

Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Religions through a Latin-American Lens

Claudio de Oliveira Ribeiro
Methodist University of São Paulo
claudio.ribeiro@metodista.br

Abstract

This article reflects on how theology of religions needs to focus on two aspects when speaking of religious pluralism: the ability and capacity of religious groups to dialogue, and the challenges of human rights and inclusiveness. From the Latin-American theological context, the research was formulated around three topics: (i) the public importance of religion in both building peace as well as the promotion of justice, taking into account the importance of mysticism and otherness in the ecumenical formation of spiritualities and how they affect religious and social processes, allowing the emergence of new utopian, democratic and meaningful perspectives; (ii) the necessity of reshaping the theological lens with an intentional starting point in the realities of afro-indigenous cultures; and (iii) the contribution of feminist liberation theology to the debate of religious pluralism.

Keywords

theological methodology – theology of religions – pluralism – theology of liberation

Introduction

The ecumenical perspective, both within Christianity itself as well as between Christianity and other religions, has gained a strong emphasis in the past few decades in theological realms, both academically and in terms of religious practices. Our assumption is that an ecumenical perspective is indeed essential for any and all religious experience as well as any theological or hermeneutical task in general. This perspective, when experienced existentially and / or

assumed as a basic element within one's goals, profoundly alters the development of any project, initiative or religious movement. Therein lays the interest in ecumenical studies.

With regard to theology, in all of its many fields, ecumenical issues raise new and challenging questions. The presence of the 'other' is the requisite factor of any ecumenical practice. It is this 'other' in one's body, speech and faith that stimulates their theological life and production with whom he or she relates. This presence and interaction are challenging in a variety of ways, one of which is plurality. Although increasingly mentioned in various discourses, it is still possible to recognize the difficulties that many of those who align themselves with a politically left ideology find in this regard. Theoretical and methodological reductionism from a significant portion of religious figures and leaders, as well as theologians, serve as examples of a certain discomfort in regards to this point. As for political and religious groups with more conservative visions, plurality is almost never considered a value.

On the other hand, people and groups that intentionally include the ecumenical aspect, generally add a distinct sense of openness, warmth, creativity and otherness to their various practices, events, projects or religious experiences. Also, the deepening of ecumenical experience requires a reordering of one's senses and sensitivity to the facts. It means assuming another lens — perhaps that of women, for example — through which one envisions the world and the divine. Thus, in this interaction with the 'other', in the mobility of our borders, we find an encounter with 'the new' in a kind of *kairotic* event, where the relationship with this otherness explodes the common course of stories for both individuals and groups.

The Need for Self-Criticism

Since the early 1990s, I have sought to make a critical assessment of Latin-American liberation theology, a theological reference of sublime importance for me; one which I try to follow, even with limitations, and on which I base my personal, pastoral and academic life. It deals with questions that come from within, with evaluations implemented *ad intra* and a commitment to the fundamental, theoretical and practical principles of this theological vision which above all deals with the preference that the gospel demands we give to the poor.

But critical thinking is always marked by interpolations, and not always fair ones. I remember certain reactions around an (old) text in which I presented such questions, 'New Challenges for the New Millennium: Reflections on a Latin American Theology and Pastorate' (1995) as well as others that followed, in which I inevitably needed to later affirm for readers that such an

understanding of the gospel — God's love preferentially revealed for the poor and how the poor are empowered as privileged heralds of the Kingdom of God — is a theological mark which is absolutely vital to living the faith.¹

These assessments highlight the dense and varied richness of the Latin-American theological legacy for future generations. From them we see themes emerging such as the communal dimension of the Christian faith, the social and political dimensions of a Christian commitment to the defence of life and human solidarity, the sustainability of the world, various forms of inclusion and citizenship, the exercise of human rights and the integrity of creation. Given such efforts to forge and ensure such a legacy, we find enormous challenges that mark the theological context of Latin America.

Despite many and diverse analyses, we recognize that indicating such challenges is no simple task. There are three aspects that both call forth theologians' attention and touch me very deeply. The first is the task of methodologically extending and updating ways of understanding reality, an assumption that is always present in theologies, whether social and political in nature. In Latin America, it means evaluating the weight of reductionist frameworks that all too often used the bipolarity between 'dominated versus dominant' in certain forms of Marxism in social analysis, often times obscuring certain social complexities. Accordingly, we advocate a logic of plurality in understanding the situations in which we live.

A second challenge relates to spirituality. There were many times that liberation theology was criticized for not having spirituality. It is a fact that the rational dimensions present in the Latin-American theological method, such as the socio-analytic means of understanding reality, rigor in both Biblical exegesis and historical assessments and articulated forms of ecclesial and political action, make for a rationality that can inhibit more subjective forms of spirituality. But the mystique of the gospel is a constitutive part of Christian participation in the processes of social liberation. Hence, the emergence of major theological and pastoral challenges, generally requiring openness to visions marked by plurality.

A third challenge emerges in the encounter between theology and religious pluralism. Latin-American theology prioritized that which was political in their interpretations and was not always attentive to cultural differences, which in the case of our continent, are strongly connected with the diversity of religious expressions.

1 Cf. Claudio de Oliveira Ribeiro, 'Novos Desafios para um Novo Milênio: reflexões em torno da teologia e da pastoral latino-americanas', *Perspectiva Teológica* 72 (1995).

Next we wish, even if only on a broad scale, to comment on the third challenge.² Our assumption is that the pluralist perspective of religions has strongly questioned the theological context of Latin America, especially through its liberating vocation and the challenges that come from its cultural composition that is strongly marked by religious differences that intertwine themselves in a variety of ways.

The Latin-American theology of liberation, among its many challenges, has produced a consistent reflection on the challenges of religious pluralism.³ As you know, the call for ecumenism in theological reflections shows that apologetics, sectarianism or exclusivity should be avoided. Theologically we affirm that God is always greater than any understanding or human reality. God acts freely, especially in terms of God's salvific work. Therefore, there is no need to be overly concerned with finding out who is or will be saved (to use the common language of Christians), but in the case of the same religious tradition, who is Jesus Christ and what does he represent to the Christian community.

This perspective leads us, among other factors, to the search for a paradigm in the theology of religions. It tries to overcome consecrated models, such as those that assume Jesus Christ and the church as the necessary path to salvation (exclusivism), those that consider Jesus Christ as the way of salvation for all, even implicitly (inclusivism), and those that assume that Jesus is the way for Christians, while for others the path is their own tradition, without a concern for self-critique, review and changes (relativism). We advocate that the pluralist perspective is characterized by the basic notion that every religion has its own proposal for salvation and faith, which must be accepted, respected and refined through mutual dialogue and relationships built with others. Thus, the Christian faith, for example, needs to be reinterpreted through dialogical and creative confrontation with other faiths. The same should be true of any religious tradition. Here is the point of novelty that puts everyone in a constant challenge.

2 Cf. my reflections on the first two challenges in my works: *A Teologia da Libertação Morreu? Reino de Deus e Espiritualidade Hoje*, São Paulo: Fonte Editorial 2010; and *Libertação e Gratuidade: reflexões teológicas sobre a espiritualidade*, São Paulo: Paulinas 2013.

3 Many of these reflections were published under the auspices of the the Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in Latin America (ASETT), *Pelos Muitos Caminhos de Deus: desafios do pluralismo religioso à Teologia da Libertação*, Goiás: Rede 2003; *Pluralismo e Libertação: por uma Teologia Latino-Americana Pluralista a partir da Fé Cristã*, São Paulo: Loyola 2005; *Teologia Latino-Americana Pluralista da Libertação*, São Paulo: Paulinas, 2006; *Teologia Pluralista Libertadora Intercontinenta*, São Paulo: Paulinas 2008; *Por uma Teologia Planetária*, São Paulo: Paulinas 2011. Note of the editors: see also José M. Vigil, Luiza Tomita, Marcello Barros (eds.), *Along the Many Paths of God*, Munster: Lit Verlag 2008.

By strengthening the dimensions of dialogue and plurality and indicating the challenge of an ecumenical debate of religions, we wish to show that the logic of plurality is fundamental to both the theological method and the religious experience. Among the many challenges for the Latin-American theological context, we indicate three as a result of our research: the public importance of religion for building peace and justice, an attempt associated with the importance of mystique and otherness in developing ecumenical spiritualities, the need to shift the starting point of our theological reality to that of African-indigenous religious cultures and the contribution of feminist liberation theology for the discussion of religious pluralism. Methodologically, we gather Latin-American theological material on issues of religious pluralism, we identify the main aspects, especially those that more directly challenge the theological method and systematize the points that we consider most challenging in regards to the three aspects mentioned above.

Conceptual Presuppositions for Analysis

Religious diversity in Brazil has generated new challenges in various fields of understanding, especially in those of religious sciences and theology. Despite institutional and popular strengthening of religious proposals that are vertically based, polemic, closed to dialogue, marked by symbolic violence and fundamentalist in nature, the religious field has also experienced ecumenical forms of dialogue between different religions.

In the midst of this ambiguous context, several questions emerge: how does such a reality, especially with its contradictions, fit into the political and social sphere and vice versa? How does it interfere in the strengthening of a democratic culture with its related practices? How can socio-religious practices that are closed off to dialogue and those that defend plurality and the approximation of religious groups live together in the same time and social space? What are the possibilities for strengthening religious pluralism? Reasonably certain answers do not exist for these questions. In fact, there is a long and hard road of reflection in the search for deepening such questions and answers before us.

We initially want to highlight three concepts that we consider essential for any hermeneutic of the religious framework. Although not detailed in this work, these concepts are presupposed in our analysis. The first concept, originating from the fields of anthropology and philosophy, is the notion of otherness. Otherness refers to the ability to recognize an 'other' that is beyond each person, group or institution's own subjectivity. Authors such as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas have deepened this theme. It is an attitude, method, or system of scientific tools that allows you to resize reality within perspective. Thus, the plausibility of a given system (religious or cultural) would be found

in association with the 'other' rather than in the apologetic confrontation trying to disqualify it. Thus, a creative possibility is allowed for approximation and association in which a better understanding of the 'other' takes place, one in which the other is no longer seen as exotic, as an enemy, inferior or through any other disqualifying lens. It is with this perspective that we have adopted the concept of otherness in relation to religious sciences.

As a second element, we highlight *interculturalism* as a contextual process aimed at empowering people and groups to experience both cultures and religions in constant relationship with each other, as well as in open and mutual transformation.⁴ Intercultural processes have been facilitated by increased communication speed, detachment from certain traditions and by rural-urban mobility. Interculturalism seeks balance in a diverse and plural world through articulating new relationships outside the logic of that what adds or subtracts. What happens instead is an interactive relationship of different paths. In the case of religion, interculturalism aims to ensure that they live in solidarity and mutuality, in openness to others and with harmonious and respectful communication among humans, detached from crystallized traditions in order to build a world through people, groups and charitable institutions and critical, purposeful and plural experiences with otherness.

Finally we come to the concept of the *in-between*. Our foundation here is based on the approaches of the renowned thinker Homi Bhabha. Within his critical view of post-colonial thought, we highlight the work of culture, which requires meeting with the 'new' in a way that allows for more than mere reproduction or continuity of the past and present. He renews and reinterprets the past reconfiguring it as a contingent 'in-between', that innovates, interrupts and challenges the action of the present. Another highlight is Bhabha's hermeneutic horizon and social intervention encouraging the possibility of a 'negotiation' of culture rather than its 'negation' which is all too common in bipolar and dichotomous positions, whether political or scientific. It involves a temporality forged in the 'in-between' and positioned in the 'beyond', which makes it possible to clearly articulate antagonistic or contradictory elements and allows for new realities that while still hybrid and perhaps without strong internal rational coherence, are by no means devoid of transformative and utopian potential.⁵

4 Cf. Raúl Fomet-Betancourt, *Religião e interculturalidade*, São Leopoldo-RS: Nova Harmonia & Sinodal 2007.

5 Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, *O Local da Cultura*, Belo Horizonte MG: Editora UFMG 2001.

1 In Reference to Justice, Peace and Otherness

One issue which has deeply challenged theological reflection in the first decade of this millennium is the role of religion in processes of seeking peace, justice and sustainability of life and how these relate to economic systems. Several theological circles and scientists of religion have been addressing within the world's socio-religious framework the effort to understand the processes of openness and dialogue between groups of distinct religious traditions, as well as the processes of the hardening of religious perspectives, especially with the strengthening of certain fundamentalist views, an increasing number of conflicts and the strengthening of cultures of violence.

It requires a careful analysis of the religious processes that bloom throughout the world and how they relate to each other and within each tradition. This set of relationships, greatly favoured by processes of globalization and the invigoration of international governmental and non-governmental institutions, forge positive relationships between the peoples of the world. At the same time, there are situations in which this approach is not present, something constantly creating a possibility of conflict.

Understanding the conflictual situation of religions allows one to perceive them as not simply negative, since they can also be carriers of a new sensibility of the need to overcome antagonism and intolerance. Therefore, despite the negative aspects of the interfaces of religions with culture and politics, generating forms of violence, a theological perspective of religions should prioritize the dialogical opening present in life as an anthropological element. Dialogue enhances the ability of human self-realization and fulfilment of the other. Recognition of the other allows me to arrive in a new environment. This situation encourages and enables the practice of being human while creating conditions for the theoretical understanding of life processes to be more complete and consistent. 'When dialogue is established, not only does one experience a theoretical concern (who dialogues with us), but also manifests a practical compromise which, furthermore, requires a mutual understanding'.⁶ It involves the 'I and Thou' that Martin Buber speaks of. It is a consciousness discovering itself as existing thanks to the other. This has been and continues to emerge as a strong need to be one of the key sources of inspiration for the ecumenical movement.

In the processes of building peace and justice, global analyses of power dynamics are obviously fundamental. Many theologians and religious

6 Julio de Santa Ana, 'Diálogos inter-religiosos: dificuldades e promessas', in: SOTER (ed.), *Religiões e Paz Mundial*, São Paulo: Paulinas 2010, 99-117 (112).

scientists have addressed North-South relations and the economic and geopolitical interests surrounding the relations between countries as well as the role of religion in these processes. Following the Latin-American theological tradition, we affirm both the critique of power dynamics and exclusion that characterize both the present world and the domain of a 'new empire', led by the United States of America, which determines and directs all forms of thinking, ways of life and value systems.

Theology itself surrenders to the empire to the extent that it conceals in its postulates the conflicts that mark the contemporary world. This type of theology is far from the evangelical *kerygma* founded on faith in Jesus Christ. The fundamental question to be answered by the theological and ecclesial circles is whether the desired path of evangelization must be defined 'with the arms of the empire — repeating mistakes of the past — or through dialogue with the religions of the world?'⁷

In addition to this is the notion that the dialogue coming from the religious pluralism is related to the issue of poverty because it is crucial to the Christian faith. What is the message of Christianity in the midst of other religions? How is it distinguished? If Christianity could give visibility to their primary theological question, prior to any exposure, which is the situation of poor people, it could make a significant contribution to interreligious dialogue.

A second aspect is that the mystical and religious explosion that has occurred in the late 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century in different continents and sociocultural contexts reveals, among other things, the opening of modern reason as a place of meaning for humanity. At the same time, we believe that the always referred to failure of global utopian projects leads a significant contingent of the population to seek intimate and privatized forms of religious expression, which inhibits the forms of social and religious life that are marked by otherness.

Although there is a definite link between violence and religion, inherited from the long cultural and religious traditions that still mark our current reality, there are indeed elements within their very own dynamics and religious concepts that are generators of peace.

Religious plurality has been lived in tension both in relation to the process of secularization as well as in relation to the conflictive coexistence of different religions. The current experience, quite different from past generations, is forged in the context of intersection and interaction between atheism, unbelief and religious indifference on the one hand, and the strengthening of various religious experiences, old and new, on the other.

7 José Comblin, *Quais os desafios dos temas teológicos atuais?* São Paulo: Paulus 2005, 10.

One would ask, therefore, whether the human emancipation would mean the twilight of God. If we have 'yes' as an answer, we are led to a negative face produced by the contexts of modernity and secularization, since these contexts

... Although intending to emancipate itself from any deity imposed and / or institutionalized, they create their own gods, before whom it is required to bow and whose laws must be obeyed. Some of these new gods are true idolatries that deeply challenge Trinitarian faith.⁸

There resides the 'saleability' of all things, which is the god of market, the cult of personality, progress seen as priority in relation to humanity, utilitarianism in human relationships, and the power and pleasure devoid of otherness and meaning. Thus, both the modern processes of human emancipation as well as religious experiences can be found in the search for paths in light of individual and group vulnerability in the face of these new gods / idols or the perplexity that the new complex religious framework presents. Given these and other questions, we perceive traces of sacredness for the scattered and confusing times in which we live today.

The appreciation of religious plurality, the recovery of the spiritual sense of that which is free, critical forms of fixism, the interest and inclination to rethink traditional theological and philosophical categories, the interface with science and spirituality, openness to the gratuitous seduction of the sacred as a loving and fulfilling possibility, and dialogue with different religious traditions create the signs to a path that needs to be reinvented every day. Latin-American theology is challenged by such signals.

In the tradition of interreligious dialogue practice, there are expressed implications of the sharing of life experience, communion and mutual understanding within a horizon of humanization, the pursuit of peace and justice and the valourization and affirmation of life, considering the specific demands that such dimensions entail. The dialogue is between people and groups who are rooted and committed to their particular faith, but at the same time are open to learning through difference. To carry out this ecumenical approach, Faustino Teixeira indicates five guiding elements: awareness of humility, openness to the value of otherness, fidelity to one's own tradition, the common pursuit of truth and the spirit of compassion.⁹

8 Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, 'Fases e interfaces da sacralidade em um mundo secularizado', in: Degislano Lima and Jacques Trudel (eds.), *Teologia em Diálogo*, São Paulo: Paulinas 2002, 285-332 (303).

9 Cf. Faustino do Couto Teixeira and Zwinglio Motta Dias, *Ecumenismo e Diálogo Inter-Religioso: a arte do possível*, Aparecida: Santuário 2008.

There are various forms of inter-religious dialogue, but regardless of these dialogical forms, in any case, a spirit of openness, hospitality and care is required. Among those stated forms of dialogue there are religious cooperation for peace, theological exchanges and sharing of religious experience, especially in relation to devotions and prayer. As Teixeira affirms, there are also two extremely challenging poles of reflection on the role of interfaith dialogue in the process of globalization: the positive effects — such as an ease of communication and a new global and planetary consciousness as well — and the negative effects — such as the sharpening of fundamentalism in various religions. Both extremes support two contrary attitudes, a refusal to have communication with the other, or a dialogical openness to the other. The first attitude reinforces an exacerbated traditionalism in response to new conditions and sensitivities of dialogic and global communication, which generates the most distinct forms of fundamentalism. Meanwhile, the second attitude emerges as a creative and significant challenge for the future of the world. It also relates to spirituality and is closely linked to the practice of interreligious dialogue.

Teixeira's view is not unrelated to something the theological and pastoral tradition in Latin America has greatly emphasized: the centrality of the Kingdom of God. It became a foundational point in the spiritual experiences of different church groups and politicians. Within this framework a new ecumenical awareness appears unexpectedly and is spreading throughout humanity. It is a new spiritual experience.

Among the aspects of Christian theology in favour of a pluralistic theology of religions we remember the vision of the historical Jesus as it emphasizes both theo-kingdom centred and *theo-praxis* as shown by José María Vigil. Both relativize cultic practice since, for Jesus, the practice of love and righteousness is above even cultic and religious practices. Both also relativize the ecclesio-centric perspective. 'Jesus was neither ecclesio-centric, nor ecclesiastic. He never thought of founding a church, and one can even say that, somehow, his central message implied overcoming that which is religion or the institutional church'.¹⁰ For Jesus, the most important, the 'ultimate' in the theological sense, is the Kingdom of God, understood as divine will revealed in loving and saving interaction with people, not a god in and of 'itself'. It is not about a concept but an experience and recognition of the fundamental option and way to go in life. Ecumenical dialogue is seen as an integral part of the Kingdom of God.

10 José María Vigil, *Teología do Pluralismo Religioso: para uma releitura pluralista do cristianismo*, São Paulo: Paulus, 2006, 139; English translation: José M. Vigil, *Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Munster: Lit Verlag 2008.

Another aspect is more philosophical in nature, although expressed in a simple way and is related to what we call the beloved 'golden rule': 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' It is the ethical element in religion and is present in the sacred texts of the most prominent religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism. The same principal occurs in philosophical thought as expressed, for example, in the 'categorical imperative' of Kant, showing that the 'golden rule' is something universally perceived, and thus reinforcing its character as a central element of divine revelation. Therefore we ask ourselves: 'if there is such a human consensus that is simultaneously philosophical, religious, and clearly universal, it is worth asking: would it not be possible and appropriate for this rule of thumb to serve as the unerring foundation of inter-religious dialogue?'¹¹

We highlight four aspects underpinning the need for Latin-American theology to strengthen its references in terms of justice, peace and otherness. The first is the importance of religion in public processes (ambiguous and contradictory of course) of building peace and justice. The second is the value of mystique and otherness for religious and social processes within the framework of a rise in prospects that are utopian and provide meaning, as well as the intensification of religious proposals that are strongly individualistic and generate violence. The third highlights ecumenical dialogue as an affirmation of life, based on the tradition of the practice of dialogue between religions, which has practical implications in the field of solidarity, experiences of communion and mutual understanding, the processes of humanization and the search for peace and justice. The fourth aspect is the importance of the Kingdom of God in theological reflection, especially within the Latin-American perspective, in which the centrality of this theological category has become the benchmark of religious experiences, both ecclesial and political.

2 Change of the Theological Lens to One Determined by the African Indigenous Religious Cultures

Themes related to the tensions between theology and culture are diverse, especially in light of the rapid socio-cultural, political and economic changes taking place both in Brazil and worldwide. Just remember the questions that emerge from urban realities, questions of bioethics, gender, emerging forms of consumption and so on. They all challenge theological reflection and since they all

¹¹ Vigil, *Teologia do Pluralismo Religioso*, 235.

have distinct interfaces with religious experiences, they also equally challenge religious sciences. Therefore, the relationship between faith and culture — or, to be more precise, between faiths and cultures (plural) — marks the main debates in the theological sphere, despite varying times and contexts. It is an extremely complex and challenging relationship.

In Brazil as well as in Latin America in general the relationship between faith and culture has various dimensions, as a result of both the symbiosis of African and Indigenous cultures and those forms of Christianities that became hegemonic on the continent. We believe that we must urgently deal with one of these edges; the one referring to the possibility of methodologically expanding theology and questioning its excessive rationalism through an approximation of the Christian faith with religious experiences marked by African Indigenous cultures, which form the basis of the cultural reality of Latin America. In this sense, we must emphasize the need to shift the theological lens to one determined by the African-indigenous religious cultures, highlight the contribution of an indigenous theology, especially through the rich creative tension between ritualism and rationality, and also highlight the contribution of black theology as it articulates the subjectivities of the Afro-Brazilian world and Western Christian rationality.

Our assumption is that the reality of African-indigenous religious cultures — that so predominantly marks the Latin-American context — requires a change of theological positioning and a review of the theological method in various aspects. Notwithstanding certain idealizations of such cultures, which need to be discarded in our analysis, there is no denying their significant traces, for example, in the primacy of community living at the expense of doctrinal and formal logic, and greater emphasis on dimensions of dispossession and self-giving in contrast to forms of Christological sacrificial thinking. Such views, among other aspects, are indications of a new / old theological path that would lead theological reflection to revise its strong rationalist accent.

The proposed change of theological positioning, which includes the possibility of doing theology from the reality of African-indigenous religious cultures needs to articulate two poles of thought: one that emerges from the standpoint of African-American experience, and one that finds itself within indigenous cultures, considering that both creatively reread and reinterpret the religious and theological perspective of the Christian faith through their own experiences and symbols.

The benchmark theological hermeneutic of this vision is the same as liberation theology and it develops from the paradigm of religious and cultural pluralism that is seen and openly appreciated in today's world. In order to value

this pluralism it is necessary to recognize it as a 'precious gift that enriches humanity and calls it towards a new and deeper spiritual depth'.¹²

Among the challenging theological views are those of an African-indigenous Christology. It shows us, among other things, that redemption happens not through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, but in a trusting faith that lies naked before the love of God. 'This does not diminish the salvific value of Jesus' self-surrender in his martyrdom nor the impact of his passion. But it opens the Christian faith to a recognition of a divine action beyond Christianity'.¹³

Regarding ecclesiological issues, there is a value found in communal forms of living the faith (as seen in reference to liberation theology) in communion with the African and indigenous cultures, including the value that they place on parties and the preparation and enjoyment of food. This perspective requires a profound change in the conception of mission, which finds its emphasis in the prophetic form of insertion into the world, that lives and celebrates the witness of the resurrection of Jesus in the midst of human suffering, especially among the poor and the constant martyrdom of Indian and black communities. The African-indigenous ecclesiology bases itself on being anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and committed to justice and a respect for differences. It is marked, despite its militant character, by joy and playfulness, even in the midst of suffering.

There are many specific challenges regarding indigenous theology in Latin America, in particular the high degree of cultural difference in different contexts and times and the challenges that a history of encounter between cultures provokes.

In one formulation of an indigenous theology, Diego Irarrázaval formulates his theology by way of the original peoples of the Latin-American continent and their spiritual experiences, in an activity that is born from 'below' in excluded populations and 'from within' the culture and Amerindian faith. The first challenge for these productions is formulated by impoverished populations, those from 'below', from lower classes and 'inside' of the very space in Latin America. Thus, it becomes necessary to question theology through indigenous speech / beliefs that question the colonial legacies that cover spiritual experiences not related to or generated by Eurocentric constructions.

This perspective builds on two major axes: the first refers to the indigenous and *mestizo* world and an incarnation of these experiences in their

12 Marcelo Barros, *O Sabor da Festa que Renasce: para uma Teologia Afro-latíndia da Libertação*, São Paulo: Paulinas 2009, 31.

13 Barros, 125-126.

complex identities, the interaction between their cultures, their myths and forms of spirituality and their other proposals of faith in God. The second axis refers to broader approaches to the Latin-American reality, from 'inside' of that space, therefore, approaching both the cultures and religiosity of poor people, and from 'below', relating evangelization, inculturation and hermeneutics that are built and developed in context and dialogue with 'indigenous-afro-mestizo' people.

From this experiential place, traditional peoples question the production of theology with its myths and utopias. Indigenous faith provokes a theology of religions and redirects it beyond Christian theological elaborations that were constructed as hegemonic spaces from which the spirituality and culture of Amerindian peoples were interpreted. Theology is therefore challenged by the construction of narratives elaborated from a plural and diverse faith.

Irarrázaval notes four points of emphasis from myths and indigenous faith:

- I. The mythical and utopian imagination in the Amerindian population is heterogeneous and complex and joins origins marked by both happiness and evil.
- II. Christian theology, when approaching the myths, rites, and ethical utopias of indigenous peoples, does not limit itself to traditionally religious Christian experiences, but feeds itself by the search for a full life with the spiritual symbols of traditional peoples.
- III. Christian reflection in this encounter finds itself in the spirituality and wisdom of indigenous peoples, in the faith of those from 'below'.
- IV. The development of a global solidarity is inseparable from the cosmos and the spiritual quality of the people, which causes an interaction between indigenous communities and other sectors of humanity, building relationships between indigenous theologies and other ways of doing theology, thus recognizing religious and theological pluralism.¹⁴

We now turn to the contribution of black liberation theology for the discussion of religious pluralism. Our proposition is that the dimensions of subjectivity and recreational experiences / rituals in Afro-Brazilian religious groups, once seen as merely questioning Christian theology, could actually reshape the strong rational character found in traditional Christian theology and generate new syntheses.

14 Cf. Diego Irarrázaval, *De Baixo e de Dentro: crenças latino-americanas*, São Bernardo do Campo: Nhanduti Editora 2007.

In Latin America in general, black liberation theology tried to bring together the various social and theological aspects of the reality of African-American and Caribbean communities that have been emerging in the last decades of the 20th century. It sought to analyse and deepen theological reflection in light of theological reflection on the great challenges coming from black people's pastoral reality, as well as deepen the requirements of an 'acculturated evangelization' indicated by churches. It deepened the reflection on the ecumenical practices of cultures and religions of African origin, as well as on how feminist and indigenous theologies can represent a gathering space for dialogue and the construction of new references and theological paradigms.

Such perspectives, espoused by groups of black pastors, presented the idea of Jesus Christ as light and liberator of the African-American people to show that in the diaspora of black African people — and this is the reality of the Latin-American context — there were no difficulties on the part of African religions to accept Jesus Christ as a concrete expression of faith. Despite the religious diversity of the black community on the continent, Jesus is respected, worshiped, invoked and seen as liberating. By analysing the experience of the African Bantu and Nago groups, we see that Christology can be reshaped from the experience of ancestry and *orixas* (divinities). It involves honouring the past and making it present in the community through the mediation of ancestors and the honouring of mediation that unites both human and divine identities, as is the case of the universal force of *orixas*.

The rational logic that underpins Western Christian theology, even liberation theology, needs to be questioned by African conceptions of the world in which the human and divine coexist in the same time and place, for example, when *orixas* take possession of a human body. Also, the very subjectivity of African wisdom benefits from the reciprocity of Western rationality.

The understanding of salvation is another challenge. The distinction that is present in traditional Christian theologies of divine acts of creation and salvation is absent in African religious traditions. For these traditions, creation and salvation are found in one single divine act. Salvation is already given by God in the creative act. 'God saves as God creates and God creates as God saves.'¹⁵ This view does not ignore ethical procedures, but frees from the near obsession with salvation, as seen in some Christian groups, which generates religious forms of 'bargaining' with God and human forms of exclusivism. The ethical commitment is based not so much on the endless search for salvation, but on

15 António Aparecido da Silva, 'Teologia cristã do pluralismo religioso face às tradições religiosas afro-americanas', in: ASETT (ed.), *Pelos Muitos Caminhos de Deus*, 2003, 97-107 (102).

a balance of good relationships between people, between people and nature and a fidelity to the divine.

Related to this issue certain Christological issues arise. African religions have a strong tendency to incorporate Jesus into their schemas and symbols. This does not typically involve the mere assimilation of Jesus or making him equivalent to, for example, *orixas*, but involves Jesus as a newness of life especially related to overcoming degrading human conditions, such as slavery. It is a new perception of faith forged by the oppressive context of diaspora. Jesus, even with different names, will be present and active in people's lives. What could this mean for Christian theology in its processes of renewal and search for deeper sources for faith? Furthermore, the author reminds us that 'if the glue that allows for unity in Christian theology is faith in the God of Jesus Christ, the unifying act of African traditions is the experience centred on the God of life mediated by AXÉ', even considering the internal diversity of African-American religions.¹⁶

The sacramental dimension is also challenging. For Silva, the mystery of the Eucharist in Christian churches and the possession by *orixas* in *Candomblé*, for example, show absolute moments of the relationship between humanity and the divine, and therefore a theology of religious pluralism should at the very least put them on the same level since they are both seen as 'sacraments'. Unlike westernized forms of Christianity, the theology of African heritage, as the author tells us, 'is based on a conception of the world of relationships that is analytical rather than simply dialectical. The human and divine coexist in the same time and place. It is a non-logical logic.'¹⁷ These perspectives raise important questions for dialogue between Christian theology and the theology of African heritage: 'What logic is able to handle a reality where the human and divine transform corporality into a carrier of both? What logic explains an *orixa* taking possession of a physical body?'¹⁸ These are mutually challenging questions.

Therefore, several questions raised by the reality of African-indigenous cultures challenge theological methods, especially in regard to subjectivity and rationality. In our view this relationship is crucial for expanding the theological method as pursued in recent decades. It questions the excessive rationalism of theology by an approximation of the Christian faith with religious experiences marked by African-indigenous cultures, the basis of the Latin-American cultural reality.

16 Silva, 100.

17 Silva, 101.

18 Silva, 101.

3 The Contribution of Feminist Theology of Liberation for the Discussion of Religious Pluralism

The debate on religious pluralism in Latin America becomes increasingly relevant due to the multicultural and multi-religious experiences of this continent. As you know, religious intolerance, alongside economic and political interests, is one of the great engines that generate violence, killing thousands of innocent people, especially in poor countries. In the Christian perspective, the discussion of religious messages that are able to give consistent answers to believers and non-believers alike in a world marked by wars, violence and social injustice is centred, in general, in the discussion of the significance of Jesus Christ for today and the doctrine of incarnation. However, feminist theologians of liberation have gone beyond this to not only discuss the issue of Christology, but to seek to deepen the sexist problems that arise from the monotheistic religious vision and emerge from patriarchal metaphors used in building the image of God. In this perspective, the discussion on pluralism revolves heavily around the dogmas that have excluded women from decision-making and power in religious spheres rather than on differences between religions. Furthermore, some of these dogmas have also marginalized men and women of different races and cultures in the name of a 'white Christ with European features'. Feminist theology, therefore, is a radically inclusive effort.

The feminist perspective of interreligious dialogue searches for liberating elements, principles and practices not only for women, but for many groups that are marginalized and socially discriminated against. It bases itself on the concept of a divinity that is neither sexist, patriarchal, elitist nor racist. In this sense, there is a need to enhance the religions and cultures that are typically disregarded in society:

The scandal of Christology, for most feminists, is the promotion of a male God, asking women to face the figure of a man as human exemplar. Simply overcoming the masculinity of the historical Jesus as a contingent fact, the relativity of language and the emphasis on the message of Jesus as a revolutionary does not seem to be sufficient to overcome the traditional Christologies. All of the symbolic underpinnings of Christology must be reinterpreted (Ruether). The repudiation of heroes and heroines should be implemented. This repudiation, focused on the salvific idea of relatedness in community can move us away from authoritarian governments, which concentrate the idea of salvation in a single figure. Moreover, it moves us closer to a dialogue with religious pluralism, as shown by the work that Latin-American theologians are doing with the

African-American and indigenous communities. In this sense, not only is the vision of women recovered, but also the vision of oppressed people and races, both in socio-economic and racial / ethnic terms. The inter-relatedness among people in the community is highlighted, and the community is salvific in African-American religions. The power is more widely shared and a great respect for the elderly, children and the whole of nature is observed.¹⁹

As a result of this search, Christology needs to be revised so that it is not restricted to a message focusing on a single individual, but a community. It would mean the possibility of religious experiences that are guided by inter-relatedness, the sharing of power, the establishment of fair internal relations, respect for elders, children and nature. In the words of the author:

This proposal does not intend to reject the historical person of Jesus. Instead, he should remain as a paradigmatic figure for both his message and praxis. The community becomes central, but the people within it should be role models of community living, the praxis of solidarity, brotherhood / sisterhood, and the fight against social inequality and injustice.²⁰

Beyond the specific issues of Christology, there are two other points that represent major challenges to the debate surrounding religious pluralism: the concept of salvation and the question of monotheism.

The concept of salvation understood as healing and life-giving relativizes several myths about the origin of sin and guilt, in which much of the blame was historically and ideologically attributed to women. The criticism — and even break — with the Augustinian vision of original sin makes that the traditional theology of salvation loses its meaning. Salvation gains new meaning when it is no longer linked to a Christology of reconciliation between the human and their initial state of sin, but instead against structural sin. The salvific dimension becomes linked to the cure, elevation of self-esteem, life giving and welcome into the community. Thus, Christian theology would be able to be more faithful to its principles of equality of all human beings, having a community

19 Luiza Tomita, 'Crista na ciranda de Asherah, Isis e Sofia: propondo metáforas divinas para um debate feminista do pluralismo religioso', in: ASETT (ed.), *Pluralismo e Libertação*, 2005, 107-124 (112-113).

20 Luiza Tomita, 'A contribuição da Teologia Feminista da Libertação para o debate do Pluralismo Religioso', in: ASETT (ed.), *Pelos Muitos Caminhos de Deus*, 2003, 108-119 (114).

based on justice and peace and expressing divine power as the representative of love in all its fullness.

The subject of monotheism is very similar since it was always directed towards a male image of God. It even became a 'coup' against ancient cultures that held a belief in female deities who inevitably empowered women. Monotheism has affected the lives of women by ending the dual sexuality of the divine, thus alienating women from the divine nature. A dualism between body and spirit, humanity and nature and God and the world was introduced as well. A Goddess-centred spirituality enables a reflection from reality embodied in everyday life, in dimensions of both pleasure and pain, including changes and processes of the body, personal life, and self-assertion while at the same time staying connected to social commitment and political activity. From this spirituality arises the possibility of affirming the body, both its erotic power as well as its creative power to give life and to be a source of healing.

The effort of feminist liberation theology in seeking female images of God concentrates on the expression of faith in a deity who is concerned with situations of oppression and violence that mark the lives of a considerable part of the population, in particular women. This deity, stripped of androcentrism and the resulting forms of sexism and patriarchies, promotes healing and values the body, sexuality, care and protection of nature with a consequent ethical responsibility for creation. Incidentally, such a perspective would establish healthy connections with indigenous and African religions since they have less authoritarian divine images, but ones that inhabit or reveal themselves in the middle of the community, based on interrelatedness and greater solidarity and respect for people and nature.

Interreligious dialogue also produces within each religious expression change and the identification of challenges. In the case of Christianity, it is important to emphasize the need for the critical role that it played in the processes of colonization and catechization, whose brand of intolerance, violence and rejection of other religions and cultures that were considered to be demonic, is strongly present until today. Feminist theology can contribute to the re-visioning of the place of religion in this task of liberation.

Final Considerations

The complex social and religious reality that is lived today, especially religious pluralism, strongly challenges Latin-American theological output. We attempt to show that, given the presence of religious pluralism, any theology of religions must give special attention to the articulation of both the ability of

religious groups to dialogue as well as the challenges related to the defence of human rights, presupposing that ecumenical spirituality requires a dialogical vision and a deep sensibility to the questions that affect human life and the promotion of peace. We also indicate that an ecumenical spirituality emerging from religious pluralism will appreciate otherness and the dimension of mysticism, and that this will clarify religious and social processes, favouring utopian and democratic perspectives that provide meaning. We reaffirm ecumenical dialogue as an affirmation of life, with its own concrete implications in relation to solidarity, communion, mutual understanding and the initiatives and projects of humanization and social justice. We also highlight the centrality of the Kingdom of God as a fundamental category in the theological task that is affirmed as a reference to ecumenical spiritualities and that there are important implications for the theological task when the reality of Afro-indigenous religious cultures and the experiences of women are considered.

There are different groups involving men and women, ecumenical groups of young people, ecclesial communities and academic environments that have dedicated themselves to interreligious dialogue and such experiences have forged new theological perspectives. The same is true with regard to other religious expressions. Such a path enables a new paradigm for theology with a pluralistic imprint, moving it away from the inclusive vision that marked its beginnings.

The objectives of this new theological and pastoral movement, generally speaking, reside in the articulation of foundational elements in Latin-American theology — such as the spiritual sensibility towards the defence of life, human rights (especially of the poor) and land rights with an ecumenical dialogical vision in search of a theological foundation of religious pluralism. A long and arduous road remains to be travelled.

Claudio de Oliveira Ribeiro was born in Rio de Janeiro. He got his PhD Theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. He is professor in theology and religion studies at the Methodist University of São Paulo. His current area of research is theology and culture. He is also author of *Libertação e Gratuidade* (São Paulo: Paulinas 2012) and *Pluralismo e Libertação* (São Paulo: Paulinas 2013). His e-mail address is: claudio.ribeiro@metodista.br.