
Liberation Theology and Ecology: Alternative, Confrontation or Complementarity?



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Liberation theology and ecological discourse have something in common: they stem from two wounds that are bleeding. The first, the wound of poverty and wretchedness, tears the social fabric of millions and millions of poor people the world over. The second, systematic aggression against the earth, destroys the equilibrium of the planet, threatened by the depredations made by a type of development undertaken by contemporary societies, now spread throughout the world. Both lines of reflection and action stem from a cry: the cry of the poor for life, liberty and beauty (see Exod. 3.7) in the case of liberation theology; the cry of the earth growing under oppression (see Rom. 8.22–3) in that of ecology. Both seek liberation: one of the poor by themselves, as organized historical agents, conscientized and linked to other allies who take up their cause and their struggle; the other of the earth through a new alliance between it and human beings, in a brotherly/sisterly relationship and with a type of sustainable development that will respect the different ecosystems and guarantee future generations a good quality of life.

It is time to try and bring the two disciplines together, to see to what extent they differ from or even confront one another, and how, basically, they complement one another. I begin with ecological discourse, since it represents a truly all-embracing viewpoint.¹

I The ecological age

Ecology was originally seen as a sub-subject of biology, one which studies the inter-retro-relationships of living bodies one with another and with

their environment. This is how its first formulator, Ernst Heckel, saw it in 1866. But then the fan of its understanding opened out into the three well-known divisions:² *environmental*, which deals with the environment and the relationships various societies have had with it, sometimes benevolent, sometimes aggressive, sometimes incorporating human beings in the environment, sometimes not; *social*, primarily concerned with social relationships as pertaining to ecological relationships, since we as personal and social beings are part of the natural whole and our relationship with nature moves through the social relationship of exploration, collaboration or respect and veneration in such a way that social justice (the right relationship among persons, functions and institutions) implies a certain operation of ecological justice (a right relationship with nature, equitable access to its resources, guarantee of quality of life); finally, *mental*, which starts from the realization that nature is not external to human beings, but internal, in our minds, in the shape of psychic energies, symbols, archetypes and models of behaviour that embody certain attitudes of aggression towards or respect for and acceptance of nature.

In its early stages, ecology was still a regional discourse, since it was concerned with the preservation of certain threatened species (the whales of the oceans, the giant panda of China, the golden myco-lion of the tropical forests of Latin America), or with the creation of nature reserves that would ensure favourable conditions for the various ecosystems. Or, in a word, it was concerned with the 'green' of the planet – with forests, principally the tropical ones that contain the greatest biodiversity on earth. But with the growth of consciousness of the undesirable effects of the processes of industrial development, ecology became a world-wide discourse. It is not only species and ecosystems that are threatened. The earth as a whole is sick and needs treatment and healing. The alarm was raised in 1972, with the Club of Rome's famous document, *The Limits of Growth*. The mechanism of death seems all-devouring: since 1990 ten species of living bodies have been disappearing every day. By the turn of the century, they will be disappearing at the rate of one every hour, and by then we shall have lost twenty per cent of all life forms on the planet.³

Ecology became the basis for a vigorous social critique.⁴ Underlying the type of society dominant today is an arrogant anthropocentrism. We human beings see ourselves as being above other beings and lords over their life and death. In the past three centuries, thanks to scientific and technological advances, we have awarded ourselves the instruments with which to dominate the world and systematically plunder its riches, reduced in our minds to 'natural resources', with no respect for their relative autonomy.

The natural sciences developed in particular since the 1950s with the

deciphering of the genetic code and the knowledge gained from various space projects present us with a new cosmology; that is, we have a coherent view of the universe, a different outlook on the earth and the way humankind functions in the evolutionary process.⁵

In the first place, we have gained an entirely new vantage point: for the first time in history, we, in the persons of the astronauts, have been able to see the earth from outside itself.⁶ 'From the moon,' one of them, John Jung, said, 'the earth fits in the palm of my hand; there are no whites and blacks in it, no Marxists and democrats. It is our common home, our cosmic homeland. We must learn to love this wonderful blue-white planet, because it is threatened.'

In the second place, embarking on a spaceship, as Isaac Asimov recognized in 1982, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the launching of the first Sputnik, makes it obvious that earth and humanity form a single entity.⁷ This is perhaps the most basic intuition of the ecological approach: the discovery of the earth as a super-organism, given a name – Gaia.⁸ Rocks, waters, atmosphere, life and consciousness are not juxtaposed, separated one from another, but have always been inter-related, in a total inclusion and reciprocity, making up one unique organic whole.

In the third place, we humans are not so much *on* the earth as *of* the earth. We are the most complex and singular expression known, so far, of the earth and the cosmos. Men and women are earth that thinks, hopes, loves and has entered into the no longer instinctive but conscious phase of decision-making.⁹ The noosphere represents an emergence from the biosphere, which in its turn represents an emergence from the atmosphere, the hydrosphere and the geosphere. Everything is related to everything at all points and at every moment. A radical interdependence operates among living and apparently non-living systems. This is the foundation of both cosmic community and planetary community. We human beings need to rediscover our place in this global community, together with other species, not outside or above them. All anthropocentrism is out of place here. This does not mean renouncing our singularity as human beings, as those beings in nature through whom nature itself curves through space, irrupts into reflective consciousness, becomes capable of co-piloting the evolutionary process and shows itself as an ethical being which takes on the responsibility for the good destiny of the whole planet. As the great US ecologist Thomas Berry has shrewdly remarked: 'The final risk the earth dares to take is this: entrusting its destiny to human decision, granting the human community the power of decision over its basic life systems.'¹⁰ In other words, it is the earth itself that, through one of its expressions – the human species – takes on a conscious direction in this new phase of the process of

evolution. Finally, all these perceptions give rise to a new understanding, a new vision of the universe and a redefinition of human beings in the cosmos and of our actions in relation to it. Such a fact faces us with a new paradigm.¹¹ A new age has been founded: the ecological age. After centuries of confrontation with nature and of isolation from the planetary community, we are finding our way back to our common home – great, good, fruitful Earth. We are seeking to establish a new alliance with her, one of mutual respect and brother/sisterhood.

II Hearing the cry of the oppressed

How does liberation theology relate to ecological concerns? We have to recognize at the outset that liberation was not born out of the schema of ecological concern sketched above. The major challenge it addressed itself to was not the earth as a threatened whole, but its exploited sons and daughters, condemned to die before their time, the poor and oppressed.¹² This does not mean that its basic insights had nothing to do with ecology; they related directly to it, since the poor and oppressed are members of nature and their situation objectively represents an ecological aggression. But all this was worked out within a stricter historical-social framework and in the context of a classic cosmology.

The main thrust of liberation theology, back in the 1960s, was ethical indignation (the true sacred anger of the prophets) in the face of the collective poverty and wretchedness of the masses, principally in the so-called Third World. This situation seemed – and still seems – unacceptable to any basic human sensitivity and *a fortiori* to the Christian conscience, which reads in the faces of the poor and marginalized the actualization of the passion of the crucified Christ, crying out and longing to rise again to life and liberty.

The option for the poor against their poverty and for their liberty constituted and still constitutes the central axis of liberation theology. Opting for the poor implies action: it means putting oneself in the situation of their poverty, taking on their cause, their struggle, and – in the limit case – their often tragic fate.

The poor have never been the chief focus to such an extent in any earlier Christian theologies. The particular intuition of liberation theology was to try to build a theology from the viewpoint of the victims, in order to denounce the mechanisms that made them victims, and to help, with the aid of the spiritual heritage of Christianity, to overcome these mechanisms through the collective gestation of a society with greater opportunities for life, justice and participation.

This is why the poor occupy the central epistemological place in liberation theology; that is, the poor are the place from where to try and define the concept of God, of Christ, of grace, of history, of the churches' mission, the meaning of economics, politics and the future of societies and human beings. From the standpoint of the poor, we can see how excluding present-day societies are, or how imperfect democracies are, not to mention the religions and churches caught up in the interests of the powerful.

From earliest times, Christians have taken care of the poor (see Gal. 2.10). But the poor have never before been given such theological prominence, nor been seen to such an extent as transforming political agents, as they are by liberation theology. It never understood the poor in a reductive or merely 'pauperist' sense. The poor are not viewed just as beings in need, but as having desires, unlimited communication skills, a hunger for beauty. Like all human beings – as the Cuban poet Roberto Retamar aptly said – the poor have two basic hungers, one for bread, which can be satisfied, and one for beauty, which is insatiable. This is why liberation can never be sectionalized into material, social or merely spiritual segments. It is authentic only when the totality of human needs is kept open. It was liberation theology's merit always to have affirmed this integral character of human needs, from its first beginnings, from a right interpretation of what liberation means, not from any doctrinal demands from the Vatican.

The authenticity of liberation does not, however, consist merely in keeping its integral character, but also and principally in its being effected by the victims themselves, the poor themselves. This is perhaps one of the particularities of liberation theology by comparison with other practices from tradition that have also been concerned with the poor. Common understanding of the poor is of those who have not – food, housing, clothing, work, culture. Those who have, it is said, should help them to free themselves from their poverty. This approach is loaded with goodwill and right intentions; it underlies all assistentialism and paternalism in history. But it is neither efficient nor sufficient. It does not free the poor, since it keeps them in a régime of dependency: what is worse, it fails to appreciate the liberating power of the poor. The poor are not simply those who have not: they also have – culture, capacity for work, for collaboration, for organization, for struggle. Only when the poor trust in their own potential and opt for their like are true conditions created for authentic liberation. The poor make themselves into the historical agents of their own liberation; they also become free, capable of self-determination for solidarity with those who are not their like.

This is why we should stress that it is not the churches that free the poor, nor a beneficent state, nor the classes that assist them. These can be allies of the poor, provided they do not take their protagonism and hegemony from them. We can speak of liberation only when the poor themselves emerge as the principal builders of their own road, even if others help them build it.

One of the permanent merits of liberation theology undoubtedly stems from the methodology it introduced into theological reflection.¹³ It does not start from ready-made doctrines, nor from revealed truth, nor from Christian traditions. All these are present on the Christian horizon, as a backdrop to illuminating convictions and as the flooring to reflection. But liberation theology starts specifically from the anti-reality, from the cry of the oppressed, from open wounds that have been bleeding for a long time.

Its first step is to accept reality at its most dramatic and problematic. This is the stage of *seeing*, of feeling and bearing the effects of human suffering. It means an overall experience of com-passion, suffering-with, protest-a[c]tion, of mercy and of a will to liberating action. This supposes a direct contact with anti-reality, an experience of existential shock.

The second stage is that of analytical *judging*, in the double sense: that of critical understanding and that of shedding light on the basis of the contributions of faith itself. We need to decipher the causes that engender suffering, seek their cultural roots, in the interplay of relationships of economic, political and ideological power. Poverty is neither innocent nor natural: it is produced, and so the poor are exploited and impoverished. The data of revelation, of tradition, of faith, of Christian practice down the centuries, denounce this situation as sin, that is, as something that also has to do with God, as a denial in history of God's design, mediated through justice, tenderness to the poor, sharing and community.

The third stage is that of transformative *action*, which is the most important, since everything has to result in this. It is important that Christian faith should make its contribution to the transformation of relationships of injustice into those that provide more life and joy in life, in sharing and in a reasonable quality of life for all. Christian faith has no monopoly on the idea of transformation, but joins in with other forces also taking up the cause and struggle of the poor, making its contribution with its religious and symbolic particularity, its manner of organizing the faith of the poor and its presence in society.

Finally comes the stage of *celebration*. This is a decisive dimension for faith, since it brings out the most gratuitous and symbolic aspect of liberation. In celebration, the Christian community recognizes that the specific achievements of its commitment are more than social, community or political dimensions. They are all these, but they also signify the

anticipatory signs of the goods of the Kingdom, the advent of divine redemption mediated through historical-social liberations, the moment when the utopia of integral liberation is anticipated under fragile signs, symbols and rites.

Through its liberating commitment, based on theological reflection, Christianity has shown that the idea of revolution/liberation/transformation is not the monopoly of secular left-wing traditions, but can be a summons made by the central message of Christianity, which proclaims someone who was a political prisoner, was tortured and nailed to a cross as a consequence of his way of life, and who was raised back to life to demonstrate the truth of this way of life and to bring about the utopian realizations of the dynamisms of life and liberty.

III The most threatened beings in creation: the poor

We now need to bring together these two types of discourse, that of ecology and that of liberation theology. In its analysis of the causes of the impoverishment afflicting the majority of the world's population, liberation theology came to appreciate the existence of a perverse logic. The same logic of the ruling system, based on profit and social manipulation, that leads to the exploitation of workers, also leads to the spoilation of entire nations and eventually to the depredation of nature itself. We can no longer simply make technological corrections and redefinitions – though we still have to do so – in the style of reforms within this same logic; we need to move beyond this logic and way of seeing ourselves, which we have enjoyed for at least the last three hundred years. We can no longer go on treating nature, as present-day societies do, as a sort of supermarket or self-service cafeteria. Nature is our common heritage, which is being impiously plundered, but which we must conserve. We also need to guarantee the conditions for its later survival for our own generation and for future generations, since the entire universe has been working for fifteen thousand million years to bring us to the point we have now reached.

From being the Satan of earth, we have to educate ourselves to be its guardian angel, capable of saving the earth, our cosmic homeland and earthly mother.

The astronauts accustomed us to seeing the earth as a spaceship floating blue in interstellar space, bearing the common destiny of all beings. The fact is that on this earthship, a fifth of the population travels in the space reserved for passengers, and these consume eighty per cent of the provisions made for the journey. The other four-fifths travel in the cargo

hold, suffering from cold, hunger and every other sort of deprivation. They are slowly becoming conscious of the injustice of this distribution of goods and services. They are planning to revolt: either we die passively of starvation, they tell one another, or we make changes that will benefit us all. The argument is not hard to understand: either we all save ourselves within a system of living together in solidarity and sharing with and in spaceship earth, or we explode it through our indignation and fling us all into the abyss. This understanding is growing all the time.

The latest arrangements of the world order ruled by capital under the regime of globalization and neo-liberalism have brought fantastic material progress. State-of-the-art technologies, those of the third scientific revolution, have enormously increased production. But the social effect is perverse: the exclusion of workers on a massive scale, and even of entire regions of the world, which are of little interest for the accumulation of capital in a cruelly indifferent mentality.¹⁴

Recent data suggest that total world profits are sacrificing the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki every day.¹⁵ Progress is immense, but deeply inhuman. Its focus is not human beings and peoples with their needs and preferences, but merchandise and the market to which everything has to be subject.

In this context, the most threatened beings in creation are not the whales, but the poor, condemned to an early death. UN statistics indicate that fifteen million children die every year before finishing their fifth day of life, from hunger or the diseases associated with hunger. 150 millions are undernourished and 800 millions live permanently with hunger.¹⁶

It is from this human catastrophe that liberation theology starts when it meets the ecological question. In other words, it starts from social ecology, from the way human beings, the most complex beings in creation, relate to one another, and how they organize themselves in their relation to other beings in nature under régimes of great exploitation and cruel exclusion. What is most urgently sought is the minimum social justice required to ensure that life has its basic dignity. This presupposes more than social justice. It presupposes a new alliance between humankind and other beings, a new courtesy toward creation and the working-out of an ethic and mysticism of brother/sisterhood with the entire cosmic community. Democracy must become socio-cosmic: that is, the elements of nature such as mountains, plants, rivers, animals and the atmosphere must be the new citizens who share in the human banquet, while humans share in the cosmic banquet. Only then will there be ecological justice and peace on planet Earth.

Liberation theology should adopt the new cosmology of ecological

discourse, the vision that sees the earth as a living superorganism linked to the entire universe. It should understand the human mission, exercised by men and women, as an expression of earth itself and a manifestation of the principle of intelligibility and loving care that exists in the universe; it should understand that human beings – the noosphere – represent the most advanced stage of the cosmic evolutionary process on its conscious level. They are co-pilots with the guiding principles of the universe that have controlled the whole process since the moment of the 'big bang' some fifteen thousand million years ago. Human beings were created for the universe and not vice versa, in order to bring about a higher and more complex stage of universal evolution.

Having adopted this basic stance, we need to define our starting point – an option for the poor that includes the most threatened beings in creation. The first of these is planet Earth itself, as an entity. Acceptance that the supreme value is the conservation of the planet and the maintenance of conditions in which the human species can flourish has not yet sufficiently entered general consciousness. This option shifts the axis of all questions; the basic question is not: What future is there for Christianity or Christ's church? Nor: What will be the fate of the West? It is rather: What future is there for planet Earth and for humankind as its expression? To what extent can Christianity with its spiritual heritage guarantee its collective future?

Then, we have to make an option for the poor of the world, for those immense majorities of the human species who are exploited and decimated by a small majority of the same species. The challenge is to make people see one another as members of a great earthly family together with other species and find their way back to the community of other living beings, the planetary and cosmic community.

Finally, we have to find a way of guaranteeing the sustainability, not of one type of development, but of the planet itself, in the short, medium and long term. This requires as a non-consumerist sort of cultural practice one that respects the rhythms of ecosystems, that produces an economy of sufficiency for all and delivers the common good not only to human beings but also to the other beings in creation.

IV Liberation theology and ecological discourse as a bridge between North and South

Two great problems will occupy human minds and hearts from now on: What is the fate and future of planet Earth if we prolong the logic of plunder to which our development and consumer model has accustomed us? What can the poor two-thirds of humankind hope for from the world?

There is the risk that the 'culture of the satisfied' will close in on its consumerist egoism and cynically ignore the devastation of the poor masses of the world. Similarly, there is the risk that the 'new barbarians' will not accept their death sentence and will launch themselves into a desperate struggle for survival, threatening and destroying everything in their path. Humankind could still be facing levels of violence and destruction never yet seen on the face of the earth, unless we – collectively – decide to change the course of civilization, shift its axis from the logic of means to exclusive profit to a logic of ends as a function of the common good of planet Earth, of human beings and of all beings, in the exercise of freedom and cooperation among all the nations.

Today these two questions, with different emphases, are common concerns of the North and South of the planet. And they make up the central content of liberation theology and of ecological reflection. These two thoughts allow for dialogue and convergence in diversity between the geographical poles of the world. They should be an indispensable mediation in safeguarding the whole of creation and in redeeming the dignity of the poor majorities of the world. (So liberation theology and ecological discourse need one another and mutually complement one another.)

Translated by Paul Burns

Notes

1. Cf. D. G. Hallman, *Ecotheology, Voices from South and North*, Geneva and Maryknoll, NY 1973.
2. Cf. F. Guatarri, *As três ecologias*, Campinas 1988.
3. See further data in L. Boff, *Ecologia, mundialização e espiritualidade*, São Paulo 1993 (ET in preparation).
4. Various, *L'écologie, ce matérialisme historique*, Paris 1992; Various, *Ecology, Economics, Ethics. The Broken Circle*, New Haven 1991.
5. Cf. M. Longair, *The Origins of our Universe*, Cambridge 1992; R. R. Freitas Mourão, 'Nature is an Heraclitean Fire: Reflections on Cosmology in an Ecological Age', *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 25, New York 1991.
6. Cf. F. White, *The Overview Effect*, Boston 1987.
7. *New York Times*, 9 October 1982.
8. J. Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia: the Biography of Our Living Earth*, New York 1988.
9. E. Jantsch, *The Self-Organizing Universe: Scientific and Human Implications of the Emerging Paradigm of Evolution*, New York 1980.
10. *O Sonho da terra* (The Dream of Earth), Petrópolis 1991, 35.
11. R. O. Muller. *O nascimento de uma civilização global*, São Paulo 1993.

12. Cf. H. Assmann, 'Teologia da solidaridade a da cidadania ou seja continuando a teologia da libertação', *Notas de ciências da religião* 2, 1994, 2-9.
13. See the already classic work by C. Boff, *Teologia e prática*, Petrópolis 1993.
14. Cf. F. J. Hinkelammert, 'La lógica de la expulsión del mercado capitalista mundial y el proyecto de liberación', *Pasos*, San José, Costa Rica 1992.
15. Cf. R. Garaudy, *Le débat du siècle*, Paris 1995, 14.
16. Cf. UNDP, *Human Development Report*, Oxford 1990.