



## Climate change and Southern theologies. A Latin American insight\*

### As alterações climáticas e as teologias do sul. Uma visão da América Latina

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#### Resumo

A luta pela justiça e libertação encontra-se no centro dos movimentos e das reflexões teológicas latino-americanas há décadas. De que modo os movimentos sociais, os líderes políticos, os teólogos e os cristãos tratam atualmente os desafios da mudança climática? Como eles os relacionam com o contexto global? O presente artigo, baseado numa apresentação feita pelo autor para uma audiência nórdica europeia, apresenta a gênese e a matriz das teologias latino-americanas e alguns de seus principais expoentes, como Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo e Gustavo Gutierrez. Destaca também os novos empreendimentos que permitem uma abordagem dos assuntos relacionados às mudanças climáticas, chamados de teologias indígenas, eco-teologias, teologia e economia e teologia eco-feminista, construídos a partir das publicações de teólogos como Boff e Ivone Gebara. Em seguida, o autor destaca alguns dos principais componentes dessa relação, enfocando o imperativo ético de justiça climática, a renovada teologia da criação e a dimensão espiritual da abordagem.

**Palavras-chave:** Teologia latino-americana; Ecologia; Alterações climáticas; Ética; Justiça.

#### Abstract

The struggle for justice and liberation has been at the core of theological movements and reflections in Latin America for decades. How do social movements, political leaders, theologians and Christians address the challenges of climate change nowadays? How do they relate them to the global context? This article, based on a presentation made by the author to a European Nordic audience, focuses on the genesis and matrix of Latin American theologies and some of their key authors, such as Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo and Gustavo Gutierrez. It also highlights new developments that have allowed an approach to climate change issues, namely, indigenous theologies, eco-theologies, theology and economy and eco-feminist theology, based on the works of theologians like Boff and Ivone Gebara. Finally, it stresses some of the main components of that relation, presenting the ethical imperative of climate justice, the renewed theology of creation and the spiritual dimension of the approach.

**Key words:** Latin American theology; Ecology; Climate change; Ethics; Justice.

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## 1 Introduction

There is a new wind in Latin America politics, heralding interesting, if not unexpected, developments. Quite a number of left and center-left<sup>1</sup> governments have been elected, something completely new for some countries, like my own, Uruguay, where a former *guerrilla* leader was chosen for President in the elections on November 30, 2009. Of course there is a wide range of governments. Chavez in Venezuela is not the same as Bachelet in Chile. Morales in Bolivia is different from Vazquez in Uruguay. Can Cristina Kirchner be considered center-left? We also have Lula in Brazil, Ortega in Nicaragua, Correa in Ecuador and former bishop Fernando Lugo in Paraguay.

I believe these are signs that go beyond electoral situations. Despite significant differences, there seems to be, in most cases, an underlying desire for change expressed in the elections.

One could say that Latin America is moving. And in the eyes of political analysts it becomes a case worth studying. Do these political movements have something to do with the Liberation Theology (LT)? How did it originate and how has it developed? What are the insights for addressing climate change?

## 2 The geneses of liberation theologies in Latin America

There is neither one single genesis nor one liberation theology in Latin America. If we want to understand the phenomenon called Latin American liberation theology, more commonly referred to as "Liberation Theology", we have to place ourselves in Latin America (not in Africa, Europe, Asia or North America) in the 60s and 70s, as the space - time coordinates of contextualization are very significant.

Latin America in the late 60s, early 70s, was characterized by<sup>2</sup>:

a. A strengthening of social movements, which were developing rapidly and aimed at social and structural change;

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1 I am aware this is controversial, but let us use it as a working definition.

2 Although this is a simplification, I think it is helpful to understand at least approximately the scenario at that time.

- b.** The emergence of revolutionary movements throughout the region, claiming for immediate political change and choosing armed struggle to seize power;
- c.** Various intellectuals who developed the Latin American Social Sciences (LASS) presenting theories of dependency and liberation as its *Korrelat*. It is in the writings of representatives of LASS like Theotonio dos Santos and Orlando Fals Borda, among others, that we find the first expression of liberation as a concept;
- d.** A close link between reflection and action<sup>3</sup>. This would become a feature of LT, but also of the pedagogy of liberation, with Paulo Freire, for instance<sup>4</sup>. It is a core component of the philosophy of liberation as well, with, for example, Enrique Dussel and his monumental "Ethics"<sup>5</sup>;
- e.** In the Catholic Church, the General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin (1968) issued quite challenging documents concerning justice, peace and the option for the poor<sup>6</sup>.

It is, in summary, a decade troubled by multiple social, political, theoretical and ecclesial developments.

In this context, this *humus*, liberation theologies were born, with notable differences. Without being exhaustive, we can say that, for example, in Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez's *Teología de la liberación*, there is the influence of Marxist Peruvian thinker José Mariátegui; Leonardo Boff, as well as Rubem Alves's *theopoetics*, are clearly Brazilian; Jesuits Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria present a central American (and Jesuit) version, which, since the 80s, has included a strong notion of "martyrdom", with the murders of Monsignor Romero and Ellacuria and other Jesuits in El Salvador; finally, in the writings of Juan Luis Segundo, Julio de Santa Ana and Jose Miguez Bonino, I dare say that

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3 The Gramscian notion of « organic intellectual », i.e., the intellectual who articulates the people's struggles, is an important reference.

4 Cf. FREIRE, Paulo. **Pedagogia do oprimido**. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1970.

5 Cf. DUSSEL, Enrique. **Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana**. Buenos Aires/Bogotá: Siglo XXI-USTA, 1973-1980, vols. I-V.

6 The following conferences in Puebla, Santo Domingo and Aparecida, reflect, in my view, a decrease in the liberationist matrix of Latin American bishops' documents. It is the time of Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) as heads of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith and the Vatican procedures against Latin American theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff and Ivonne Gebara, among others.

the *rioplatense* theology of Argentina and Uruguay is made in the *dos por cuatro* tempo of tango<sup>7</sup>. In my opinion, liberation theologies are a clear example of the contextuality of every theology. The social and epistemological *loci* from where the author writes strongly influence the outcome.

### 3 The matrix contents of liberation theologies

If there are significant differences between liberation theologies in Latin America, why should we call them all the same? The answer which would seem obvious is not valid. It is not because theologians speak about liberation. Juan Luis Segundo spoke of "liberation of theology"<sup>8</sup> rather than of liberation theology. Liberation theologies are not genitive theologies, that is, they are not theological reflections round a theme, in this case, liberation. But then, what is their common denominator, if there is one?

G. Gutierrez wrote in his article *Teología desde el reverso de la historia*: "In liberation theology there are two central intuitions that were also the first chronologically and still constitute its dorsal spine: we refer to the theological method and the perspective of the poor"<sup>9</sup>. Gutierrez stressed what I would call the matrix contents of LT: the perspective of the poor and the theological method.

The perspective of the poor is an attempt to locate oneself, from a social and epistemological standpoint, in the poor's place. In the first LTs, the notion of the poor is not an economic but a sociological concept. In his *Teología de la Liberación*, Gutierrez wrote: "The poor, today, is the oppressed, the marginalized by society, the proletarian who struggles for his basic rights, and the social class exploited and stripped, the nation that fights for liberation"<sup>10</sup>. The various sociological or political categories (marginalized, oppressed, excluded, vulnerable, victim) are expressions of a sense of the poor (in Hebrew, *ani, anav, anavim*), revealed in the Bible and found in the core of Jesus' paradoxical

7 More than *milonga* or *candombe*, I would say, but that deserves more in-depth research.

8 Cf. SEGUNDO, Juan Luis. **Liberación de la teología**. Buenos Aires: Lohlé, 1975.

9 Cf. GUTIERREZ, Gustavo. *Teología desde el reverso de la historia*. In: GUTIERREZ, Gustavo. **La fuerza histórica de los pobres**. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1982, p. 257.

10 Cf. GUTIERREZ, Gustavo. **Teología de la liberación**. Perspectivas. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1980 (1<sup>st</sup> edition Lima : CEP, 1971), p. 385.

message: " Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Luke 6, 20 NIV).

The method of liberation theology (MLT) is another intuitive insight that introduces Gutiérrez. The MLT has been presented as a refinement of the methodology of Catholic Action groups: see - judge - act<sup>11</sup>. These three moments refer to the knowledge of reality with a suitable set of instruments (see), the confrontation of reality with God's Word (judge) and, finally, the action consistent with the interpretation of reality (act). In other words, as stated by Ellacuria, "theology has historically been a reflection about faith, but from a socially and culturally given situation"<sup>12</sup>. For Latin American theologians, theology is a second moment, the first one being reality, life, history. Theology as a second moment is a re-flection, a return to reality. Gutiérrez said: "Theology, as critical reflection on the historical praxis illuminated by the Word, not only does not replace other functions of theology like wisdom and rational knowledge, but also presupposes and needs them"<sup>13</sup>.

In addition to these two elements, one can add briefly a few others that I consider parts of the matrix contents of liberation theologies.

**The Community dimension.** The Latin American Christian experience is an ecclesial and communitarian experience. The *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base – CEBs* (Christian Base Communities) are the driving force behind a new way of being a church. The CEBs reflect together, pray together and celebrate life in the midst of death, poverty, exclusion. It is the newness that Leonardo Boff stresses in his book *Church: Charisma and Power*<sup>14</sup>.

The communities read the Bible as part of their life. The **popular reading of the Bible** also becomes a method that brings the Bible to everyday reality<sup>15</sup>.

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11 It is worth noting that Fr. Gutiérrez has been, for decades, chaplain of the Movement of Catholic Students (MIEC-JECI) in Lima, part of the Catholic Action.

12 Cf. ELLACURIA, Ignacio. Tesis sobre posibilidad, necesidad y método de una teología latinoamericana. In: VARGAS-MACHUCA, Antonio. (ed.). **Teología y mundo contemporáneo**. Homenaje a K. Rahner. Madrid: Cristiandad, 1975, p. 326.

13 Cf. GUTIERREZ, Gustavo. **Teología de la liberación**. Perspectivas. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1971, p. 38. Note this precise definition of theology as well as the need for dialogue between different ways of making theology.

14 Cf.; BOFF, Leonardo. **Igreja: Carisma e Poder**. Ensaios de Eclesiologia Militante. Petropolis: Vozes 1981.

15 Books authored by Fr. Carlos Mesters and Pr. Milton Schwantes were widely used in Brazil and Latin America. They developed a Latin American biblical hermeneutics. Cf. e.g. MESTERS, Carlos. **Flor sem**

Finally, there is one component which is almost always forgotten, or at least not highlighted: **spirituality**. Yet it is also at the geneses of LT. "Theology of liberation", wrote Leonardo Boff, "was born of a profound spiritual experience: sensitivity and love for the poor who make up the large majorities of our continent"<sup>16</sup>. The spirituality of liberation is explicitly addressed, for instance, in the writings of Gutierrez<sup>17</sup> and Leonardo Boff<sup>18</sup>.

In short, we have the option for the poor, a particular methodology, the community dimension, popular reading of the Bible and spirituality.

#### 4 Climate change and Latin American theology

How have all the above-mentioned components helped to address the climate change crisis? In forty years there has been a transformation in Latin American theology which has considered some topics particularly relevant to the climate change debate.

The first one is the development of an **indigenous theology**. In fact, the indigenous or aboriginal issue was almost a marginal matter in liberation theology forty years ago. Of course, at the time there were already in-depth studies on the history, situation and religiosity of indigenous communities<sup>19</sup>, but these were seen as anthropological essays without political consequences. It was in the process towards the commemoration of 500 years of the Spanish *Conquista* in 1992 that indigenous movements gained political importance and indigenous Christian theologians began to reflect on indigenous issues.

Humberto Ramos Salazar, for example, defines: "We call Aymara theology this religious experience of the Aymaras today, based on its founding historical memory, which allows to make a contextual theological reflection and calls for life attitudes", and explains in a footnote: "(Aymara) theology must be used as a stepping-stone to the method of

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**defesa**. Uma explicação da Bíblia a partir do povo. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1983. In another context, Ernesto Cardenal, in Nicaragua, published *El Evangelio en Solentiname*.

16 BOFF, Leonardo. **Teología desde el cautiverio**. Bogotá: IAPS, 1975, p. 14.

17 Cf. e.g. GUTIERREZ, Gustavo. **Beber en su propio pozo**. El itinerario espiritual de un pueblo, Lima: CEP, 1983; idem, **Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente**: Una reflexión sobre el libro de Job. Lima: CEP, 1986.

18 Cf. inter alia BOFF, Leonardo. **Atualidade da experiência de Deus**. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1974; idem. **O Pai nosso**. A oração da libertação integral. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1978; idem. **Mestre Eckhart**: a mística do ser e do não ter. Petrópolis: Vozes, 1983.

19 For instance, the studies of Father Bartomeu Melia SJ, on the mbyá Guaraní ethnic group.

liberation theology", and then refers to Gustavo Gutierrez and Clodovis Boff<sup>20</sup>. It is from these reflections that an interreligious dialogue and a (Christian) indigenous theology have developed. Indigenous theologies – as we could distinguish at least an Aymara-Quechua theology, a Mayan theology, a Guarani theology - have a common denominator, the reference to the land as a key issue, and as a consequence, a new way of relating to the environment.

This new awareness of human relationship with the land and the human being as part of the whole creation is the basis of Leonardo Boff's **ecological theology**. After his classic works from the 90s *Jesus Cristo Libertador* and *Igreja. Carisma e Poder*<sup>21</sup>, his theological production focused on the ecological issue. He tried to articulate the cry of the poor, characteristic of liberation theology, with the cry of the earth, the cry of creation<sup>22</sup>.

Another dimension not present in the 70s, and later developed, is the relation between **theology and economy**. Analyses of the root causes of poverty and their connection with economic models, in particular neoliberalism, have become central. As pointed out by Jung Mo Sung, economics was almost non-existing as a discipline in the genesis of liberation theology<sup>23</sup>.

Another relevant contribution to address climate change has been the development of a **Latin American eco-feminist perspective**. Ivone Gebara, for instance, explains that her adoption of an eco-feminist perspective, a combination of feminism and social ecology from a holistic perspective, changed her way of looking at the world, people and events. She dropped an exclusively anthropocentric and androcentric world view and began to see more clearly how her body and her neighbors' bodies are affected, not only by unemployment and economic hardship, but also by the way the exclusion of the poor is linked to the destruction of their land, racism and the militarization of their country<sup>24</sup>.

With these new developments theology in Latin America has addressed the issue of climate change. The World Forum on Theology and Liberation, held in Belem, Brazil, at the heart of the Amazonia, in January 2009, focused on the theme: *Water, Earth and*

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20 Cf. RAMOS SALAZAR, Humberto. **Hacia una teología aymara**. La Paz, CTP-CMI, 1997, p. 131.

21 Cf. BOFF, Leonardo. **Jesus Cristo Libertador**, Petropolis: Vozes, 1972 and **Igreja: Carisma e Poder**. Ensaios de Eclesiologia Militante. Petropolis : Vozes, 1981.

22 Cf. e.g. BOFF, Leonardo. **Ecologia: grito da terra, grito dos pobres**. São Paulo: Atica, 1995, p. 11.

23 Cf. SUNG, Jung Mo. **Economía, tema ausente en la teología de la liberación**. San José –CR : DEI, 1994. Cf. also the writings of Franz Hinkelammert.

24 Cf. GEBARA, Ivone. **Longing for Running Water**. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, p. vi.

*Theology for another possible world.* During the debates, the topic of climate change was addressed in different ways: indigenous peoples performing earth- and water-centered rituals, Afro-Brazilian priests presenting African insights to land and water, workshops with people engaged in movements of the landless, and theologians from Latin America and other regions reflecting on different aspects of the topics. Particularly relevant in the debate was the clear affirmation that climate change is a matter of justice. From an ethical point of view, it is unjust that those who are suffering and will suffer more the consequences of climate change are precisely those who have contributed less to its causes. **Climate justice**, therefore, is an ethical imperative to tackle the challenges of climate change. Strategies to mitigate climate change effects, adapt to new conditions, and fund new technologies to achieve these goals, which are being internationally discussed in United Nations Climate Change Conferences (COPs), should be analyzed also in this climate justice perspective. While some ethical principles are already presented in Article 3 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (e.g. on common but differentiated responsibilities), a thorough analysis is needed to unfold other ethical aspects.

Furthermore, in a Latin American theological perspective, climate change should be seen in the context of **a renewed theology of creation**. The planet suffers the consequences of current development patterns which have favored the dominion of the earth (Gen 1) rather than the care for the garden of creation (Gen 2). An in-depth understanding of God-in-creation, the transience of God, more than his transcendence, helps to rediscover a forgotten dimension of men's place in creation<sup>25</sup>.

The cry of the earth is indeed also the cry of the poor. The 2007 report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)<sup>26</sup> already recognized the most vulnerable groups and regions are suffering and will suffer most consequences of climate change. These groups include the poor, indigenous peoples and communities living in low lying islands. To respond to climate change challenges means to consider these communities in particular and act responsibly and audaciously.

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25 Latin American theologians, especially Leonardo Boff, develop the concept of *pantheism* borrowed from process and eco-feminist theologians.

26 IPCC 4th Assessment Report (AR4) is available at. Available in: [http://www.ipcc.ch/publications\\_and\\_data/publications\\_ipcc\\_fourth\\_assessment\\_report\\_synthesis\\_report.htm](http://www.ipcc.ch/publications_and_data/publications_ipcc_fourth_assessment_report_synthesis_report.htm). Accessed on 20 December 2009.



A response to the climate change crisis is also a matter of **conversion**. As said before, Latin American theology regards spirituality as a key component, and conversion is at the core of the Gospel's message and Christian Spirituality. In relation to the climate change crisis, conversion means that we need to convert our attitudes, our paradigms, our ways of life. To do so, lessons learnt from other cultures like indigenous peoples or peoples of African descent could bring new insights to different ways of relating with nature and fellow human beings.

## Conclusion

I would like to return to the initial question. Has Latin American theology anything to do with contemporary politics in Latin America? Obviously the answer is not simple. There is not, I believe, a direct relationship. But if we take, for example, Lula's government in Brazil, there was a relation between the CEBs and the creation of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* - PT (Labor Party). The support of liberation theologians such as Frei Betto and Leonardo Boff to President Lula was clear at the beginning of his first administration. Today, during his second term of office after re-election, there is much criticism of his government from liberation theology sectors, but, in my view, this is part of a democratic govern, negotiations and compromises. This is, I repeat, not only in the case of Brazil, a complex issue.

What was the position of Latin American governments in relation to COP 15? Brazil came with an interesting proposal to limit its CO2 emissions. Let us remember that Brazil is not part of the Annex-I countries of the Kyoto Protocol, and together with China, India and other "developing" countries, is expected to commit to mitigation despite not being included in the Kyoto binding agreement. But in the negotiations in Copenhagen, Brazil joined those "emerging" countries together with the United States and South Africa to adopt the Copenhagen Accord, which was much less than the fair, ambitious and legally binding treaty civil society and the poorest countries were looking for. The strong reaction of the representative of Tuvalu, saying accepting the Accord meant "we are being offered

thirty pieces of silver to betray our people and our future”<sup>27</sup>, was one of the hardest critiques of the deal.

The concern for indigenous populations was brought by Bolivia to COP15, and the organization of the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba in April 2010 catalyzed the claims of an increasing number of civil society organizations from Latin America and other parts of the world to continue struggling for a fair, ambitious and legally binding agreement as an outcome of international negotiations. Many of these organizations and individuals from Latin America, I'm sure, have had some kind of exposure to Latin American liberation theology. New approaches are needed to overcome the climate change crisis and the present impasse of international negotiations. I strongly believe a Latin American contribution could be positive in this regard.

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27 Cf. ABC News. Future not for sale: climate deal rejected. Available in: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/12/19/2776604.htm>. Accessed on 20 december 2009.

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