

## On Expanding the Scope of Liberation Theology: Two Theses Ivan Petrella

### *First Thesis: Liberation Theology must understand itself as a Global/Universal Theology*

It's common to speak of liberation theologies as contextual. There is, however, something wrong with the designation of liberation theology as contextual, particular, or local. Why? The designation of liberation theologies as contextual is another way to take the edge off the critique. Today, liberation theologies are no longer explicitly criticized and pushed to the periphery. Instead, they're assimilated into the community of 'identity' theologies." To label a liberation theology as contextual is to reduce it to the category of a particular theology in dialogue with others. Insofar as this occurs, the fact that liberation theology is a fundamentally different discourse from the bulk of theology is missed.

Liberation theologies themselves are also responsible for their designation as contextual. When confronted with the tension between the universality of the idea of liberation and the plurality of particular liberationist perspectives liberation theologians have opted to downplay the former in favor of the latter. I agree with Hugo Assmann when he asked long ago:

It's not so particular that more than thirty million people die every year of starvation and hunger. It's not so particular that two-thirds of humankind today are oppressed. Are we not falling into a new ideological control when we speak always from our particular or contextual point of departure...We are representatives of two-thirds of humankind today. Do we not need to come together for a common struggle against the oppressor?

At the heart of Assmann's questioning lies liberation theology's epistemological shift: Liberation theologies—whether Latin American, Black, Womanist, Feminist, Queer etc.—realize that theology has traditionally been done from a standpoint of privilege. North Atlantic theology, like the distribution of global resources, is slanted toward the affluent, the male, the white and the heterosexual; it's the product of a minority of humankind living in a state of affluent exception and enjoying gender, sexual, and racial dominance. Oppression and poverty remain the norm for the majority of the world's population. By grounding themselves in the perspective of the oppressed, therefore, liberation theologies are grounded in the broadest context available today and so come as close as possible to being the first truly global theologies. Yes, all theologies are particular and local, but liberation theologies, in their particularity, are as universal as theology can today ever be.

### *Second Thesis: Liberation theology must tackle disciplinary power beyond theology.*

Liberation theology is the first global theology; but it must become more; it must become the foundation for other disciplines as well. Economics, law, medical anthropology, political science, sociology and a host of other disciplines could engage in the same epistemological shift with revolutionary consequences for each field. No discipline possesses a neutral framework of analysis, and each usually encounters the world with a set of preconceptions that are biased, much like North Atlantic theology, toward the wealthy. Yet these are the disciplines, not theology, which set the intellectual frameworks through which the world is most influentially analyzed. Whether people live or die is most directly related not to theology but to economics, political science, medical anthropology. Liberation theology's epistemological shift, according to which you think from the standpoint of the poor, needs urgent elucidation in disciplines with a wider impact than theology.



Here we must train a revolutionary vanguard of liberation theologians that can operate undercover as economists or legal theorists and work from within to transform a discipline's presuppositions. As far as I know that vanguard does not yet exist so my example comes from the work of Paul Farmer, who rethinks medical anthropology from the perspective of liberation theology. Farmer is founder of Partners in Health, an organization that provides health care to poor communities around the world. His intellectual production, grounded in the reality of caring for tuberculosis victims in Russian prisons and AIDS victims in Haiti, focuses on health and human rights.

He notes that "diseases themselves make a preferential option for the poor." Yet the focus of medical research operates oblivious to the needs of the communities that are most threatened by disease. Medicine, Farmer shows, is based upon a health transition model according to which as societies develop "death will no longer be caused by infections such as tuberculosis but will occur much later by heart disease and cancer." A different standpoint reveals that for the poor there is no health transition. In other words, while wealthy citizens of 'underdeveloped' nations (those countries that have not yet experienced their health transition) do not die young from infectious diseases; they die later and from the same diseases that claim similar populations in wealthy countries. In parts of Harlem, however death rates of certain age groups are as high as those in Bangladesh; in both places, the leading causes of death in young adults are infections and violence." This health transition model makes the present sufferings of the poor unimportant - they are in fact sacrificed for the development of remedies for diseases that afflict the wealthy.

Medical ethics, from the standpoint of the poor majority of humankind, fares no better. He notes:

What is defined, these days, as an ethical issue? End-of-life decisions, questions of brain death and organ transplantation, and medical disclosure issues dominate the published literature. The question "When is life worth preserving?" is asked largely of lives one click of the switch away from extinction, lives wholly at the mercy of the technology that works to preserve some. The countless people whose life course is shortened by unequal access to health care are not topics of discussion.

This is an ethics for the few and the wealthy. Farmer's work as a doctor and medical anthropologist parallels the work of a liberation theologian within theology. Both struggle to reshape their disciplines around the concerns and issues that affect the majority of humankind.

Perhaps the task is that of disentangling the "liberation" from the "theology" in liberation theology. To work in liberation theology could mean to work outside of it, by finding ways the epistemological shift can infiltrate, subvert, and transform other bodies of knowledge. Here the liberation theologian need not carry the label of "theologian" and works best under a different disciplinary guise. Could the future of liberation call for the dissolution of liberation theology as an identifiable field of production? It would be up to subsequent generations of liberation theologians to turn this vision into a reality.

