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Marx in a Gay Bar

Indecent Theology as a Reflection on the Theology of Liberation and Sexuality

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Resumen

Este artículo busca analizar críticamente la relación entre la teología de la liberación y la sexualidad. Sin negar la influencia de la Teología Latinoamericana de la Liberación y la Teología Feminista en su pensamiento, Marcella Althaus-Reid demuestra intercambios entre estas teologías y los cambios ocurridos en los últimos años. Sin embargo, ambas teologías llegaron a un límite. Es necesario ir más allá. Este «más allá» es la Teología Indecente que inserta la sexualidad fluida en la agenda teológica contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Teología Latinoamericana de la Liberación, Sexualidad, Teología Feminista, Teología Indecente.

Resumo

Este artigo busca analisar criticamente a relação entre a teologia da libertação e a sexualidade. Sem negar a influência da Teologia Latinoamericana da Libertação e da Teologia Feminista em seu pensamento, Marcella Althaus-Reid demonstra trocas entre essas teologias e as mudanças que ocorreram nos últimos anos. No entanto, ambas as teologias chegaram ao limite. É preciso ir além. Esse «além» é a Teologia Indecente que insere a sexualidade fluida na agenda teológica contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Teologia Latinoamericana da Libertação, Sexualidade, Teologia Feminista, Teologia Indecente.

Abstract

This article seeks to analyze the relationship between the theology of liberation and sexuality critically. Without denying Latin American Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology's influence in her thought, Marcella Althaus-Reid demonstrates exchanges between these theologies and the changes that occurred in recent years. However, both theologies arrived at a limit. It's necessary to go beyond. This «beyond» is the Indecent Theology that inserts fluid sexuality in the contemporary theological agenda.

Keywords: Latin American Liberation Theology, Sexuality, Feminist Theology, Indecent Theology.

Marcella Althaus-Reid

Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid (Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina 11 May 1952 – Edinburgh, Scotland 20 February 2009) was Professor of Contextual Theology at New College, the University of Edinburgh. When appointed, she was the only woman professor of theology at a Scottish University and the first woman professor of theology at New College in its 160-year history.

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«Go further»¹

To 'Go further.' Or decode the Christic symbol beyond any traditional morality. [...] The Spirit? Not, this time, the product of the love between the Father and the son, but the universe already made flesh or capable of becoming flesh, and remaining in excess to the existing World.

Luce Irigaray (2002: 58)

I want to start this talk with an anecdote. I want to tell you a story that happened to me a couple of years ago when I participated in a conference on theology and globalization organized by a group of European churches. It turns out that to my surprise and joy, I found among the guests at this conference, predominantly from Europe and the United States, a small delegation of Latin American theologians. And not only Latin American theologians but also pioneering theologians, founders of the movement that is now known as «Latin American Liberation Theology» (TLL).

I immediately introduced myself to the group, and we fraternized. We would eat together during the conference weekend, have afternoon coffee together, and talk a lot. Actually, they spoke, and I, rather than participate, listened to them. These theologians were old friends among them, with many years in common in the struggle for social justice in our continent at all levels: in the ecclesiastical sphere, in the doctrinal field, and the political arena. They spoke of their memories of struggle in Medellín, in Puebla, of their memories of life in the 1970s' militant Christian Church. And I listened to them.

¹ Originally published as Marcella Althaus-Reid (2008: 55-69). Translated and published with permission. Translation: Hugo Córdova Quero. Missing references were added throughout the article.

Suddenly one of them asked me: «And you, Marcella, what is your work, your theology?» I thought, «What do I tell them? Would they understand a position even more critical than the one formulated by them so many years ago?» However, the men of the first wave of TLL have had Christian and theological integrity. TLL is *una caminata* [a walk] that no one should take unaccompanied, and I am the first to rejoice to have so many companions full of courage and vision on this path.

Then I told them about my commitment to sexual liberation theology. I told them about my work in the community, the struggles and sacrifices of many in this theological path and pastoral, and how they confront a heterosexual ideology that has emerged as the dominant hegemony in Christianity and the Christian Church.

I do not know if there was an attempt at dialogue. If I had to find a phrase to articulate my answer, I would say that it was a question that marked the conversation: What does sexuality have to do with TLL? It was unfortunate —I thought— because although my community and I had many things in common with them, they had nothing in common with us. As a colleague from the Metropolitan Community Church in Buenos Aires said, «Liberation theologians have stopped walking with us.» The problem is that perhaps —and I know this is hard to say— those pioneer theologians already do not walk anymore, neither alone nor accompanied. They have long ceased to follow this problematic, risky, and disorderly creative route that leads to radical liberation theology.

The funny thing about this story is that while they talked about Puebla and Medellín, I wanted to tell them that there are other «Medellines» and other «Second Vaticans» in our Latin American church's history. «Medellines» and «Pueblas» that were not organized by the spheres of power of the Christian Church. Events where a few pastors, a few Christians, excluded from their

churches, excluded from society, persecuted by authoritarian regimes, came together in the name of Christ to fight for social justice without neglecting sexual justice.

I wanted to tell you how in Buenos Aires, a pastor and liberation theologian, Rev. Roberto González of the Methodist Church, lost the right to be ordained a pastor for declaring to his church that he was gay. He lost his place in the church and his job for exercising what Paul Tillich called «the courage to be» (2000). Yet, amid these sufferings, he would go to all the gay bars he knew and distributed photocopied invitations to gay meetings. All that during the military dictatorship! Little by little, without money and friends, he formed a small group that today makes up the Metropolitan Community Church in Buenos Aires. What else is the church's so-called *aggiornamento* if not this marginal theological praxis, gratuitous and great love, faced with the little love of so much encyclical and so much church? What is the so-called «church on the move» if not this contagious praxis that even brutal authoritarian regimes cannot suppress? That is precisely the theology of liberation.

Liberation Theology?

Let us go by part. What is the theology of liberation? By liberation theology, I mean not a historical theology whose point of reference is always a church council in the past or historiography of the Latin American church that does not admit the irruption of new discourses of justice. That would be an «archive evil,» according to Jacques Derrida (1995). In other words, an obsession with reconstructing a past that authorizes a present. I refer to liberation theology as a style of doing theology, and contemporary, present praxis. Not anecdotal theology because when theology becomes anecdotal, it is because it does not have a current project, and it has to look back. For example, the self-titled European Liberation

Theology —as it does not have its historical project— is dedicated to repeating the TLL from the 1970s.

However, for us, TLL is a theology that understands God's presence in history and the chronicles of acts of liberation amid peoples' daily lives. It is not limited to being a catalog of topics authorized by the Church. It continues with an ideological suspicion, with a right to doubt ideological interventions in theology and the churches. Thus we were able to identify other liberation processes that were not theologically authorized. Legal proceedings, processes of theological *Otherness*.

On the other hand, we identify other theological alliances of power between the Church and the market. That is where sexuality enters because I am talking about the market that determines the production and exchange of goods, desires, affections, and love. In other words, TLL is *una caminata* that must continue to create theologies in times of globalization and social exclusion that are closely related to the processes of sexual exclusion. In reality, capitalist mechanisms of exclusion are the other side of an exclusive sexual epistemology. Exclusion has its logic of love and the market.

So, what do I propose? As I am a scandalous theologian, educated during the military dictatorships. I am accustomed to producing ruptures rather than reconciliations with structures that cannot be reformed. Some time ago, I began to think about the possibility of doing a theology that at first, I called «out of the closet,» but then I started calling it «a theology without underwear.» What is to do theology without underwear? What does it imply? It involves two things:

First, a theology made without a supposed sexual theological neutrality because such neutrality does not exist and never existed neither in the church nor in theology. It is a theology that openly

declares its sexual interests and denounces the sexual ideological formation in Christianity and theological reflections.

Second, a theology that questions the theologian's role and her theological integrity concerning her sexuality context. A theology that broadens and radicalizes the field of suspicion within the hermeneutical circle of TLL.

Allow me to explain that: TLL has not known or been able to distance itself and reflect upon the reality that the ontological infrastructure provided by a particular sexual ideology, such as heterosexuality, even sustains our doctrinal positions. When I was studying theology at ISEDET in Buenos Aires, José Míguez Bonino, the Methodist theologian, used to tell us: to study a particular Christology, you have first to explore what the theologian's anthropology is. All anthropology depends on—and is configured in—an intimate relationship with the concept of humanity that the theologian wields. I affirm that Christology and all doctrinal propositions—even the doctrine of Grace or Redemption—developed based on a presupposition of sexual identity. They function at the level of ontological «pre-text» and determine the essence of the human being and their relationships with the world, be them affectional or economic exchanges. In other words, theology has made an idol of a sexual ideology like heterosexuality.

Sexuality?

In TLL, a biological concept of sexuality has been used, mediated by the medical discourse of sexuality from the 19th-20th centuries. It coupled with a foundation that comes from misinformed medieval biology, without naming the biblical positions. Those situations ignored the basics of reproduction mechanisms. In theology, sexuality is always a «given»; it is a narrative goal of authority but of sacred authority. Simply naming

this narrative goal usually serves to end any argument about sexuality in the Christian Church.

Curiously, we are in a time when in theology, we use sophisticated elements to understand reality, such as historical materialism, social anthropology, or cultural studies. We study the Bible through semiotics, post-structuralism, or post-colonial perspectives. However, when we encounter an issue of sexuality, we revert to a medieval position based on Aristotle that knew less about biology than about his sexuality. Nonetheless, we have elevated both ignorance and error to the level of divine knowledge, as if imparted by God, or even worse, as emanated directly from God. Nevertheless, here I am going to use a post-Marxist conception—or one influenced by post-Marxism—such as the theory elaborated by Gayle Rubin (1984) and Judith Butler (1990).² These are constructionist sexual theories.

Some of you may recall what it cost the Christian Church to understand that gender is neither universal nor historically consistent. In other words, the roles that define femininity and masculinity depend on an exchange between cultures, social classes, ethnic groups, and, ultimately, on the historical period in which one lives. Gender has not remained unchanged during long periods either, including the writing of the biblical books or the history of Christianity. For example, if Saint Paul saw me, he would suffer an attack, and I would also have a seizure if I see him! But if I would see Saint Paul alive, I would send him to read Paulo Freire's work, so that he could discover the beauty and challenge of the dialogical method.

Today's Christian people understand their faith in a dialogical way. Yet, the Christian Church is not dialogical. Referring to the evidence, I would like to recall the Roman Catholic Church's latest document: the «Letter to the Bishops of the [Roman] Catholic

² Butler is one of the most important thinkers of this century.

Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the World» (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2004). Have you read it? It is a document that is very poor intellectually, a poorly researched, and poorly written essay devoted to establishing that the divine will is against feminism, that women transcend when they become mothers.

The Christian Church has problems with something as elementary as the conceptualization of the category of gender. The employees of the bank where I have my checking account do not have that problem. The Christian Church that calls itself an «expert in humanity» has not finished elementary school yet, and its ignorance moves me. What, then, can we expect of the Christian Church's ability to critically discern issues that are more important than that psychotic obsession it displays to control pre-established codes of conduct according to given biology? The Christian Church has to work its problems with sexuality, and thus humanize itself.

I am stating that if gender is acquired, then we are not born with our sexuality. Sexuality does not have equivalence with biological formation, that is, that our biology is not our sexual destiny. Heterosexuality behaves as an ideology. Namely: an ideology within a set of ideas and beliefs, sometimes in conflict but strong enough to provide the basis for some organized social action. Ideologies, for example, can defend an established order or replace one order with another. They are world-views, collections of doctrines, theory, and principles that claim to interpret reality. Ideologies, according to Marx, replace the world of experience with the world of ideas. If human beings' experiences and their needs and happiness are opposed to ideas, then ideas are always chosen. Human beings must adapt to ideas and not vice versa — Marx called this the process of reification or objectification. Thus, Heterosexuality behaves like a hegemonic ideology.

The problem with TLL is that it could not overcome inherited idealism. TLL has to take its materialistic base more seriously. Let me state once again that I am talking about TLL because it is my foundation. For me, TLL is the most significant contribution made to theology in the last century, mainly produced in Brazil. I speak of TLL with criticism and with love.

Sex and the Theologian

The second point that I want to make briefly is about the ethics of the theologian. Or about the ethical position of women theologians in general. Why, when doing theology, do women theologians declare themselves either neutral or take an idealist position? Why do women theologians not come out of the closet? I am not only referring to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender closets that exist —although they are hidden— but also the heterosexual closet. That is to say, when it comes to doing theology, many theologians speak, reflecting a heterosexual ideology that is not necessarily related to their experiences.

In other words, we say very little about the contradictions between the theory of heterosexuality and its practice as an institution. Hence, the project of making a sexual theology, «without underwear,» is an ethical position. It is establishing a principle of «reality» in theology from the standpoint of a sexual perspective. It is leaving a lot of hypocrisy and lies aside. Thus, theology's object is to reflect on the relationship between God and human beings and not between God and the world of ideologies.

Panorama: Where Do We Come From, And Where Are We Going?

The ethical stance started with feminist theology. It began when women said they could not stop being women when reflecting and

carrying out a Christian practice. Let me give you a brief overview of Feminist Theology (FT), where we are, what we agree upon, and what we do not agree regarding gender, class, and sexuality issues. Yet, «theology without underwear» is still a scandalous position and not necessarily feminist. Nevertheless, I will focus on it.

FT has a long process compound of many political choices. If we recall history, we can state that the FT of the first wave was a theology with a liberal political proposal and —like all liberal theology— was characterized by social equality issues rather than issues of social change. These theologians' gender questions related to the search for equality of roles and opportunities between men and women, which is fair — even without substantive institutional questioning. FT was concerned with women of a particular social and cultural level having a place in men's companies, men's universities, and men's churches. The image was like they would ask for a chair to sit in the Vatican, but not to reform it. It was a theology influenced by liberalism, with a strong legal discourse.

Consequently, FT was a theology of law that tried to argue for the right to women's ordination, for the constitutions of churches to be modified, and the right to pursue academic careers. Thus, we could say that the feminists of the first wave, more than theologians, were historians because —by re-reading and reinterpreting the Christian Church's history— they could prove their legal background claims. For example, we can acknowledge that women had occupied a rightful place in the Christian Churches, their leadership, and their ministries. Nevertheless, the first wave's FT does not yet have a notion of gender, race, and class differences. That is why black women theologians rose in the United States, in reaction to this, with one of the most original proposals of late 20th-century theology: Womanist theology.

In reality, the first wave of TF did not produce a theology but rather dealt with making a feminist ecclesiastical history, liturgical issues, and, of course, a feminist hermeneutic that re-read the Bible seeking equality and fraternity between men and women of faith. That theology produced a Christology that featured Jesus for the first time as a Messiah of sexual equality. Some theologians of that time even spoke of a feminist Jesus, although that is an anachronistic concept and false. The consciousness of Jesus on the subject of sexual ideology was historically limited. They based all these reflections upon a liberal position with exceptions such as Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983), the first North American theologian who identified herself with TLL.

That is where TLL comes in. There was a Latin American Feminist Theology, which had been developing among pastors, some consecrated religious women, laywomen with a lot of work in the churches, and the few who had been able to study theology. For me, they were very limited in the dissemination of their work. Rosemary [Radford Ruether] is crucial because —by rewriting liberation theology from a feminist perspective and with great diffusion from the United States— she authorized them, if you will. She made it easier for many Latin American women —who were saying the same things but without being heard— to finally had a place for dialogue. That is when a change, a move in FT, occurred.

To begin with, we started to talk about FTs in the plural. In other words, Latin American Feminist Theology —like the theology of black, Asian, or African women—, which also no longer has a neo-liberal base, was a theology that questioned the universalization of women's identity in different cultural and political contexts. It was a theology that brought criticism of capitalism as a life project for women and used Marx for the first time. That questioned power structures. It no longer searched for parity with women in the world or equality in the sphere of the Christian Church's decision-making and power but challenged the

very structures of that power. Beyond the liturgy and biblical reading, it brought an attempt at doctrinal criticism, such as the work in Liberation Mariology.

Sexual Theologies

So far, in this recount, more or less, we have a gender discourse, although sexuality began very early to be a reason for reflection in Latin America. There are important names like Professors Jaci Maraschin (1989) and Nancy Cardoso Pereira (1993, 1997, 1999), whose works I have been reading and using in my writings for many years. For me, Maraschin and Cardoso Pereira were very advanced. They have a theology that was pioneering not only in Latin America but on a world scale. However, the sexual theme appeared specifically in gay theologies — and I say «gay» because «lesbian theology» appeared later and, initially, continued gay theology. That is the contribution or rupture of the gender paradigm that comes with these sexual theologies.

Until that moment —even within FT— we had a gender discourse. Suddenly, we have a theology that specifically articulated around the idea of compulsive heterosexuality as an ideology of power. Interestingly, this is also part of a liberation theology framework, as in the works of Gary Comstock (1993), Mary Hunt (1994), and Robert Goss (1993) in the United States, to name a few examples. In other words, liberation theology as a *caminata* has inspired a radical praxis of liberation among many oppressed communities. What is essential about these theologies is that they reversed the order of their theological reflection and praxis.

Traditionally, theology went to its discourse, encyclicals, or church documents, and from there, it considered sexuality. The questions were: What does the Christian church, a theologian, or the Pope say about sexuality? What does Karl Barth say about

marriage? What does Martin Luther say about sexuality? Sexual theologies cease to be genitive theologies, and now they ask themselves: What does sexuality say about God, about the Christian faith, and the Christian Church?

«Queer» Sexual Theologies

We finally come to Queer Sexual Theologies. I could say that gay—and later, lesbian—theologies have a fixed, essentialist, concept of what is to be «gay.» What I say, I know, is controversial, and I accept it. I belong to a movement of people who do not want to have fixed sexual identities, neither heterosexual nor gay. I belong to a Queer group, who builds fluid sexual identities and even changeable ones.

Here I have to talk a bit about Queer Theologies, resulting from the combination of sexual theologies and Queer theory. In Queer theory—which came from a post-modern current—we have the following:

First, Queer—or «crooked»—is an inclusive term for all sexualities, including bisexuality, transgender, and transsexuality. This rainbow of sexual identities is taken seriously for the first time, not wanting to reduce it to a supposed heteronormality. At the same time, we study heterosexual identity seeking to understand heterosexuality outside the ideology that has also distorted what it means to be heterosexual. I have called this «heterosexuality out of the closet.» In other words, it does not deny heterosexuality but wants to separate the heterosexual experience that comes from a critical reality from the heterosexual ideology or imaginary. Heterosexual ideology also oppresses heterosexuals.

Second, sexual identity is considered fluid—«in motion.» It is not interesting to have fixed sexual identities, define them, or make them definitive.

Third, the Queer movement is a marginal movement, which wants to remain somehow marginal to answer heterosexual discourse and not assimilate. In fact, «Queer» is a disparaging word that means «strange» and refers to a «strange» person.

Finally, queer theory has a sexual epistemology —or way of knowing— that challenges the heterosexual postulates that we handle, for example, the binary categories of thought, of opposition that heterosexual thought uses. Because sexuality implies an epistemology —a way of understanding and relating to the world— configures a particular type of structured or institutional thinking.

In theology, the impact is tremendous. It shakes the founding ground of sexual ideology, dismantles it, and shows the conceptual dependence that theology has on heterosexuality.

However, not everything is critical. There is also a positive and creative aspect. Queer Theology uses new affective perspectives, new ways of being a community that have excluded groups, and themes from the Christian Church. Within the biblical sense also of «scandal,» that scandalizes and enriches the doctrinal reflection, the liturgy, and the Christian Church's pastoral work and its ecclesiology.

Indecent Theology

By now, you realize what I am talking about when I say «Indecent Theology.» It is a Queer Theology but of liberation. It is a transgressive sexual theology, but it uses twisted epistemology concerning the crisis produced by globalization, social exclusion, and savage capitalism. It is Marx in a gay bar! When the political paradigm in theology has gone out of fashion to give rise to a cultural critique that excludes not only the thought of Marx and all political analysis, I uphold that the analysis of production is

still valid. We cannot understand consumerism and the spirituality of consumerism without analyzing the form of production.

Therefore, an Indecent Theology is a Feminist Theology of Liberation (FTL) that uses sexual suspicion to dismantle the sexual ideologies that structure doctrines and organize churches. I called it «indecent» because, for me, as an Argentinean woman, the dialectic of «decency/indecency» has been critical concerning my sexual and religious identity. «Decency» is a way of constructing political, cultural, and sexual identities transformed into presuppositions of faith in our continent's Christian Churches. Thus, it has a regulatory and idolatrous function. My proposal is to «indecent» the FTL, which is my theology. The other theologies of the North Atlantic are obsolete. The TLL that follows the *caminata* is still the most valid proposal we have.

My indecent proposal is the following: How can we make a popular sexual theology that is concurrently a popular theology of love? How can we use the stories of our loves to (re)read the Scriptures, rethink how we organize as a Christian Church, and reflect on themes such as Grace, Christology, the Trinity, and Redemption from the experiences of love that the church and theology have suppressed and silenced for centuries? How can we think of Grace without declaring love illegal?

Indecent Theology is not a theology to ask for equality like the liberal FT, but to recognize differences. So that differences and divergence can be an integral part of our theological praxis. It is not an inclusive proposal, in the sense that it does not seek to include people and ideas to a Christian church structure and a way of doing existing theology but to open alternative spaces for reflection. There is finally the possibility of an encounter with a less domestic God in these spaces, less limited by prevailing sexual ideologies, who do not even belong to all cultures.

For example, in Latin America, we have other traditions and other loving and relating ways that come from many First Nations that we have forgotten. How is it possible that TLL—with its strong accent on a politico-economic criticism—has not paid attention to our people's sexual spirituality, the bisexuality of the divine mountains in Peru, or the gay and transgender traditions of Umbanda? TLL should have taken the sexual spirituality very seriously if it wanted to (re)discover our faith by (re)discovering God's presence in our people. Why is that? Because in our people's sexual spirituality, we find alternative keys for ways to organize ourselves as a community and challenge economic systems based on, for example, a binary logic. The private is also political. The Andean people who use bisexual paradigms in their relationship with the sacred have economic organization forms different from the capitalist spirit, such as the *Ayni*, which means «affection.» Affection, tenderness, love is an economic institution and the Andean people's social labor organization!³ That is why I produced *Indecent Theology*.

I have wanted to study issues such as promiscuity in poverty cultures and redefine from it concepts such as solidarity, family, or love as a way of survival. «Promiscuity» is also a theological key to rethinking many things, for example, the Trinity. Instead of making the Trinity a men's club or a metaphor for God-community as a family made up of father, son, and the holy spirit, it is interesting to find a solidarity model not based on homo-solidarity. Still, solidarity exchanged in the diversity of loves and of flux identities is also interchangeable and dynamic. It is a Trinity where each of its members can come out of the closet.

³ For the subject of Latin American economies based on a different spirituality and affectivity such as the *Ayni*, see Chapter 7 of my book, *The Queer God* (Althaus-Reid, 2003: 113-132).

For that, we need to hear stories, stories of struggle, and solidarity and sexual stories. The Christian Church has never heard people's sexual stories, and that is why theology knows so little about love. How will we talk about Grace —something that is free, God's free love— if we do not understand what lies behind the lives and loves of so many people, of so many theologians who hide behind idealistic rhetoric?

That is what this is all about: getting God out of the closet. Or perhaps, to recognize that we already have a God who came out of the closet in Jesus. What closet? The closet that did not allow the God-self to walk like God among human beings, suffer human fragility, doubt, have hunger and desire, enjoy friendship, love, fear, and death. A promiscuous God whose love circulates without limits and without laws that contain it. A God who comes out of God's divine centrality to unite with the marginalized.

TLL found a God in Christ among the marginalized but did not recognize in Jesus the marginal presence of God. In other words, not a God who leaves glory to meet briefly with the poor and the excluded. No, a God who assumes God-self as poor and excluded. A strange, twisted, Queer God. A God outside the closet of sexual and political ideologies fluid and unstable like ourselves, in whose image and likeness we were made. A God who laughs and finds pleasure in God's divine destiny of transgressive justice, the kind of justice that dismantles the laws, and that finally —more than disciples— makes us lovers of God.

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