

Challenges of the Discourse of Sexuality in the Theology of Liberation: An Approach from Queer Theology

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Introduction

The oppression of the poor class is also present in the sexual discourse. This is the central claim that queer theology makes to the discourse of liberation theology in Latin America.

The theologians of the liberation of the first wave reflected on sexuality from a socioeconomic perspective, that is, sexuality, specifically sex, was understood either as an instrument to alienate the poor class from becoming aware of the situation of oppression that they lived, or as a way to deviate from the path traced to be a "new man", in the terminology of Saint Paul.

However, they did not reach depth in the criticism to problematize the way of living the sexuality that came from the European colonization in Latin America.

Indecent theology, a queer way of doing theology in Latin America, introduced suspicion into the understanding of sexuality by the peoples of Latin America inherited from the European tradition. This theology puts into evidence the existence of an underlying ideology in sexual discourse: the heterosexual ideology. Which is present in political, economic and theological discourses.

Undoubtedly, the awareness of the existence of an ideology hidden in the sexual discourse of liberation theology will question the development of various issues within liberationist theology. The most important is the understanding of the poor, who is the subject and main actor of this theology. From the criticism of queer theology, the poor person is a sexed person, who does not necessarily respond to the heteronormous model imposed from Europe.

1. Walking with the poor of Latin America: the theology of liberation

Latin American theologies of liberation have been mainly distinguished by the audacity to denounce and relativize the dominant theology, also called classical theology, in our churches declaring it a particular theology, which from the perspective of liberation theology, it helped to make the situation of oppression of many people in Latin America invisible many times.

Despite the efforts made to remain a critical movement in the way of doing theology as well as being the voice of the poorest, these theologies of liberation have succumbed to the pressure of aligning with the prevailing system. That is, once the meetings of "Theology in the Americas" were held by the Ecumenical Association of Theologians of the third world, liberation theologies have tended to accept and reproduce, at least in part, the dominant orthodoxy: the content of classical theology¹.

2. Talking about sexuality in the theology of the liberation of the first wave

The denunciation of the economic and social oppression exercised by the powerful on the poor people in Latin America was the most important prophetic action of liberation theology in its beginnings. The reading of the socioeconomic context of the time, with the help of the social sciences, made possible to identify the structures of oppression suffered by the poor people from the South American continent. It is from this perspective that sexuality is approached in the reflections of the first wave of liberation theology.

In this context, references to sexuality questioned the way in which the capitalist socioeconomic system presented sex as an object to be alienated from the reality of people's oppression; or sex as an object of consumption, which in both cases would be a way to manipulate people on behalf of the powerful and leave them alienated without a social and critical conscience of their time reality².

¹ MADURO, O., *La théologie latino-américaine de la libération : une autocritique*, Dial, Dossier 2874, mai 2006. <https://www.autresbresils.net/La-theologie-latino-americaine-de-la-liberation-une-autocritique>

² MOSER, Antonio, *Sexualidad en ELLACURÍA*, Ignacio y SOBRINO Jon, *Mysterium liberationis, Conceptos fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberación*, Trotta, Madrid, 1990, p. 121.

Antônio Moser³, when talking about sexuality, the discourse immediately turns into discussing themes about marriage. For example, the interpersonal relationships that are developed in it, (such as respect, equality, dignity of the spouses, fidelity), procreation in the couple, the relationship with the children and the constitution of the family. When dealing with sexuality as such, the way of understanding pleasure in sexual relationships, remains a sensitive issue in these reflections, since the tension between body and spirit is still present. On the other hand, insists on the catalog of depersonalized ways of living sexuality from the commandments.

3. The criticism of queer theology to the theology of liberation

This criticism is very much in the self-reflection made by the theologian and philosopher of the first wave of liberation theology Otto Maduro. He believes that in the Theology of liberation one becomes aware of a certain failure. In the words of the author, “We have neglected [the] diversity, creativity and variability, instead of assuming them as a challenge that gives life”.⁴

Specifically, regarding to sexuality in liberation theology, the absence of a critical discernment of the model of sexuality, may be due to the fact that the theology producers in Latin America “were mainly ministers men of Christian churches and, Catholic priests, that is to say, men subject to priestly celibacy, with all the pressures and limitations inherent in this special religious condition”⁵.

Marcella Althaus-Reid say that the norm of sexuality is based on “the white, selective, western man, who is the source of all philosophical-theological reflections”⁶ and this subject, “can be found in the main representatives of the constructions of the hegemonic discourse of political power and economic of our world.”⁷

³ MOSER, Antonio, *Sexualidad en ELLACURÍA*, Ignacio y SOBRINO Jon, *Mysterium liberationis, Conceptos fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberación*, Trotta, Madrid, 1990,p. 107-124.

⁴ MADURO, O., *La théologie latino-américaine de la libération : une autocritique*, Dial, Dossier 2874, mai 2006. <https://www.autresbresils.net/La-theologie-latino-americaine-de-la-liberation-une-autocritique>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teología indecente: perversiones teológicas en sexo, género y política*, Ed. Bellatera, Barcelona, 2005, p. 40.

⁷ Ibid.

The queer theology developed by Althaus-Reid studies two main elements in theological research. On one hand, “the suspicion with respect to the assumption that heterosexuality is both universal and a stable sexual identity and that as such, is part of the sacralized natural order”⁸. On the other hand, “to be aware of the historical contribution that hegemonic constructions of sexual identity have made to oppressive structures of power relations in Christian churches and in theology”⁹.

Althaus-Reid¹⁰ explain that oppression of the poor class is also present in the sexual discourse. For this reason, the author makes visible the deep overlap between the sexual and the political agenda. Denouncing structures of oppression, such as politics and economics, means recognizing that there is also an underlying sexual ideology that has not been denounced until now.

The stereotype of the poor for liberation theology were the educated peasants, the poor families but legally married and blessed by the church, and the general image of a stereotyped Christian universe in which the poor rarely transgress the social and religious norm that it is considered appropriate or “decent”. Women were included in a general male category of poor communities, and their struggles and expectations were ignored. As you can see, the true poor of Latin America have become invisible. The real poor, especially the poor women who did not fit the stereotypes of the church, the people who did not fit the heterosexual norm (prostitutes, transvestites, gays, lesbians, etc.), disappeared¹¹.

The wells of Latin America are full of different love praxis and different types of economic exchanges that still flourish in some regions. Bisexual spirituality, for example, is considered the most important in altiplanic cultures. In this sense, says the Argentine author:

“Could not this be the basis for a more authentic gospel and a cultural paradigm: a bisexual city? Or 'tenderness' which is against the concept

⁸ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teoría queer y la teología de la liberación: La irrupción del sujeto sexual en la teología en Concilium* 324 (febrero), p.119.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teología indecente: perversiones teológicas en sexo, género y política*, Ed. Bellatera, Barcelona, 2005, p. 45-53.

¹¹ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *Doing a Theology from Disappeared Bodies: Theology, Sexuality, and the Excluded Bodies of the Discourses of Latin American Liberation Theology*, en FULKERSON, Mary McClintock, and BRIGGS Sheila, (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012, p. 445-447.

of economic capitalism, where prosperity grows limited only by the growth of love and excess? Why has Liberation Theology ignored the profound sexual praxis of our own continent and its implications for a more just social order?"¹².

In the book *The Queer God*¹³ there is an attempt to rediscover God outside the heterosexual ideology that has dominated history, Christianity and theology, including the theology of liberation. Finding God beyond the interpretation of a God marked by ideology and experiences that present heterosexuality as normal and normative, is the task of queer theology of liberation. It is then a question of overcoming a theology that shows a God who is a transcendent patriarchal hierarchy. The desexualization of the heterosexual ideology of theology results in a queer theology¹⁴.

4. Challenges in sexuality for liberation theology

In my opinion, the contribution of the criticism of indecent theology could be considered in the following challenges to the theology of liberation:

How to achieve a warm reception, acknowledging rights equality, and not just a mere welcome in Christian churches, to people who do not identify with the heterosexual normative system. These poor people were invisible to theology for a long time, either because they were considered perverse, or simply because they were not even considered as subjects of "liberation" at all. At the same time how to create spaces to think and live heterosexual sexuality, in the words of Althaus-Reid, "out of the closet" (coming out) , that is, free of the prevailing ideology. At this point, it should be noted, the need to return to "drinking from our own well", that is, the wisdom and experiences of the indigenous peoples of Latin America before the European colonization. In them it is possible to find ways to live and understand sexuality in diversity and free of guilt ties inherited from the Western sexual ideology.

¹² Ibid., p. 447

¹³ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella. *The queer god*. Routledge, London, 2004.

¹⁴ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella. *The queer god*, p. 9-10

These challenges point to an integral liberation of the person, in which sexuality and ways of loving are considered as something positive.

Living a diverse sexuality positively implies a new anthropological understanding. The queer theology questions a dualistic anthropological vision (body / soul) that at the moment of reflecting sexuality is left at the mercy of the total domain of the spiritual. In this way, sexuality is relegated to the background, and that is considered only from the heterosexual ideology imposed on the reading of the revelation of God in history as a content of divine revelation. Corporality, and with it, sexuality, is considered as a good and constitutive part of the human being, which is not defined by a "nature", but it is an expression of the human being as such. So how is it possible to integrate the complexity and diversity of sexuality in people's life, especially the poor? The answer to this question will allow a considerable change in the understanding of the poor as a peasant raised in the Christian faith, a poor legally married Christian and with the blessing of the Church, subject to the Christian norms established by the churches and society, above all in sexual matters.

The roles assigned to gender in feminine liberation theology, passed without being criticized, because they were considered natural. Thus, the criticism of indecent theology shows that women are considered in the theology of liberation as an image of the Virgin Mary. This is presented as a country woman, who is always silent, bearer of sexual purity, holding the male in all circumstances, away from political decisions and in general the world producer of knowledge and power.

The Indecent Theology book shows that poor women are not only rural women, but also urban women. Those who moved from the countryside to the city and there they do not have a vital place. These are on the side of the road. There are also women who live from prostitution, transvestites who also prostitute themselves, poor women who have always lived in the city, among others.

The liberation of heterosexual normalization generates a much more fluid and equitable understanding of gender roles between men and women. Therefore, the challenge posed in this topic is the openness of women as subjects with equal rights as men. However, some questions remain, what place do poor women of Latin America have in society? What kind of integral liberation corresponds to them in the current socio-historical context? Who are

the bearers of their voice in the world of political and economic power, in the theology and the pastoral life of the churches?

How to return the theology of liberation to the first producers of theology, the poor? A tension that is not easy to overcome, because by entering the academy, it becomes a consumer product of professional knowledge. If the theology is not produced by the poor, from their daily experiences, it becomes an abstract product for the satisfaction of the intellectuals, serving themselves, and not the true recipients of this novel way of doing theology.

The contribution of the decolonial movement has introduced suspicion into the way of constructing and producing knowledge. The theology of liberation had anticipated these criticisms by going to the same recipients. These were the main producers of liberation theology during the '70s and '80s. With the decrease of the base communities, the prohibition of teaching of theologians, and the change of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church towards a more conservative line, liberationist theological production diminished considerably. Which theological production became a very desired product in publics in Europe and the United States. This left aside the original producers of Latin American theology, the poor.

Finally, assuming sexuality in an integral way also affects the theologian. This means that theology is always produced with a preconception of sexuality. The awareness of these preconceptions was expressed in the metaphor of Althaus-Reid, doing naked theology, writing naked on the desk. That is, it is necessary to take into account the way or way of living one's sexuality and the perversions that are part of the theologian's life.

“What happens, for example, when Sade's boudoir meets Tillich's unwritten enjoyment of slavery or the multiplicity of Barth's compromised relationships? How could the scenes unfold? What does it teach about the economics of theology and its effects? A female theologian who writes these scenes does not become Sade, Tillich or Barth, even if she writes one, two or several [...] combinations of them on the page with a remarkable affinity with her person or her ideas.”¹⁵

¹⁵ HOFHEINZ, Hannah, *Implicate and Transgress: Marcella Althaus-Reid, Writing, and a Transformation of Theological Knowledge*. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 2015, p. 211