

# Liberation, Women, and Nature: The Past, Present and Future of Liberation Theologies

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## Introduction

Sallie McFague, one of the leading ecofeminist theologians today, says that there have been two major shifts in twentieth century theology: First, from the "How can we *know* God?" enterprise to the "How can we *change* the world?" theologies of liberation; Second, from "How can we *change* the world?" project to "How can we *save* the world?" theologies of nature.<sup>1)</sup> She presents the second shift not as a rupture but as a widening or deepening of the focus of liberation theologies, whereby all oppressed creatures as well as the planet earth are included in addition to all oppressed human beings.<sup>2)</sup> However, is this genealogy of shift—"know-change-save"—linear? Is the second transition simply *widening*, *deepening*, and *in addition to*?

Ivone Gebara, who has deeply devoted herself to liberation theology in Latin America, presents it differently. In an interview about her "conversion" from liberation theology to ecofeminism, she says straightforwardly: "We are tired of the struggle, which is often violent and which promises our liberation at the end."<sup>3)</sup> Something must be wrong here. Where has hers deep frustration come from? What is it that made her so exhausted and even

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This article was presented in the 7th Minjung-Dalit Theological Dialogue Conference, October 17th–22nd, 2007, Seoul, Korea.

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<sup>1)</sup> Sallie McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993), 84.

<sup>2)</sup> McFague, *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>3)</sup> Ivone Gebara, "Cosmic Theology: Ecofeminism and Panentheism," in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 210.

furious about liberation theology? Two different expressions about the second shift tell us something about it. Gebara's groaning outcry suggests explicitly that the second shift was not actually as smooth as McFague describes it.

As we will see, there are more discontinuities than continuities in the second shift. Like the first one, the second shift equally remarks a fundamental paradigm shift in our whole God-talk. It is not simply a stylistic change but a profound transformation of the whole way of our doing theology. Only when we first and correctly understand the radical hermeneutical rupture that took place in the second shift, we will be able to grasp the heart of its meaning. In order to understand the true nature of the second shift, let us revisit to the first shift and examine what had happened there.

## Liberation

All Third World theologies of liberation began as a reaction to the dominant theologies of Europe and North America.<sup>4)</sup> The rise of Third World theologies, with their keen interest in liberation, was directly related to the emergence of national and political liberation movements in their countries of origin.<sup>5)</sup> What then were the most distinctive characteristics that remarked the distinction of Third World theologies from the traditional Western theologies? Seven points could be abstracted from the inter-continental dialogue among liberation theologians in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).<sup>6)</sup>

First, it is their theme of "liberation" that replaced the traditional focus on the divine economy of human "salvation"; Second, their prime concern on the humanity of "non-persons," not the faith of "non-believers"; Third, their open claim not to be neutral but to publicly side with the poor and the oppressed like Minjung and Dalit; Fourth, their seeking of the transformation of socio-politico-economic structures, for the immensity of the suffering of the people demands the elimination of the structural root causes of oppression;

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<sup>4)</sup> James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 99.

<sup>5)</sup> Cone, *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>6)</sup> Unlike the author, Robert McAfee Brown identifies six overlapping emphases of liberation theology: (1) a different starting point: the poor; (2) a different interlocutor: the nonperson; (3) a different set of tools: the social science; (4) a different analysis: the reality of conflict; (5) a different mode of engagement: praxis; and (6) a different theology: the second "act." (Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, 60-74).

Fifth, their consideration of social analysis as a critical component to define the root cause of all forms of oppression; Sixth, their commitment to the liberation of the oppressed as the very first act of theology, through which theology becomes a critical reflection upon prior political commitment in solidarity with the oppressed; and Seventh, their claim of the poor/Minjung as the subject of doing theology and the affirmation of the hermeneutical privilege of the poor/Minjung. In short, the most original and truly creative insight of Third World theologies of liberation was to see the world from the *underside* of history--i.e., from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed, and the losers in history--and to respond to this vision by searching for effective strategies to transform the structures of societal sin which are the root causes of their suffering.<sup>7)</sup>

As a matter of fact, liberation theologies introduced not so much a new theme but *a new way* to do theology.<sup>8)</sup> Like any other theologies, liberation theology talks about all the topic of theology (e.g., God, Trinity, Christ, the Spirit, grace, sin, and the church, etc.), but the radical originality of liberation theology is its methodology in that it talks about all these topics from the perspective of the poor and the oppressed. This theological methodology of the "option for the poor," to use Latin American jargon, is the key to liberation theologies. What is equally important is that this option for the poor was made possible because of "the fundamental datum of Christian faith"<sup>9)</sup> that God has been revealed in the Bible as the God of the poor and the oppressed. One cannot find in any other religion, teachings that parallel the perspective of the Lukan beatitudes that God has a special concern for the poor *simply because they are poor*. As Aloysius Pieris affirms, the biblical revelation, which has no explicit doctrinal parallel in other religions and thus connotes a Christian specificity, is "the irrevocable covenant between God and the poor."<sup>10)</sup> It is indeed liberation theologies that rediscovered and recovered the perennial Christian themes of God's salvific activity in history as recorded in the *biblia pauperum* (the bible of the poor), which have often

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<sup>7)</sup> Alfred T. Hennelly, ed. *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), xvi.

<sup>8)</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15.

<sup>9)</sup> Victorio Araya, *God of the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987), 30.

<sup>10)</sup> Pieris, "Monastic Poverty in the Asian Context," in *Love Meets Wisdom*, 90. He argues that there are "two radical convictions derived from [biblical] revelation: (1) The irreconcilable antinomy between God and Mammon; and (2) the irrevocable covenant between God and the poor." The former finds a corresponding doctrine in non-Christian religions, assures Pieris.

been hidden by the ideologies of Christendom. The option for the poor is not a new theory introduced by any radical economists but the clear thrust of the biblical message.

We can identify one more important characteristic of Third World liberation theologies by reviewing the battle between Latin American liberation theologians and German political theologians more than 30 years ago. The battle between liberation theologians and German political theologians, who saw themselves as the "kindred to Latin American liberation theology,"<sup>11)</sup> particularly Juergen Moltmann, who was recognized as "the theologian to whom liberation theology is most indebted and with whom it has the closest affinity,"<sup>12)</sup> can be summarized as the dispute regarding the "relation between God's eschatological order and man's political action in history."<sup>13)</sup> This theological dispute was in fact derived from the political economic issues regarding the Latin American option for socialism and its use of Marxist analysis: For Moltmann, in order to avoid sacralizing a particular ideology or power structure, it is important to refuse to "materialize" God's presence in history and keep "critical freedom" in theology.<sup>14)</sup> For Miguez Bonino, however, this conception of critical freedom, which is allegedly "above right and left, ideologically neutral," only meant option for *another* particular ideology, which is liberalism or one form of the liberal social-democratic project.<sup>15)</sup> On the part of liberation theologians, the problem with German political theology is that its supposed neutrality, on the pretext of affirming the relativity of all political order, only offers an ideological justification of the established system of the capitalist West.<sup>16)</sup> Therefore, for liberation theologians, Moltmann's "promise of hope" only looked "too vague, a tantalizing mirage unable to inspire concrete historical action," unable to give concrete content to the identification with the oppressed.<sup>17)</sup>

<sup>11)</sup> J. Moltmann, "Political Theology and Theology of Liberation," in *Liberating the Future*, 60.

<sup>12)</sup> Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 144.

<sup>13)</sup> Bonino, *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>14)</sup> Moltmann, "An Open Letter to Jose Miguez Bonino," in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, 197-200.

<sup>15)</sup> Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, 144-150. Thus Gutierrez faulted Moltmann for being caught in a "European liberal syndrome" which accepts the present socioeconomic order, engages in "reformism from within," and seeks to move by gradualism to a more just social order, which is a luxury Latin Americans can no longer afford. (Gutierrez, *Teologia Desde el Reverso de la Historia*, 59.)

<sup>16)</sup> Thus, for Segundo, political theology is "revolutionary only in name." (Segundo, "Capitalism-Socialism: A Theological Crux," in *Concilium* (1974), 111-113, 117.

<sup>17)</sup> Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in the Revolutionary Situation*, 144-147.

On the part of Moltmann, however, the Latin American effort to reflect on the praxis of liberation is only to "limp after reality." As we know, the key to Moltmann's theology of hope is that "the future must be redeemed from the power of history."<sup>18)</sup> Therefore, the subject of Moltmann's eschatology is not chronological "future time," in which the future "develops," but "God's future," in which God's Advent is "expected" (thus "anticipation").<sup>19)</sup> Central to Moltmann's theology of hope is the affirmation that only a redeeming and fulfilling future can give consolation and meaning to suffering and acting in history, and that it is only this kind of future that can be "the new paradigm of transcendence."<sup>20)</sup>

On the part of liberation theologians, however, hope is not coming from the future but pregnant in the present. For Boff, the Kingdom is "the presence of the future within the present";<sup>21)</sup> for Gutierrez, the present in the praxis of liberation, in its deepest dimension, is "pregnant with the future" and therefore there is in Moltmann's theology of hope the danger of docetism, since the "Promise" is not related to any specific situation."<sup>22)</sup> See to it that Asian and feminist theologians share this stance. For C.S. Song, "The future has to be the growth out of the present, fulfilling it, changing it, and carrying it forward. The future is not the negation of the present but the fulfillment of it and then the transformation of it."<sup>23)</sup> For ecofeminist theologian like Rosemary R. Ruether, eschatological hope, although useful and important for

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<sup>18)</sup> Moltmann, "Liberating and Anticipating the Future," in *Liberating Eschatology*, 190. Moltmann's "theology of hope" was in fact developed in the context of the twentieth-century renaissance of eschatology in Christian theology, initiated and promoted by Schweitzer, Barth, and Bultmann in reaction to the effort to conform Christianity to modern trends and ideas. Influenced by Tillich, Moltmann criticized both the "conservative syndrome" and Progressive syndrome" of modern eschatological paradigm, and assured instead the "God of hope" as the power of the future, as a "new paradigm of transcendence," qualitatively different from the progress of the world developing out of the present. (Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996], 98.)

<sup>19)</sup> Moltmann, "Liberating and Anticipating the Future," 189.

<sup>20)</sup> Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 192.

<sup>21)</sup> Boff, "Salvation and Liberation," in *Concilium* (1974), 80-80, 87.

<sup>22)</sup> Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 11-12, 124-135. For Gutierrez, "Despite all his efforts, Moltmann has difficulty finding a vocabulary both sufficiently rooted in human concrete historical experience, in an oppressed and exploited present, and yet abounding in potentialities. The hope... must be rooted in the heart of historical praxis; if this hope does not take shape in the present to lead it forward, it will be only an evasion, a futuristic illusion."

<sup>23)</sup> Song, *Jesus & the Reign of God*, 157. Song goes on to say: "We must, then question the word 'coming' in 'the coming of God's reign,' implying that the reign of God is to be introduced into the present world from outside it. The fact of the matter is that the reign of God struggles to be born in conflict situations." (Ibid., 158).

keeping history itself open, has been related to an alienation from and disappointment with bodily life and tended to despise its processes of seasonal and generational renewal; for these reasons, the idea of *eschaton* itself must be rejected, for it is fundamentally based on "a model of endless stretching forward into the future and on an understanding of God who exists only in the unrealized future."<sup>24</sup>) Women and Third World theologians are careful not to replace "a Christianity of the Beyond" with "a Christianity of the Future," for the former tends to forget the world, while the latter runs the risk of neglecting a miserable and unjust present and the struggle for liberation.

## Women

In the course of development of Third World liberation theologies, however, women theologians have initiated a serious renewal to liberation theologies. Their challenge, which was called as "an irruption within the irruption," was so radical that the emphasis, paradigm, and style of Third World theologies of liberation could not remain unmodified. Seven common characteristics of these new thrusts could be abstracted: First, women theologians have become suspicious of the efficacy of the traditional objectives, conceptions, and methodology of liberation theologies in general; Second, they unanimously affirm pluralism of Third World theologies; Third, they generally abandon the idea and hope for an immediate socio-politico-economic transformation in history, exploring instead a long-term strategy and possibility; Fourth, they emphasize the concrete daily life of the people as the new source and locus of theology; Fifth, they no longer rely exclusively on sociology, once the traditional partner of social analysis, and prefer various other disciplines, such as anthropology, cross-cultural studies, and natural sciences, etc., as their new dialogical partners; Sixth, their scope and areas of concern are expanded beyond human history to include the whole creation; and Seventh, they began to explore the possibility of a reconstruction of Christianity itself apart from its patriarchal foundation.

Not surprisingly, one of the most radical forms of these renewal thrusts took place in Latin America. Diego Irarrazaval, who is from indigenous villages in Chilean mountains, says that theology should no longer be done in terms

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<sup>24</sup>) Ruether, *Womanguides: Reading Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 219-224; Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 238, 244-245, 253-256. Ruether actually proposes a reverse model of historical hope, i.e., "conversion" to the "starting point" or the "roots in an ontology of creation and in God/ess as ground of creation."

of subject and object, but rather in terms of correlations among all living beings.<sup>25)</sup> Latin American ways of doing theology, according to Irarrazaval, should be a journey into life's mystery, and the heart of theology is nothing other than openness to this mystery.<sup>26)</sup> Contending that the radical transformation of society is no longer possible, Pablo Richard argues that we should move from political theology to civil theology, from marginalized liberation theology to a theology working inside the churches, from option for the poor to option for the excluded, beyond a strategic context of confrontation to a consensus and reconciliation.<sup>27)</sup> It seems that these examples are nothing but a direct reaction to the inadequacy of the previous Latin American liberation theology's rigid emphasis on exclusive socio-economic analysis that heavily relied on Marxist tools. Could I say that an extreme has brought another extreme on itself?<sup>28)</sup>

Ivone Gebara speaks in this context: "We are tired of the struggle which is often violent and which promises our liberation at the end." This implies that her "conversion" to ecofeminism is not simply widening, deepening, or in addition to as Sallie McFague describes it; rather, it is a sort of total "renunciation" of the existing paradigms of Latin American liberation theologies. She reproaches that liberation theology has not challenged the underlying patriarchal structure of Christianity itself, and thus urges that the anthropological and cosmological basis upon which Christianity itself is built must be changed.<sup>29)</sup> Ynestra King seems very well articulating what Ivone Gebara would have meant in her "renunciation" of both Christianity and liberation theology all together:

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<sup>25)</sup> Diego Irarrazaval, "How is Theology Done in Latin America?," in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, 61.

<sup>26)</sup> Irarrazaval, *Ibid.*, 61, 76.

<sup>27)</sup> Pablo Richard, "Liberation Theology in Latin America in Dialogue with Theologies from Africa, Asia and the Minorities in the United States: A Historical Perspective," in *Voices From the Third World*, Vol. XVIII No. 2, December 1995, 38-43.

<sup>28)</sup> We are to remember that in the context of Latin American dominance, Aloysius Pieris declared in 1979 at the EATWOT sponsored Asian Theological Conference (ATC) that "Asian context is a coalescence of religiosity and poverty," that is to say, "The religiousness of the poor and the poverty of the religious masses together constitute the complex structure of Asian reality that is the matrix of an Asian theology. Therefore, for Pieris, the theological attempts to encounter Asian religions with no radical concern for Asia's poor and the ideological programs that would eradicate Asia's poverty with naive disregard for its religious dimension are both misdirected zeal. (See Pieris, "Toward an Asian Theology of Liberation," *Asian Theology of Liberation*, 89; "A Theology of Liberation in Asian Churches?" *Ibid.*, 113; "Western Christianity and Asian Buddhism," *Love Meets Wisdom*, 36.)

<sup>29)</sup> Gebara, "Cosmic Theology: Ecofeminism and Panentheism," 209-210.

At this point in history, there is no way to unravel the matrix of oppressions within human society without at the same time liberating nature... All hitherto existing philosophies of liberation... accept the anthropocentric notion that humanity should dominate nature and that the increasing domination of non-human nature is a precondition for true human freedom. No socialist revolution has even fundamentally challenged the basic prototype for the nature/culture dualism--the domination of men over women.<sup>30)</sup>

What does liberation theology have to say to this challenge?

## Nature

The God of the poor in liberation theology is also the God of history--history understood as the locus of and the road to God. (Minjung theology is also a world affirming theology, and it strongly affirms that "God acts in history" and in current situations.) In this history-centric hermeneutics, however, the realm of creation/nature is by large excluded or neglected. Liberation theologians, particularly those in Latin America, conceived of history as a process of human liberation and considered freedom as "a historical conquest," characterized by dynamic conception of the human person as the agent of his/her own destiny.<sup>31)</sup> This particular notion of history, which emphasizes human creativity toward the future, is nothing but the nineteenth-century philosophy of history, developed in the lineage of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel and was later taken by Marx within an economic framework and by Teilhard de Chardin within a evolutionary social philosophy.<sup>32)</sup> The notion of the poor as a collective and active subject or agent actually comes right from this idea of history.

Liberation theologies in general and Latin American liberation theology in particular are epistemologically indebted to the nineteenth-century European

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<sup>30)</sup> Ynestra King, "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature/Culture Dualism," in *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, eds. Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), 109.

<sup>31)</sup> Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 17-19, 21-22, 24-25, and 56.

<sup>32)</sup> Hegel wrote in his *Philosophy of History* (837): "The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom," and freedom is "the absolute goal of history." (G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* [New York: Dover Publications, 1956], 225.)



philosophy of history. This philosophy, needless to say, holds a Promethean attitude to nature, in which "conquest of nature" is taken for granted in the idea of history as "conquest of human freedom." In this view, humankind liberates itself in the acquisition of genuine freedom which through work transforms the world/nature. However, as ecofeminists will immediately stand up and point out, such a notion of freedom is typically the idea of "man's freedom" which depends on an ongoing process of "emancipation from nature by the power of [human] reason and rationality."<sup>33)</sup> Such a freedom understands human activity as transformation of nature for the sake of unlimited progress without any consideration for the internal logic of nature. Needless to say, this freedom is the freedom of Enlightenment, which is common to both capitalism and socialism.<sup>34)</sup>

In this vein, Moltmann was not wrong to charge Latin American liberation theologians that liberation in liberation theology is "not Latin American enough" but "too European."<sup>35)</sup> Deservedly, "even in the light of 'this' gospel of liberation," as George Tinker, the Native American theologian, criticizes, "indigenous peoples are yet non-persons," for to put the means of production into the hands of the poor eventually makes the poor exploiters of indigenous peoples and their natural resources.<sup>36)</sup> Accordingly, Latin American liberation theology is viewed by Vine Deloria, Jr., another Native American thinker, as merely "the latest gimmick to keep minority groups circling the wagons with the vain hope that they can eliminate the oppression that surrounds them," without seeking to destroy "the roots of oppression" but merely to change "the manner of oppression."<sup>37)</sup> Indeed, Ivone Gebara was not wrong to reprimand liberation theology for being only a revolutionary theology "inside the Western patriarchal tradition."<sup>38)</sup>

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<sup>33)</sup> Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (New Jersey: Fernwood Publications, 1993), 6.

<sup>34)</sup> Thus, Moltmann was not wrong to criticize latin American liberation theologians who present the process of liberation in Latin America as "the continuation and culmination of the European history of freedom." (See Moltmann, "An Open Letter to Jose Miguez Bonino," 197-198.

<sup>35)</sup> Moltmann, "An Open Letter to Jose Miguez Bonino," 196, 200. It is significant to remember that liberation theologians rejected capitalist developmentalism but not the developmentalism itself. Development was rather taken for granted. Both capitalist developmentalism and socialist developmentalism can be seen as "a family quarrel among western ideologies,"<sup>1)</sup> only variants of the Enlightenment project of the historic diversity of human cultures with a single, universal civilization.

<sup>36)</sup> George Tinker, "The Full Circle of Liberation," in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, David G. Hallman, ed. (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications & Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1994), 220.

<sup>37)</sup> Deloria, "A Native American Perspective on Liberation," in *Mission Trends*, No.4, 262.

We have to admit that Third World liberation theologies in general and Latin American liberation theology in particular are theologies of "liberation without creation." However, the biblical memory of liberation includes not just oppressed people, but also oppressed lands; that is, the redemption of humanity and the redemption of the entire created order will be one intertwined story rather than two separate ones.<sup>39)</sup> In order to destroy the roots of oppression, not merely change the manner of oppression, liberation theology must vigorously incorporate ecology, nature, and creation for serious self-renewal. For the future of liberation theologies in the Third World, liberation theologians must liquidate their intellectual debt to the nineteenth-century European ideology of history, which is mechanistic, triumphalistic, anthropocentric, and androcentric.

### Toward a Point of Convergence

"Is there still room for a theology of liberation in the light of the conclusion of liberation struggles in various parts of the Third World?," asked Frank Chikane in Nairobi, in 1992, at the third general assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), convened after the collapse of the Berlin Wall.<sup>40)</sup> Indeed, the revolutionary excitement of the 1960s, 70s and 80s has dimmed, and after the *Wende*--the German term that refers to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989--, liberation theologies could not remain the same as they were before. What theological changes, modifications, and renewals have followed after the *Wende*?

Third World liberation theologians have worked hard to renew their theological reflections themselves. I have identified three eye-catching trends within this theological renewal. First, although liberation theologians still believe that the socio-economic aspect of poverty is significant, they began to give new attention to the racial and cultural world, and the discrimination against women.<sup>41)</sup> Secondly, they began to speak of the human complexity

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<sup>38)</sup> Gebara, "The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America," 178. Gebara agrees that liberation theology has surely introduced novelties, especially in the effort to reread theology on the basis of love of the impoverished in Latin America, and to derive practical consequences from it. But, she criticizes this effort for being carried out within patriarchal "orthodoxy" and still retaining the same tradition and the same field of religious imagination that have been present for centuries in Latin American culture.

<sup>39)</sup> One example is the Jubilee that required the liberation of the poor and land.

<sup>40)</sup> For more about this EATWOT conference, see K.C. Abraham and Bernadette Mbuy-Beya, eds., *Spirituality of the Third World* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994).

and ambiguity warning against even the "idealization of the poor." The poor are also human beings and as such they participate in grace and sin.<sup>42)</sup> Thirdly, liberation theologians began to see the significance of ecology in theological reflections on liberation: For instance, broadening the perspective on social solidarity to include "a respectful relationship with nature," Gustavo Gutierrez states, "A theology of creation and of life can give much oxygen to the struggle for justice," and this is "a task that without doubt provides fertile ground for theological reflection on liberation."<sup>43)</sup>

Indeed, by virtue of these efforts, one of the alarming features of the 21st century Christian theology is that liberation theology and ecological theology have moved toward a point of convergence. To give an example, James H. Cone, the "founding father" of North American black theology of liberation, admits that the fight for justice cannot be segregated but must be integrated with the fight for life in all its forms.<sup>44)</sup> Liberation theologians have actually opened themselves and begun to incorporate ecological consciousness as one of their vital concerns. Ecological theologians, too, have made vigorous efforts to incorporate the perspective of justice in their reflection on sustainability. For instance, John B. Cobb, Jr., one of the most articulate theological voices of process and ecological thought today, accepts that there cannot be a reversal of patterns of destroying the Earth that does not involve the liberation and empowerment of oppressed people everywhere as much as there cannot be liberation and empowerment of oppressed people without restoration of the Earth.<sup>45)</sup> Indeed, liberation theology and

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<sup>41)</sup> Gutierrez, "Liberation and Development," in *The Density of the Present*, 130f.

<sup>42)</sup> Gutierrez, "Liberation Theology and the Future of the Poor" in *Liberating the Future*, 117-118, 123. This is indeed a provocative statement, for it is Gutierrez himself who has insisted persistently that liberation theology must emerge directly from the experience of the oppressed so that Segundo was forced to critique Gutierrez's theology for its lack of criticism toward popular phenomena. (See Segundo, "Two Theologies of Liberation," in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, 353.

<sup>43)</sup> Gutierrez, "Liberation theology and the Future of the Poor," in *Liberating the Future*, 121-122. It is in fact Leonardo Boff who, among many other liberation theologians in Latin America, has firmly endeavored to develop an ecological theology from the perspective of liberation theology. What is noteworthy is that Boff takes ecological reflection as "a second critique of political economy" that can check capitalist developmentalism and correct the Marxist optimism on the development of the forces of production. (See Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 89, 115, 117; *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, xi-xii, 3, 4, 11, 68, 101).

<sup>44)</sup> James H. Cone, "Whose Earth Is It, Anyway?," in *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 138.

<sup>45)</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), 179.

ecological theology have already taken steps toward a point of convergence.

Nonetheless, a question remains: As Paul G. King and David O. Woodyard ask: "Can a theology that is primarily focused on social transformation by infusing the historical order with a Liberative God address ecological disaster *with the same force*?"<sup>46)</sup> I would like to add another question here: Can a theology that is primarily focused on ecological sustainability by infusing the evolutionary order with a deity of cosmic matrix of matter/energy address social injustice *with the same force* as well? Nobody denies the necessity to connect "the cry of the poor" with "the cry of the Earth," to link the earth's crisis with the crisis of humanity. Still, the remaining question is how we can ensure the interlocking and interpenetrating connection between liberation theology and ecological theology without diminishing the original forces in each. Unfortunately, as H. Paul Santmire observes, the ecological theologian sometimes falls prey to the traditional romantic danger of submerging the distinctively human dimension of the created order in nature, thereby undercutting the biblical norm of social justice; on the other hand, political/liberation theologians are sometimes prone to the opposite danger, so historicizing their conceptualization of reality that nature comes to be treated, as it generally was in the nineteenth century continental Protestant thought and on into the twentieth century, as a mere stage for history.<sup>47)</sup>

I do not think that creation/sustainability and liberation/justice are two separate things. Indeed, as Rosemary R. Ruether affirms, the God/ess who underlies creation and redemption is one and indivisible.<sup>48)</sup> However, to secure and reinforce the perspective of justice, I would like to propose with the late Dorothy Soelle that we interpret creation *in light of liberation*, that we apprehend the creation tradition from a liberation perspective. This way of dialectic, in fact, has a good biblical ground, as Soelle herself explicated:

Biblical faith originated from a historical event of liberation, not from belief in creation. For the people of Israel, the Exodus... was... a "root experience"... In Gerhard von Rad's opinion, faith in creation was a

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<sup>46)</sup> Paul G. King and David O. Woodyard, *Liberating Nature: Theology and Economics in a New Order* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1999), 11. Emphases added.

<sup>47)</sup> H. Paul Santmire, "Ecology, Justice and Theology Beyond the Preliminary Skirmishes," in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, 59.

<sup>48)</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 215.

comparatively late development and decidedly an ancillary and secondary belief... In the words of Coratto, "Genesis is an 'interpretation' of Exodus." ... If liberation precedes creation, then soteriology precedes cosmology... It is not creation that grants us our freedom; rather, we are enabled to understand creation in light of our memory and experience of liberation.<sup>49)</sup>

Indeed, the domination of the earth is never unrelated to social domination.<sup>50)</sup> Nature is product not only of natural evolution but also of human development.<sup>51)</sup> This means that nature is a historical actor that interacts with human beings through mutual ecological relations. <sup>52)</sup> Therefore, as Ruether rightly affirms, "An ecological ethic must always be an ethic of ecojustice that recognizes the interconnection of social domination and domination of nature."<sup>53)</sup> In other words, as Korean-born ecofeminist Chung Hyun Kyung puts it, the envisioning of right relationships among God, human beings, and nature cannot just remain at the level of empowering image in a world of poverty, but it "should be incarnated in our people's struggle for survival and liberation, empowering their life and movement." <sup>54)</sup> In short, the ecological spirituality--i.e., the union of renewed awe and reverence for God's presence in nature--should be accompanied by the prophetic demand that all God's creatures have their rightful share in the flourishing of life.<sup>55)</sup>

Creation faith *alone* is susceptible to the danger of "cheap reconciliation," whereby we are asked to live as if we did not require freeing from present, unjust orders, as if the God of creation/nature had triumphed over the God of liberation/history.<sup>56)</sup> I strongly believe that we must move

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<sup>49)</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *To Work and To Love: A Theology of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 7-11.

<sup>50)</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 2f.

<sup>51)</sup> Ruether, "Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature," in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, 89, 93.

<sup>52)</sup> Merchant, "Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory," 105.

<sup>53)</sup> Ruether, "Toward an Ecological-Feminist Theology of Nature," 93.

<sup>54)</sup> Chung Hyun Kyung, "Ecology, Feminism and African and Asian Spirituality: Towards a Spirituality of Eco-Feminism," in *Ecotheology*, 177f.

<sup>55)</sup> Ruether, *God and the Nations*, 91.

<sup>56)</sup> Soelle, *Ibid.*, 7-11. As Larry L. Rasmussen affirms, unlike many others in the god-rich world of the ancient near East, the Hebrew God was not recognized as simply a power or force in the universe which transcended human powers and suffused all nature with its energy; rather, this sacred power was a moral force that rejected the inevitability of oppression and injustice and commanded and made possible transformation of the world on the terms of community. "God is

beyond a mere ecological rhetoric of interconnectedness. "Restoring and deepening connection" alone cannot be the commitment to the correction of historical injustices, for the real problem is not that we are disconnected at all but that we are *badly* connected after all. What we need is therefore "a socially and historically responsible ecocentrism."<sup>57)</sup> What we desperately need is "a liberated and liberating relationship,"<sup>58)</sup> i.e, the right relationship among all beings based on justice.

## Conclusion

Liberation theologies are the articulated cry of the oppressed, and they were born when "faith confronted the injustice done to the poor"<sup>59)</sup>; and, as such, they exist wherever there is oppression. As long as the poor are with us, as long as oppression remains with them, we need such theologies whose foundational insight is the biblical inspiration of "the intimate relationship between the God of life, the poor, and liberation."<sup>60)</sup> In this sense, I believe that liberation theologies are not circumstantial theologies but contextual theologies that have universal implications. After all, did Jesus not say that "For you always have the poor[/Minjung] with you"? (Mark 14:7) A Theology of the poor/Minjung, by the poor/Minjung, and for the poor/Minjung will always be with us, if Jesus' words are true.

Let me conclude my paper by quoting David K. Suh who best captures what Korean Minjung Liberation Theology was, is, and shall be:

Theology of minjung or minjung theology is an accumulation and articulation of theological reflections on the political experiences of

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the uncreated energy of the created, energy-suffused universe," says Rasmussen; and yet, this God is "a power-sharing God." The *raison d'être* of the sacred itself is nothing less than marking, evoking and channeling extraordinary power; therefore, whatever else theology of life, nature, or cosmos might mean, it must invoke moral responsibility on the part of human beings. (Larry L Rasmussen, "Theology of Life and Ecumenical Ethics," in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications & Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 113, 24-125.)

<sup>57)</sup> Catherine Keller, "Women against Wasting the World: Notes on Eschatology and Ecology," in *Reweaving the World*, 262.

<sup>58)</sup> Call for Jubilee Year 1998, *African and Asian Spirituality (Cosmic and Indigenous): New Awareness and Orientation*, Consultation Statement, Columbo, June 18-25, 1992 (Quezon City, Philippines: Milcar Enterprises), 22.

<sup>59)</sup> Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 3.

<sup>60)</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 120.

Christian students, laborers, the press, professors, farmers, writers and intellectuals as well as theologians in Korea in the 1970s. It is a theology of the oppressed in the Korean political situation, a theological response to the oppressors, and it is the response of the oppressed to the Korean church and its mission. Theology of minjung is a socio-political biography of Korean Christians in the 1970s. This is the way in which Korean Christians have lived and acted, prayed and participated in the Lord's Supper. It was a search for a contextual theology in Asia.<sup>61)</sup>

Minjung theology is one of liberation theologies, and it is a contextual as well as political theology, for it is to do the liberation politics of God.<sup>62)</sup> Of course, theologies like this will not sound nice, will not smell good to many; what is more, these theologies, whose basic inspiration is a faith that transforms history will not be acceptable by all. Indeed, this approach to theology from the viewpoint of the poor/Minjung and suffering of the world was destined from the very beginning to generate opposition and conflict from other sectors of society that seek to maintain the status quo or even to increase their share of economic and political powers.

Nevertheless, Korean people and Christians will continue to live, act, pray, and participate in the struggle for justice and sustainability. They will continue to search for a more nuanced contextual and political theology in Asia. What is good to know is that such a theology of liberation is now more urgent than ever and a radical aspiration for integral liberation of the poor still remains a valid vision and daunting task *in light of* the contemporary challenges from economic neoliberalism, globalization and the "Empire."<sup>63)</sup>

## Abstract

Is there a future for Third World liberation theologies in general and Korean Minjung Theology in particular? Are they not dead after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 along with the arrival of "New World Order" defined by

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<sup>61)</sup> David K. Suh, "Minjung and Theology in Korea: A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation," 18.

<sup>62)</sup> David K. Suh, "Telling a Story of Doing Theology in Asia: Korean Minjung Theology," Tainan Seminary and College/SEAGST, June 14, 2004.

<sup>63)</sup> Regarding economic neoliberalism and globalization, refer to the author's article: Yoon-Jae Chang, "Economic Globalization and the Neo-liberalism of F.A. Hayek: A Theological Critique," in *QUEST*, Vol. 2, No. 2, November 2003.

economic neoliberalism, globalization, and the "Empire"? After recapitulating the history of development of liberation theologies, particularly by recapturing the significant hermeneutical ruptures that took place in the paradigm shifts from traditional theologies to liberation theologies as well as from liberation theologies to ecological and feminist theologies, the author argues that in order to ensure the interlocking and interpenetrating connection between liberation theologies and ecological theologies, we interpret the creation tradition from a liberation perspective, and that this kind of a more nuanced contextual and political theology of liberation is now more urgent than ever as people continue to live, act, and participate in the struggle for justice and sustainability.

**Key words**

liberation, creation, nature, women, ecofeminism, sustainability, option for the poor, kingdom of God, minjung, and contextual theology