil, Bolivia, but practically in all regions in which people see themselves as indigenous population, a new self-assurance has developed since that time among the descendants of the aborigines of Latin America. Impelled by this self-assurance some representatives of the indigenous population would like to completely reject Christianity as part of colonial history. But at the same time a movement of dialogue and search has developed that deals with the quarrel between Christianity and the traditional religions and does not ignore the many relations and blends of both of them through-out the centuries.

This movement of search is consistent in relying on the participation of the indigenous communities. Their representatives, men and women from the village communities, catechists, indigenous deacons and priests, are therefore the most important subjects of indigenous theology. Theologians of not indigenous origin, as for instance *Diego Irarrázaval* (Chile/Perú), *Enrique Jordá* (Spain/Bolivia) and *Paulo Suess* (Germany/Brazil) therefore understand themselves as mediators, witnesses, or messengers of an indigenous experience of God, which by them is articulated in the language of theology.

The movement of indigenous theology grows on the background of a pastoral care which is embedded in the respective indigenous culture, and nevertheless goes far beyond the paradigm of 'Inculturation', which is considered to be Eurocentric, since it takes the indigenous religions seriously as part of God's revelation and asks for God's word, hidden in the indigenous inheritance - and nonetheless apparent. At the same time the indigenous theology reflects concrete situations of exclusion and suppression of the indigenous cultures of Latin America and works out strategies of liberation that correspond with traditional ideas of solutions. Obviously indigenous theologies are mostly focused on a certain culture, and then also call themselves "Aymara theology", "Maya theology" etc. But there is throughout Latin America a continuous exchange of their representatives by conferences and publications under the common name *Theología India* (last in 2002 in Asunción). Indigenous theologies of Latin America make clear what one of their most important representatives, the Mexican *Eleazar López* repeats untiringly: The native population of Latin America throughout centuries in state and church was treated as problem; but it is part of the solution.

Also, the *Afro-American theologies* can be mentioned here in the plural. On the one hand they too usually proceed from concrete local, regional, and cultural contexts, and thus develop differentiated and individual profiles. On the other hand, concrete circumstances represent very special challenges, which can also lead to differing theological drafts. For also Afro-American theologies increasingly set on individual questions and personal experiences. The everyday, hidden and denied racism is the central topic. Also, Biblical texts are asked in what way they embody, mask or further racism.

From the experience of Afro-American women, a feminist theology of its own is growing. Coloured homosexuals relate their own experience of multiple exclusions to the speaking about God. The meditation on the cultural roots in Africa and the memory of slave trade and

exploitation is further developed by referring to one's own identity, in a culture of syncretism that is often considered a side issue. (synkretistische / marginalisierte Kulturen). In this way an extraordinarily multicoloured spectrum of liberation theologies develops proceeding from the viewpoint of concrete life and faith experiences of the Afro-American population.

Due to their high portion of black population naturally Brazil and Colombia with theologians as *Antônio Aparecido da Silva* and *Maricel Mena López* play a kind of ringleader role within the Afro-American theologies. Throughout the continent they are also bundled in publications and seminars, as in the meanwhile nine "Afro-American Pastoral Meetings".

Migrants Make Themselves Heard

Other theological developments grow from the experiences of *migrants*, and here too they are differentiated according to the migration within a country, within Latin America, and the migration to the north, particularly to the USA. The theology of the Latin American female migrants in the USA is probably the only development in present Latin American theology that is carried out above all outside Latin America. An important representative is the Mexican *Maria Pilar Aquino*, well-known also in Germany.

The experiences of the migrants are many and diverse: cultural differences, economic poverty and hopes, illegality, separation and partnership, sexuality, HIV/AIDS, solidarity with one's relatives, return or stay out. Due to these experiences new questions arise also in theology and ethics. Feminist, Afro-American and indigenous theologies play a role for the migrants according to their identity. For the *Latinos* in the USA a systematization of these experiences at present seems only to begin. According to the designation used by Mexican immigrants this theology is also called *chicano*-theology. Some theologians (male and female) separating their work from North American "white" feminist theology call it *womanist*- or *mujerista*-theology.

A relatively recent theological trend is called "Liberation Theology of Religions" and attends to the dialogue with non-Christian religions. It has been developing only since the turn of the century, and is particularly promoted by representatives of ASETT (EATWOT), the Ecumenical Association of the theologians of the Third World in Latin America. Led by the double conviction that liberation is impossible for the poor without taking into account their religion, and that on the other hand any inter-religious dialogue that does not consider the actual situation of the poor degenerates to a mere intellectual affair, one works emphatically on a theology that attends to the various and complex relations between religiousness, poverty, and liberation.

The inter-religious dialogue here is applied globally to the traditionally understood world religions as well as within Latin America to the indigenous and Afro-American religions. Above all *José M. Vigil* and *Faustino Teixeira* push this development ahead. Apart from some international seminars and different publications, especially a publication series with the ambitious name "Tiempo Axial" shows that a fundamental re-orientation of theology matters to the protagonists of this movement.

It begins to emerge that the traditional religion criticism of the liberation theology will be extended to a pluralistic theology of religions, that the liberating force of religions - and their power to suppress and to exclude - will be assessed anew, and that the theology of liberation through this dialogue will generally come to a more open assessment of religions, particularly also of their "own" traditional Latin American religions. And what is more, the dialogue with the theology of religion brings Latin American liberation theology in close contact with the newest developments of this theology in Asia, Africa, and North America.

Finally, a not insignificant theological movement in Latin America develops the classical economic topics of the liberation theology under the conditions of the globalized neo-liberalism. Taking as starting point local and national structures of injustice which are in concrete terms experienced as causes of poverty, the quarrel with the global financial, economic and political centres of power, as well as the criticism of the cultural foundation of the west are in the centre of this theological work.

The critique of the hegemonic western claims to superiority in politics, economics, culture and religion is summarized in harsh criticism of imperialism, and is theologically deepened by the comparison with New Testament texts - above all the Book of Revelation, which are critical of imperialism. Far beyond the traditional field of liberation theology the representatives of this movement gathered around *Franz Josef Hinkelammert*, who comes from German Münsterland, and the Korean *Jung Mo Sung*, who lives in Brazil, proceed to the fields of critique of civilisation, ecology, and philosophy.

A Developing Liberation Theology

One could continue this list without difficulty. The cross-linking and overlapping of numerous liberation-theological fields alone give rise to new topics, new perspectives, new questions, and new theologies. Also, the development within the different Christian denominations contributes to the plurality, differentiation, and vitality of the current liberation theologies in Latin America. Its representatives are interlinked with the different social forum movements throughout the continent. That is why just before the World Social Forum in 2005 in Porto Alegre the "World Forum Theology and Liberation" took place at the same place. Finally, one can already suspect that many of these new theological movements will lead to new conflicts in state and society, in international relations, with the different church hierarchies.

The theology of liberation lives and develops. It could not bring about a revolution in theology and church, as many had expected. Now as before the Christians in Latin America who refer to it are a minority. But this theology many times declared dead and silenced has nevertheless up to this day a large influence on the churches in Latin America. The fundamental concerns, which induced its founders to give a new name to this kind of theology, are developed by the present liberation theologians in a profound and varied way, which could not yet be imagined 35 years ago.

The Latin American liberation theology today has become more ecumenical, more lay, more differentiated and in many respects more independent. It has not got discouraged by resistance from inside the church, and instead has become more aware of today's men and their concerns. Proceeding from the actual situation of concrete men, and using the results of the analysis of post-modern realities it is able to effectively and reliably devote itself to the questions of the time. The

reference to concrete living conditions allows human experiences to unfold their importance for the concrete shape of theology. In this way various new theologies of liberation cooperate in freeing the poor.

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