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Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology: Similarities and Differences

In this article I will examine the relationship between liberation theology and feminist theology. What is the impact of liberation theology on feminist theology? Which similarities and differences can be found between these theologies? The aim is not to make an extensive analysis over their relationship, but to sketch an introduction or a short overview.

NOT ONE THEOLOGY, BUT THEOLOGIES

It is possible to define liberation theology either in a narrow or in a broader way. Seen in a narrow way, liberation theology can be described as a theological approach that arose in the sixties in Latin America.

In a broader meaning of the concept, it stands for a wide range of different liberation theologies (for example black theology and Asian liberation theology). Using this latter understanding of the concept, also feminist theology can be seen as one of the forms of liberation theology.

The different liberation theologies were born more or less at the same time, but not all of them were "derived" from Latin American liberation theology. Having all this in mind, it is today more appropriate to speak of liberation theologies, in plural.

Feminist theology can neither be seen as one homogenous discipline nor one unified movement of thought. The views differ, for example concerning the relationship to Christian tradition.

A watershed can sometimes be seen in the question of whether the inferiority of women (and other oppressed groups) is understood as an essential part of Christian tradition, or if the tradition in an unconditional way can support equality among all human beings.

On the other hand, feminist theology has more and more become a worldwide, global ecumenical movement. The challenges lie in the different perspectives that spring from the range of cultural and social contexts and religious backgrounds.

Feminist theology can be seen both as a part of academic women's studies (when feminist analysis focuses on religious studies) and as a part of the liberation theology paradigm (if we have a wider definition of liberation theology).

Some feminist theologians explicitly define themselves as feminist liberation theologians: Rosemary Radford RUETHER and Elisabeth SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA especially, among others.

CONTEXT, PRAXIS AND EXPERIENCE

One can find many methodological commonalities between the different liberation theologies. For liberation theologians, the inseparability of theory and praxis is of a great importance.

Feminist theology that is close to the women's movement exemplifies this connection. In Europe, however, there is not necessarily a connection between academic feminist theology and feminist activists in and outside the Church.

This inseparability of theory and praxis appears as liberation theology and feminist theology have as their intellectual foundation the strong reference to praxis, even though they call it differently.

Liberation theology speaks more about *praxis*, while feminist theology talks about *experience*. Some call both approaches *contextual*. The aim for feminist theology, however, is not just to reflect on praxis, but to seek actively to be a form of praxis, thus shaping genuine Christian activity.

This emphasis on context involves the view that there is no objective theology. Every theology is shaped by its context (also European theology, even if sometimes it has claimed to be objective and universal) and not without linkages to social or cultural use of power.

Taking context as the starting point has for liberation and feminist theology meant looking at theology from the "margins", from the situations of poor human beings, from different women's situations.

MULTIPLICITY OF OPPRESSION

For liberation theology, the poor people's situation is not due only to one type of oppression. Instead, there is an inter-relatedness of different structures of oppression (political, social, economic, racial and sexual).

Latin American liberation theology has mainly been created from men's perspectives (almost all of its well-known theologians are men). Feminist liberation theology has criticized it for not including a gender perspective, for not seeing that it is often the poor women who are the most oppressed ones.

Often it has just remained a question of merely formal



inclusion or of “adding women”, instead of enlarging the understanding of the subjects of the poor. Another tendency among male liberation theologians has been a failure to see sexism (and heterosexism) as fundamental political and theological issues.

This situation is now changing, not so much because of revision on the side of liberation theologians, but more because of the amount of feminist theologians writing within the field of liberation theology.

A similar problem subsists inside feminist theology: feminism cannot just fight sexism. Instead, it must be a struggle against racism, classism, colonialism and militarism as structures of women’s exploitation and oppression.

It cannot just be preoccupied with gender-dualism. Feminist voices are arguing that patriarchy must be understood as a historical political system of dominations that intertwine — only when taking this perspective can it be changed.

Most of the Latin American feminist liberation theologians and the black and Hispanic women theologians take this view as their starting point. Feminist liberation theology highlights the fact that it is possible to be both oppressed and oppressor simultaneously.

This has been the starting point for their critique of male liberation theologians as well as for their self-critical attitude to their own generalizations of women’s experience. Also, here is the question of the interlocking of oppression.

EXPERIENCE AS NORM?

When theology (as in the case of liberation theologies) is understood as a critical reflection of praxis, women’s historical, concrete and bodily experiences, especially those of oppression and suffering, become the centre of theology.

Even if experience or praxis constitutes the norm of theology, it is not the same as reducing theology to experience or praxis. Experience is understood as a tool for critique and reconstruction of reality.

Within feminism, critique has nevertheless been directed

against placing women’s experiences as a norm that could give more complete and less distorted knowledge than men’s experiences.

Why would women or the poor have a “truer” understanding of reality and of theology? These feminists want to remind that experiences do not say anything about what women are but only about how they are treated.

In fact, experience is not anything unique to feminist theology, as all theological reflection has its foundation in experience: what have been called objective sources of theology — Scripture and tradition — are themselves collected human experience.

What is new about feminist theology’s use of experience is its use of *women’s experiences*, which have been almost entirely neglected in theological reflection in the past. It is also important to note that as much as there is no one liberation or feminist theology, there is not one experience in singular, but many experiences.

COMPARISON IN SIX SUBSTANTIAL QUESTIONS

Bible: The role of the Bible is quite different when one compares liberation theology with feminist theology. It is often less complicated for Latin American liberation theologians to lean on the Bible than for feminist theologians to do so.

The “theology of poverty” of Latin American liberation theology has a strong Biblical basis, while it is much more difficult to create a theology in favour of women’s liberation based on Biblical texts.

Language: Feminist theologians have pointed out that the language in Latin American liberation theology remains in a way sexist and exclusive (for example when it comes to the image of God).

Ethics: The ethics in Latin American liberation theology have mostly dealt with political and economic ethics and, for example, lacked the proper treatment of sexual ethics and morality.

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Compared to Latin American liberation theologians, many feminist theologians talk about oppression on a more individual level, as an intimate personal kind, in the area of sexuality, for instance.

The individual and her or his experiences, including emotions and personal relationships, are more accentuated in feminist theology. Latin American liberation theology tends to value "collectivism", a collective subjectivity.

Christian Tradition: Like other liberation theologies, feminist theology has both its critical, deconstructive aspect in relation to tradition, and a constructive aspect that aims at creating a more inclusive, non-sexist theological discourse and practise.

The relation of feminist theologians to religious institutions and traditions is much more complex than that of most liberation theologians. The reason for this is that women as a group have been excluded from the most valued positions, especially from ordination.

Liberation and Evil: Both Latin American liberation theology and feminist theology understand liberation as something that can happen here and now, not anything that awaits humanity only in a life after death.

This understanding is probably connected to how these theologies relate to evil in the world. Evil is understood as something socially constructed, which means that evil also can be deconstructed in this life.

Grassroots Groups: Liberation theology has emphasized

the base community as a worshipping group. This has also had an impact on feminist theology and enabled the growth of woman-churches and groups of justice-seeking friends.

CHALLENGES

The challenges for the future are to engage in serious dialogue between different liberation theologies and First World and Third World feminist theologies. This has been done only to a small extent.

Another challenge concerns the problems with the concept of experience mentioned above. In order to avoid the risk of becoming dogmatical or uncritical, both liberation theology and feminist theology need to develop a theoretical reflection concerning their claims of truth.

Suggested Reading

ISHERWOOD Lisa, *Liberation*. In ISHERWOOD Lisa – MCEWAN Dorothea (eds.), *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*. Sheffield, 1996.

VUOLA Elina, *Limits of Liberation. Praxis as Method in Latin American Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology*. Helsinki, 1997.

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WELCH Sharon, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity. A Feminist Theology of Liberation*. New York, 1985.

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