

The Indecent Theology of Marcella Althaus-Reid as a Continuation of the theology of Liberation

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Introduction

Indecent Theology, in the first instance, is not easy to associate with Liberation Theology, mainly because of its subversive and irreverent nature, since it uses sexual perversions to explain and illustrate its contents and contributions. Among them, the dismantling of a moral order based on a heterosexual construction of reality that organizes not only the categories of approved social and divine interactions but also economic and political ones.

Therefore, it is not uncommon to find it challenging to understand the so-called "Indecent Theology" in a socio-economic liberationist context, particularly because this theology seeks to offer an internal critique of the "classical" Liberation Theology. For example, the way in which this theology has reflected on oppressive systems and structures of the people of Latin America. Although there are differences between one and the other, I argue that Marcella Althaus-Reid's proposals are inscribed in the heart of the Liberation Theology's own, that is, the option for the victims of injustice within history.

Who is Marcella Althaus-Reid?

Marcella Althaus-Reid, Argentina, baptized in her childhood as a Roman Catholic, became a member of the Argentine Methodist Evangelical Church, where she was trained for the ministry. She worked on the Paulo Freire Awareness Method, which she successfully practiced in community and social projects supported by the church in impoverished neighborhoods of Buenos Aires (poor women, prostitutes, transvestites, among others). This work was continued at Dundee and Perth in Scotland, where she coordinated popular awareness projects inspired by Freire's liberation pedagogy.

She completed her doctorate at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, whose thesis was about *Paul Ricœur's influence on the methodology of liberation theology*. Subsequently, she was appointed professor in Edinburgh as director of the Master in Theology and Development. Her interests included liberation theology, feminist theology, and queer theology. She was associate editor of *Studies in World Christianity: the Edinburgh Review of Theology and Religion* and member of the Editorial Board of *Concilium Journal*.

Althaus-Reid died on February 20, 2009, at age 56, in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he lived since 1986¹.

¹ MCKAY Johnston, « Marcella Althaus-Reid » in *The Herald*, 11th March 2009. On line: <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12382592.marcella-althaus-reid/> (consulté 20 octobre 2019).

From experience to theology

The theological reflection of Althaus-Reid stems from her experience as a woman engaged in liberation theology and contact with poor women in the streets of Buenos Aires.

During this time, Althaus-Reid begins to discover the injustice that women live not only in the theological production space but also in the diverse oppressions that the poor women of the city are subjected to - such as lemons sellers without underwear at the train station in Buenos Aires - and that liberation theology has not taken into consideration, and even feminist liberation theology has not been able to relieve either.

The author explores in-depth the contextual and hermeneutical circle of suspicion by questioning the way of doing theology in the traditional liberationist context. Her project of "indecent theology" represents both a continuation of liberation theology and its disruption. However, she always inscribes herself within the tradition of liberation theology. The author affirms that "liberation theology must be understood as a continuous process of recontextualization, the permanent exercise of deep doubting in theology."² Not as something finished and available to apply in any context.

The term "indecent" is an opposition to the "decent" concept. This distinction the author takes from her own country, Argentina, "where the dynamics of decency and indecency is the basis of a whole set of prescriptive behaviors and gender expectations, not only at the private level but also at the social level. This dynamic of decency/indecency governs everything, from women's hairstyles and expected behavior according to age and marital status, to religious expectations."³ The decency has allowed Christianity in Latin America to function as a restraining agent by forcing people, and especially poor women, to behave and conform according to perceived orders of decency. "This amounts to a theologically justified and supported control system that regulates behavior and forces compliance."⁴

The use of the term "indecent"⁵ for Althaus-Reid's theology aims to subvert not only the class ideology that perverts theology but also its sexual ideology. In consequence, the sexual agenda, as politics, should be understood together. On the other hand, "indecent" is used in a positive, subversive sense, in clear reference to a counter-discourse to unmask and undress the sexual assumptions integrated into liberation theology during the last decades. Now also to issues of globalization and the new neoliberal world order.

Multidisciplinary approach to a multifactorial problem: oppression

Her methodology is based on a kind of "guerrilla strategy", which she calls as the "Libertine Hermeneutic Circle", by which she interprets the queer meaning of theological symbols through the practice of intertextual readings. That is, she brings queer texts, narratives, spaces, and stories to the theological level to make a dialogic shift. That is, to transport readers to perverse spaces of love, freedom, and hope: dungeons, bedrooms and other

² ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teología indecente: perversiones teológicas en sexo, género y política*, Barcelona, Bellaterra, 2005, p. 17.

³ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *Doing a Theology from Disappeared Bodies: Theology, Sexuality, and the Excluded Bodies of the Discourses of Latin American Liberation Theology*. In Sheila Briggs and Mary McClintock Fulkerson (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, (442-455). p. 447.

⁴ PEARS, Angie. *Doing contextual theology*. New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 123.

⁵ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teología indecente*, p. 23-72.

sexually unusual places. It is about transmitting knowledge, a reality that cannot be said in any other way than using these irreverent, non-normal spaces (queer).

Her indecent theology is a critical theology, whose political mode is based on transience and periphery, rather than focusing or acting. This theology does not seek to propose new theological forms that replace the currently available dominant ones, but to question whether the “correct”, “normative” or “centered” qualities are properly theological qualities. Something very clear that the author maintains is the resistance to the temptation to replace or supplant the heteronormative ideology by instituting indecent/queer thinking as a normative, centering and legitimizing discursive regime, which only re-inscribes the theology of normality. In her understanding, the only way to reach a truly indecent Christology is if we assume the displacement of marginality, towards the “non-normal”.

The heterosexual ideology as the basis of decency

The results of her analysis consist of confirming that the oppression of the poor/victims of injustice in Latin America is a complex network of layers of oppression, which are based on heterosexual ideology as anchored in patriarchalism.

The author notes that both in developmental theology, which seeks uniformity in a Western European center, and in liberation theology, there is an accumulation of assumptions that have never been examined in an ontological way. In other words, theologians naturally see “the universalization of the needs of a regulated souls market through the codification of sexuality, but also race and culture (and the economy).”⁶

This homogenization of reality is based on a concept called capitalist-patriarchal. Capital, according to the author, is a complex articulation of patriarchy, and the other race, culture, sexual identities, and religion. Besides, unfortunately, theology has frequently been partial in the analysis of the economic model. Liberation theology focused on analyzing the spirit of the capitalist model but never criticized capitalism and patriarchy in a profound way.

The most important finding of the Argentine theologian, in my opinion, is that *heterosexuality is the ideology that supports the patriarchalism network in Latin America*. Heterosexuality as an ideology is the true God of patriarchalism, and Christianity reinforced this alliance of heterosexual gods built on continents such as Latin America. “Heterosexuality was divinized and, thus, it cannot be discussed or theorized about it, because it has divine qualities. That is, a meta-narrative that claims to be natural and not created.”⁷ That is why Althaus-Reid uses queer thinking to subvert, distort, and reveal the heterosexual ideology of Christianity. That is, “to demonstrate how theology supports and reflects the sacralization of heterosexual relations, which are then mapped and distributed as a complete political project.”⁸

The Argentine author examines the existence of a normative center that homogenizes people's lives and needs. This normative center is closely related to heterosexual ideology, and the regulatory institutions of economics, politics, and theology. In other words, to be

⁶ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teología indecente*, p. 242.

⁷ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teología indecente*, p. 244.

⁸ MORGAN, Silas, “¿Es la teología de la liberación una teología política? La crítica hermenéutica de Marcella Althaus-Reid y la pregunta mesiánica *Queer sobre el Marxismo*, in *Perspectivas*, Spring, 2017, p. 115.

centered or legitimate is to accept the central authority of heterosexual patriarchates. According to the American theologian Silas Morgan, "Althaus-Reid seeks a theology of what is truly marginal, which avoids authority, legitimacy, the center and refuses to be co-opted by the central discourses of theological power."⁹ Our Argentinian author believes that normalcy deprives people of real-life experience by forcing them to adapt to an idealized discourse. In this way, theology becomes a distorted praxis, which, far from liberating, enslaves even more¹⁰.

On the path of Liberation Theology

To this point, we have seen a critical distancing from the theology of liberation by the Argentine theologian, even when she declares herself to be within this tradition. However, in her theological reflection, the deepest ethos of liberation theology remains, namely the preferential option for the poor.

The understanding of what means "the preferential option for the poor" has been one of the main problems that have occupied the theology of classical liberation. José María Vigil¹¹ points out that some liberation theologians have understood this option as a preferential charitable action of God towards the poor, which implies, in some way, the possibility of not opting for the poor. The author maintains that the option for the poor corresponds to the being of God, He is justice. God is necessarily on the side of the victims of injustice. Otherwise, it would be a contradiction. Therefore, theology only can opt for the poor/victims of injustice.

For Vigil "every human problem that is convertible into injustice - although it does not have to do with poverty in a literal or economic sense - is the object of the option for the poor. In this way, the option for the despised culture, for the marginalized race, for the oppressed gender, are not different options from the option for the poor, but different concretions of the only "option for the victims of injustice", which we call option for the poor."¹²

Thus, I focus my research on this definition, mainly because Althaus-Reid begins her reflection precisely in an area that was forgotten/ignored in the classical reflection of liberation theology. Indeed, there is no reflection on the diverse sexuality of women that reach those spaces never considered in theology as spaces of theological production. That is, the street's women without underwear, prostitutes, street transvestites, and even the private sexual preferences of theologians.

According to her, if we opt for the poor, we must necessarily incorporate the whole person, not just their condition of economic poverty. In this sense, I believe that Althaus-Reid offer a new key to understanding the oppression: this is not unique, but multiple. "The contingent

⁹ MORGAN, Silas, *¿Es la teología de la liberación una teología política?*, p. 117.

¹⁰ Cfr. ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella. *The queer god*. London – New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 64

¹¹ VIGIL, José María, *La opción por los pobres es opción por la justicia, y no es preferencial—Para un reencuadramiento teológico-sistemático de la opción por los pobres—*. In *Theologica Xaveriana* 149 (2004), p. 151-166. Kristein JUSTAERT's text is very enlightening, *Cartographies of experience: Rethinking the method of liberation theology*, in *Horizons* 42.2 (2015): 237-261. Specially 242-247.

¹² VIGIL, José María, *La opción por los pobres es opción por la justicia...*, p. 157.

and precarious identity of the subject under multiple and contradictory pressures.”¹³ According to this, “all theology around issues of wealth and poverty must consider rather the incoherence of oppression and its multiple dimensions than only its general aspects.”¹⁴

Althaus-Reid denounces the forgetfulness of the sexuality of the poor. Classical liberation theology has romanticized the poor, it has invented him as a decent, religious, married farmer, oppressed by big capitals, and women, in reality, were not only excluded but also exploited by liberation theologies through an idealization process in which the women were anonymous or, in author's words, “fetishization, reified phenomena extrapolated from the reality of people's lives.”¹⁵ Instead of the white middle-class woman idealized elsewhere, the woman model that was idealized was that of “the poor, ignorant but faithful Christian mother.”¹⁶ This model did not take into account the wishes and needs of many women. Similarly, it has ignored the possibility of expressing, and theologically consider, the sexual diversity in general.

The author's criticism aims to make an option for the victims of injustice that allows them to find God outside the comfort space of universities, the church, the academic market, tightly controlled scientific journals, etc. In effect, these are corporate economic exchange sites. Hence, it is possible to find God, doing theology, when the theologian leaves those places to take a position in more vulgar, dirty places, and uncivilized places of public sexual life: bedrooms, bars, and alleys.

One of the great contributions of Liberation Theology has been to relieve the poor as subjects of theology, the privileged place where it is possible to meet the God of Jesus Christ. Marcella Althaus-Reid uses the indecency to take to discover God that was in the closet in those places unfit for God. If liberation theology opened a space for the poor within the Christian community, a privileged place; Indecent theology opens a multiple space for diversity, for the marginalized and rejected by a heteronormed patriarchal system.

If Liberation Theology was able to put the socio-economic context of the people on the themes of reflection of the theology, identifying oppressive systems and structures of the people, Indecent Theology has accommodated the sexuality of the poor and also the sexuality of the theologian. This theology has been able to integrate sexuality into political and theological discourse in a unit, without compartmentalizing people's lives.

In my opinion, Indecent Theology is a continuation of liberation theology when it focuses on the victims of injustice, makes use of socio-analytical mediation to understand, and identify the structures of oppression in society. Also, when it seeks to liberate the face of God of the false idols that stealthily penetrate the normality of the society and the church. However, by deepening the suspicions of possible idolatrous ideologies within theology, it is possible to arrive at results that are not understandable from the categories of traditional theology. For example, do an equivocal, off-center theology and betray the idea of a normative center of hermeneutics.

¹³ MOUFFE, Chantal. « *Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics* », en J. BUTLER y J. W. SCOTR (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Routledge, London, 1992. Cité dans ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teología indecente*, p. 238.

¹⁴ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teología indecente*, p. 238.

¹⁵ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *La teología indecente*, p. 54.

¹⁶ Ibid.

In the case of the preferential option for the poor as a charity, we may wonder, was it not the goal of Liberation Theology to achieve the inclusion of the poor at the center? And, in the case of this option for the poor as representative of the divine essence, we may ask whether it does not seek to constitute the poor as a theological place? As a manner of revelation? If so, indecent theology proposes a critical disarticulation of a normative center, including the poor themselves. At this point, we go to a discontinuity as the result of the application of his method.

But we must not forget that Althaus-Reid pointed out that the contribution of Indecent Theology is a response to the multiple layers of oppression of the subjects, only one, but not the only. She never intended to create a normative theology from indecency. That would betray the heart of this theological effort.