



Beyond Genesis to contexts: Liberation Theology and Ecology

Além de Gênesis para contextos: Teologia da Libertação e Ecologia

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Resumo: Este artigo contempla a experiência de ler os textos de Genesis com grupos inspirados pela Teologia da Libertação na África. O artigo aponta um problema hermenêutico e exegético interno numa Teologia da Libertação em usar textos de Genesis para fundamentar compromissos com eco teologia e eco justiça. O artigo convoca a 'Teologia da Libertação para 'sistemáticas imaginativas', lembrando que a fundamentação da prática da Teologia da Libertação e o amor, não a doutrina da criação.

Palavras-chaves: Teologia da Libertação. Ecologia. Bíblia. Genesis.

Abstract: This article contemplates the experience of reading texts from Genesis with Groups inspired by Liberation Theology in Africa. The article highlights an internal hermeneutical and exegetical problem for a Liberation Theology that uses Genesis to root commitments to eco-theology and eco-justice. The article calls for an 'imaginative systematics' in Liberation Theology, recalling that Liberation Theology is rooted in a practice of love, and not the doctrine of creation.

Keywords: Liberation Theology. Ecology. Bible. Genesis.

Introduction

This is an invitation to do theology differently, to listen to the voices of ancestors under the "shade tree"⁴³⁹, and to learn to love God and love our neighbor. Throughout the 20th century, and into the 21st century, liberation theologies have been at the forefront of new perspectives on the love of God and neighbor. The commitment to doing theology alongside the poor has revolutionized 'how we do theology'. And yet, while 'how we do theology' has changed, what theology is has remained largely the same. For example, it continues to be marginalized in scientific discourse⁴⁴⁰, and is increasingly viewed with suspicion (disregarded even) by many churches and faith

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⁴³⁹ ELA, Jean-Marc. *African Cry*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986, p. vi.

⁴⁴⁰ Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun have reflected on the 'internal' and 'external' crises facing a particular kind of 'Western academic theology'. Volf and Croasmun suggest that the marginalization of theology by social, economic and cultural shifts (the external crisis) is far less important than the 'internal crisis' described by Volf and Croasmun as the coping strategy pursued by theology of being a science (accepted or not) by academic parameters. VOLF, Miroslav & CROASMUN, Matthew. *For the Life of the World. Theology that Makes a Difference*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019, p. 45-59.

communities⁴⁴¹. I would like to locate this tension between the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of theology and also its relationship to science, and the churches and faith communities in the shifting paradigms between oral theology and *summae theologia*, between advances in critical biblical scholarship and liberation theologies still dependent on outdated religious ‘systematics’. In other words, the genesis of the problem is the book of Genesis.

In what follows, I reflect on what I heard through a series of consultations with environmental activists and church leaders in Africa⁴⁴². However, the African consultations with environmental activists and church leaders are not the focus of the critical discussion presented in this article. The problem distilled by the African consultations is one that is shared in other contexts where the Bible is read by activists and church leaders, inspired by liberation theologies, to underpin their commitments to environmental justice. In other words, what follows is not a general critique of African theology, or an analysis isolated to popular Bible reading in Africa. The contexts can be different, but similar theological problems arise in approaches taken by Liberation Theology to eco-theology and eco-justice.

1 Genesis and the genesis of the (theological) problem

It is a widely held (although not universal) assumption amongst Christians and Christian theologians that our reading and interpretation of the opening chapters of the book of Genesis helps to inform our understanding of the world and approach to environmental questions. For a long period, this was framed in technical theological language as the ‘doctrine of Creation’ and frequently interpreted through the perspective of ‘dominion theology’. ‘Domunion theology’ was a particularly popular form of ‘Western’ theology during the colonial era, which justified conquest of land and peoples in the name of a theological project of salvation⁴⁴³. It is worth noting that ‘dominion theology’ is largely absent from Orthodox (Eastern) theologies, even though these same theologies use Genesis to underpin understandings of the world and approaches to environmental questions. Elizabeth Theokritoff attributes this to the fact that in Orthodoxy, creation “is less a theory of origins than a doctrine of relationships”⁴⁴⁴.

⁴⁴¹ The marginalization of theology in churches and faith communities is the marginalization of a certain kind of theology – a critical reflection on praxis, to use Gustavo Gutierrez’s term (*A Theology of Liberation*. London, SCM Press, 2001, p. 50). – in favor of what Ruben Alves called the ‘informative propositions’ to be memorized and repeated. ALVES, Rubem. *Religião e Repressão*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2005, p. 156.

⁴⁴² I helped to organize three gatherings in Africa on the topics of Economics, Ecology and Theology at Pretoria, Nairobi and Accra with 32 participants from 17 different countries. Eleven participants were women and 10 participants were young leaders.

⁴⁴³ Luis Martinez Andrade’s study of the relationship between liberation theology and ecology (largely focusing on the influential work of Leonardo Boff) underlines Boff’s perception of the ‘dominion theology problem’ in Roman Catholic theology. Curiously, Boff’s influential ecotheology does not appear to acknowledge the underlying problem with liberation theology’s misreading and misinterpretation of the open chapters of Genesis. It does not draw Andrade’s attention either in his study, but unlike Boff Andrade is a sociologist and perhaps unfamiliar with contemporary trends in critical biblical scholarship. ANDRADE, Luis Martinez. *Ecología y Teología de la Liberación: crítica de la modernidad/colonialdad*. Barcelona: Herder, 2019.

⁴⁴⁴ THEOKRITOFF, Elizabeth. Creator and creation In Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff. *Orthodox Christian Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 63.

Sometimes Christians and Christian theologians can give the impression that understandings of the world and approaches to environmental commitments can primarily be resolved by a ‘new’ or ‘updated’ reading and interpretation of Genesis’ theory of origins. However, this fails to account for the advances in critical biblical scholarship, which alerts theology that the opening chapters of Genesis are not discussing the order of creation, nor the created order. Instead, the opening chapters of Genesis describe the political institution of the temple and the centralizing of religious and political authority in the life, ritual and geography of the temple⁴⁴⁵. In other words, the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of theology find themselves in conflict in the opening chapters of the book Genesis. The ‘how’ tries to find partnership with the narrative of a created order; the ‘what’ admits that a narrative describing the political and religious power of the temple is not an appropriate founding religious myth for discussions about the world and the environment. This largely unresolved tension has particular implications when liberation theologies address ecology, and will form the main part of our reflection.

I observed through the African consultations that liberation theologies empower the ‘how we do theology’ into the realm of the socio-political commitment to environmental justice. I have seen this in other contexts too, in Asia, Europe and Latin America. However, these same liberation theologies still struggle with the ‘what is theology’ because the founding religious ‘systematics’ is outdated (both in terms of critical biblical scholarship and scientific understandings of the world which permeate human perceptions of the world)⁴⁴⁶. This is not a specifically African problem. It is a problem more generally within liberation Christianity. In relation to liberation theology, the focus of this article, the problem has very specific roots within liberation Christianity and liberation theologies⁴⁴⁷.

It is worth noting at this point that in the emerging Latin American liberation theology, biblical scholars placed a greater emphasis on ‘Exodus’ as the founding religious narrative of a Christianity of the poor. This work was, in the words of Carlos Mesters, rooted in the most up-to-date European biblical scholarship at the time⁴⁴⁸. It also allowed liberation theologies neatly to sidestep the book of Genesis by making the distinction between the historicity of the Exodus narrative and the literary (primarily poetic) genres of the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. This situation has proved to be unsustainable in the 21st century for three major reasons.

Firstly, often Latin American liberation theologians continue to defend texts from Exodus as the founding myth for a Christianity of the poor, despite the fact that critical biblical scholarship has again moved on to new discoveries which question this late 20th century interpretation. The criticisms of the positions adopted by liberation theology’s biblical scholars with relation to ‘the poor’ and the Exodus narrative are only

⁴⁴⁵ RIBEIRO, Osvaldo Luiz. *Homo Faber: o contexto da ‘criação’ em Gênesis 1:1-3*. Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2015 and TSUMARA, David. *Creation and Destruction: a reappraisal of the chaokampf theory in the Old Testament*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005. It is hinted at in earlier ‘classic’ texts by Gerhard von Rad and more recently by Walter Bruggemann.

⁴⁴⁶ As mentioned in the introduction, this is not a critique *per se* of African theology. Rather, it is a problem that appears in the different contexts that explicitly assume a liberation theology approach.

⁴⁴⁷ Michael Lowy draws the distinction between liberation Christianity and liberation theology. LOWY, Michael. *The War of the Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*. London: Verso, 1997.

⁴⁴⁸ MESTERS, Carlos. “Como se faz Teologia Bíblica Hoje no Brasil” In *A Bíblia como Memória dos Pobres*. Estudos Bíblicos Vol. 1. 1987, p. 7-19.

one aspect of this critical biblical scholarship. According to Walter Brueggemann, within critical biblical scholarship there is now increasing agreement that the form of the Hebrew Bible is a response to the Babylonian Exile, not a testimony of 'Exodus from Egypt' as many liberation theologians have continued to insist⁴⁴⁹.

Secondly, the increasing merging of social justice movements with environmental justice agendas has forced Christians to reflect critically on their readings and interpretations of the world and commitment to the environment. Invariably, groups inspired by liberation theologies fall back on the opening chapters of the book of Genesis to justify their biblical commitment to eco-theology and eco-justice. Without access to critical biblical scholarship, which the liberation theologians ignored due to their commitment to the Exodus narrative, the readings and interpretations of the opening chapters of Genesis are influenced by an outdated (European) 'systematics' or, at best, by a literary (poetic) analysis of the created order.

I have written about 'systematics' to this point, without fully addressing its context and content. It may seem somewhat strange to highlight an outdated 'systematics' when discussing liberation theology. General perception is that it is a 'contextual', not 'systematic' theology. Some liberation theologians have even on occasion also argued this position, partly to mark a deliberate turn away from the universalisms of the Enlightenment paradigm, and partly in an attempt to bring it into closer dialogue with the increasingly fragmented social sciences.

However, Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrinos' edited volume, *Mysterium Liberationis*, laid this ghost to rest. Sobrino describes liberation theology's 'systematization' as a "greater theological rigor"⁴⁵⁰. Juan Luis Segundo's careful 'systematics' – "a point of no return" – points to the missed potential of a liberation theology with greater theological rigor⁴⁵¹. The observations from Ellacuria, Sobrino and Segundo highlight tensions within liberation theology that often relate to the use of a new hermeneutic in old systematic wineskins. In other words, liberation theology as a contextual theology focuses on the 'how' of theology, liberation theology as a 'systematics' focuses on the 'what' of theology.

Thirdly, the rise of interest in interfaith dialogue and co-operation has encouraged Christians to rediscover the book of Genesis as an interfaith text. The critical biblical scholarship enhances this pluralist, subaltern approach through the long-established scholarship around the Mesopotamian origins of the Genesis stories. Genesis does not belong to one religious tradition (Jewish, Christian or even Judeo-Christian), but to a plurality of religions not all of which are monotheist. In addition to this Mesopotamian pluralism, a monotheist pluralism is introduced in chapter 12 of Genesis. The story of Abraham, as father of all the nations⁴⁵², and common denominator to the monotheist religions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, is an increasingly important hermeneutic as Christians grapple with their understandings of relations with people of other (and no) faiths. The readings and interpretations of the story of Abraham have helped to inform a wider reading of the book of Genesis,

⁴⁴⁹ BRUGGEMANN, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, p. 74.

⁴⁵⁰ ELLACURIA, Ignacio & SOBRINO, Jon (eds) *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993, p. x.

⁴⁵¹ SEGUNDO, Juan Luis. *The Liberation of Theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976.

⁴⁵² Definite issues with patriarchy with this approach.

including stories not related to Abraham, using a similar hermeneutical approach. The consequence of this ‘turn to the story of Abraham’ is that the other parts of the book of Genesis, notably the opening chapters are read and interpreted in the same manner (historicity returns mixed with poetics), again falling back on interpretations contrary to advances in critical biblical scholarship.

2 Liberation ‘systematics’ and Ecology

Understanding the complex issues associated with reading and interpreting the opening chapters of Genesis and a liberation ‘systematics’ – the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of theology – is a starting point for understanding Christian approaches to ecology. In light of this observation, I would like to discuss some of the current approaches used in the African Consultations in relation to the opening chapters of Genesis. Again, I would emphasize that the examples looked at can be found in other liberation contexts too.

This exercise might best be considered as a “clearing of space” for which Ivan Petrella advocates in any liberation theology methodology⁴⁵³. Such a “clearing of space” permits liberation theology to overcome established modes of thinking. Through this approach, Petrella points to Roberto Mangabeira Unger’s theory of institutional imagination – a step-by-step construction of alternatives. This is particularly helpful in the ‘Genesis case’ in Western and liberation theologies because readings and interpretations are rooted in a particular European ‘systematics’ which ignores the advances of critical biblical scholarship. Such readings and interpretations continue to be imprisoned in the ‘gaps’ offered by current science. In this case, the ‘how’ – a commitment to environmental justice is predicated on an outdated ‘what’ – an established mode of thinking related to the opening chapters of the book of Genesis. This enables both science and the churches to continue ignore ‘imaginative systematics’, and it forces liberation ‘systematics’ to give continued emphasis to the ‘how’ of theology without facing the ‘what’ of theology.

While I focus on Genesis, particularly the opening chapters of the book, to understand some of the ongoing tensions between ‘how’ and ‘what’ of theology, and the relationship of theology and science in the climate change debates, it is important to recognize that a wide variety of biblical texts can inspire Christian commitments to environmental justice. Some of these texts include suggested at the African Consultations included Deuteronomy 28:1-11 (Moses speaking of God’s blessings on the people of God), Isaiah 65:17-25 (The promise of new heavens and a new earth), Amos 5-8 (The earth bearing the consequences of sin, of idolatry and injustice). In the New Testament, texts included Luke 10:25-41 (Who is our neighbor?), Matthew 6 and Luke 4:16-27 (which recall the Jubilee of Leviticus 25) and John 10: 10 (which speaks of life in abundance). This is not an exhaustive list. It simply highlights some other key biblical texts from the African context, which underpin Christian commitments to environmental justice.

The texts are in some ways disparate in terms of genre, composition and redaction. Not all of these biblical texts directly address themes of the environment; however, Christians use them in addressing the ‘how’ of theological commitment to environmental justice. In these instances, it is possible to ignore the ‘what’ of theology

⁴⁵³ PETRELLA, Ivan. *The Future of Liberation Theology: An argument and a manifest*. London: SCM, 2006, p. 94.

in order to proceed with a new hermeneutics (commitment to environmental justice) in an old systematic wineskin (a 'Western' doctrine of salvation history). It is beyond the scope of this article, but worth noting that the biblical texts chosen in the African context highlight an unconscious 'systematics' that is loosely predicated on a classical 'Western' doctrines of salvation history (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Salvation)⁴⁵⁴.

Alongside biblical texts, in Africa I heard some themes (or motifs) which inspired Christian commitments to environmental justice. Some of these themes (or motifs) are inspired by particularly broad or creative readings and interpretations of biblical texts, although without explicit reference to specific passages. Again, this places readings, interpretations and commitments in the field of 'how' and gives emphasis to hermeneutics in place of systematics.

For example, themes (or motifs) drew on pictures of abundant life and prosperity where towns and fields, children and crops are blessed; herds, flocks, fruit baskets and breadbaskets are blessed; storehouses are filled; and the earth is blessed. Productive labor and meaningful work; self-determination and not slavery; a place of joy and delight where there is no weeping or crying. People will build houses, live in them, plant vineyards, and eat from them. Work will not be in vain. Children will not be doomed to misfortune. There are powerful, indeed inspiring, readings and interpretations of biblical themes (and motifs) and they contribute greatly to Christian commitments to environmental justice and liberation. However, they bear no relation to a scientific conversation about climate change, nor do they in any way engage with critical biblical scholarship. They depend entirely on Mangabeira Unger's critique of 'established modes of thinking', or Rubem Alves' 'informative propositions'.

This is also the case, moreover, with readings and interpretations of the opening chapters of Genesis. For example, I heard from different people – environmental activists and church leaders – readings and interpretations beginning with chaos, and seeing a beautiful creation coming out of the dark cosmos, and light springing out. This kind of reading and interpretation draws conclusions based on a particular 'systematics' and does not do justice to the context or content of the biblical text according to critical biblical scholarship. As mentioned above, if, as the critical biblical scholarship alerts theology, the opening chapters of Genesis are about the political and religious power of the institution of the temple, why do Christians continue to read and interpret the story 'historically' or 'poetically' as one of the origins of the world? Furthermore, this 'systematic' approach to Genesis runs counter to Ivan Petrella's call for 'clearing space' to overcome established modes of thinking. Instead, Genesis becomes the reference text for Christians to see that God is inviting human beings to be part of the work being done on earth, as part of a Christian calling.

⁴⁵⁴ John Behr concisely explores 'salvation history' in Christian theology from an Eastern perspective. He concludes that many of 'systematics' problems with 'salvation history' arise when theology uses an Enlightenment (modern) concept of history within 'systematics'. Not surprisingly, he advocates a recovery of the concept of 'Christian history' from Patristic sources. His critique is in line with other Orthodox theologians, some of whom – David Bentley Hart, for example - even question the very need for a salvation history at all within Christian theology. BEHR, John. *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death*. New York: St Vladimir's University Press, 2006.

3 Liberation Theology, Love and Ecology

Liberation theology's commitment to doing theology alongside the poor has revolutionized 'how we do theology'. It has changed 'how we do theology'. It is now time for an 'imaginative systematics', which can 'clear spaces' for a theology on the point of no return. This is particularly important for Christians and for Christian commitments to eco-theology and eco-justice. An outdated 'systematics' for reading and interpreting Genesis can no longer sustain 'what theology is' in the face of scientific discourse or even suspicious churches. Instead of defending a story of creation based on an outdated systematics, Liberation Theology can help to discern that 'imaginative systematics' depends more on love than creation. In other words, there is widespread consensus amongst Christian theologians that Christian commitments are rooted in explorations of love (and not misconceptions about outdated systematics of an order of creation or created order)⁴⁵⁵.

This has particular implications within Liberation Theology, which has helpfully drawn attention to the links between 'materialist theology' and poor and marginalized bodies⁴⁵⁶. In other words, a disembodied theology of love, largely the responsibility of Augustine and his influence on Western and Liberation Theologies, often leads to misconceptions about the embodied nature of love – God's love and human love. Augustine's unhelpful legacy is to set in opposition a 'spiritual love' with the 'sins of love of bodies'⁴⁵⁷. In 20th century theology, Anders Nygren's influential study and distinction between Eros and Agape as different types of love, largely draws on Augustine's legacy and helped to popularize distinctions between 'Christian love' and 'worldly love', between the right kind of love and wrong kind of love, between Godly love and humanly love, between spiritual and material loves⁴⁵⁸. That both Nygren and Augustines' theological visions are drawn from a particular *summae theological* and not an embodied love creates problems for them. Liberation systematics – as a step-by-step construction of alternatives – looks to root Christian commitments to eco-theology and eco-justice in love, and in an embodied love that has frequently been marginalized by other (outdated) forms of systematics.

Christian theology posits that we love God, other human beings and material things⁴⁵⁹. Love is embodied by God incarnate, human life and the life of the world. It is embodied love that ultimately commits liberation theology to eco-theology and eco-

⁴⁵⁵ JEANROND, Werner. *A Theology of Love*. London: T & T Clark, 2010, p. 25.

⁴⁵⁶ ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella. *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversion in Sex, Gender and Politics*. London: Routledge, 2000.

⁴⁵⁷ Theologians as different as Werner Jeanrond and Marcella Althaus-Reid (amongst others) have profoundly questioned Augustine's theology of love and its legacy in Western and Liberation theologies. Jeanrond ponders if the totemic Church Father (at least in Western and Liberation Theologies) is 'meaningless and problematic' for today's question about love and freedom (2010, p. 45). Althaus-Reid is altogether more provocative (liberative?) asking if we (Queer theologians) need to put our hand under the skirt of the Augustine God in an embodied spirituality of love (ALTHAUS-REID, Marcella, *The Queer God*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 23).

⁴⁵⁸ NYGREN, Anders, *Agape and Eros: The Christian Idea of Love*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

⁴⁵⁹ By material things, I mean that which is material based on liberation theologies materialist approach to the world. This immediately discards Greek Platonic theological interpretations of spiritual realities, and roots any Christian commitment to the environment in a materialist love of the world. In this instance, it does not refer to materialism as a product of the Capitalist religion as outlined by Walter Benjamin and important to the liberation theologies of Jung Mo Sung and Franz Hinkelammert.

justice. Enrique Dussel, inspired by Jacques Derrida, calls this the politics of affective links. In other words, liberative commitments to the environment are linked not only to rational choice, but more importantly to affective impulses⁴⁶⁰. This turns the ‘what of theology’ into explorations of love – love of God and love of neighbor. Underpinned by a materialist approach, it is possible to expand the Christian understandings of love of neighbor to material things beyond human relationships. We love our dogs and cats, and fish. We love the trees and the fields, the mountains and the valleys. We love the water and the air. In a relationship of love, we commit to our environment as our material neighbor.

Andrew Linzey calls this ‘reverence for life’; a fundamental theological concept strangely absent from centuries of Christian theology, as he notes⁴⁶¹. ‘Reverence for life’ has carried humanist projects and theologies, including Liberation Theologies that defend a Christian humanism⁴⁶². However, the danger with humanism and Christian humanism is the anthropocentric approach in a world which is not necessarily anthropocentric⁴⁶³. Linzey finds this dangerous anthropocentric approach in Liberation Theology by demonstrating that the work of Gustavo Gutierrez focusses on *human* liberation. Linzey’s work, sympathetic to Liberation Theology, nonetheless critiques a ‘what of liberation theology’ imprisoned within a humanist worldview.

Linzey’s work serves as a ‘clearing of space’ for Liberation Theology. It encourages institutional imagination – step-by-step change – that overcomes established modes of thinking. Insights from his work have been taken up by liberation theologians in Latin America, most notably Luiz Carlos Susin. Susin’s insightful book (written with Gilmar Zampieri), *A Vida dos Outros* [The Life of the Others] demonstrably moves Liberation Theology beyond the humanist world view, and beyond theologies that derive from exclusively anthropocentric concerns⁴⁶⁴. This is increasingly helpful for theology if it is to engage with scientists (and politicians) in debates and commitments to climate justice. It enables theology not just to change hermeneutics (the ‘how of theology’) but to go beyond the point of no return advocated by Juan Luis Segundo (the ‘what of theology’). Theology, in its Christian form, is about love, not creation. Christians commit to eco-theology and eco-justice not through a theology of ‘care for creation’ derived from humanist anthropocentrism and outdated (European) systematics of a particular doctrine of Creation and of Salvation history. In a liberated theology, love draws out the principles of interrelationship with God, beings and the material world. The reverence for the life of others leads into an understanding that life is not restricted to humankind, and that humankind is interdependent with

⁴⁶⁰ DUSSEL, Enrique. *Paulo de Tarso na Filosofia e Política Atual e Outros Ensaio*. São Paulo: Paulus, 2013, p. 99.

⁴⁶¹ Linzey, Andrew. *Animal Theology*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995, p. 3.

⁴⁶² The major work on Christian humanism in the 20th century is that of Jacques Maritain. In liberation theology, Leonardo Boff, José Miguez Bonino, among others, have advocated for Christian humanism.

⁴⁶³ Linzey, 1995, p. 63.

⁴⁶⁴ Luiz Carlos Susin’s book (written with Gilmar Zampieri) makes a monumental effort to overcome humanism and anthropocentrism in Christian theology. Sadly, however, the book falls back on a presentation of Genesis as a story of origins and created order (SUSIN, Luiz Carlos & ZAMPIERI, Gilmar. *A Vida dos Outros: Ética e Teologia da Libertação Animal*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2015, p. 197). This leaves the book with inherent tensions between the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of liberation theology, and perhaps serves to demonstrate just how difficult it is to produce a truly liberative liberation theology not held back either by outdated (European) systematics, or by outdated use of sources from critical biblical scholarship.

the life of others be it animals (as Linzey and Susin & Zampieri advocate) or indeed the wider material world (as Anne Primavesi has argued⁴⁶⁵).

Conclusion

Inspired by my encounters with African environmental activists and church leaders, I have tried to set out an invitation to do theology differently, to listen to the voices of ancestors under the “shade tree”, and to learn to love God and love our neighbor (understanding neighbor in a materialist approach to the world). Throughout the 20th century, the commitment to doing theology alongside the poor has revolutionized ‘how we do theology’. I have argued that Liberation Theology now needs to revolutionize the ‘what of theology’.

It can do this in two ways. Firstly, Liberation Theologies need to discard outdated (European) systematics, including where it appears in the ‘voice of the poor’, that place the doctrine of Creation at the center of Christian eco-theology and eco-justice. The doctrine of Creation, inherited from Western theology (particularly the ‘dominion theology’ of colonizing) but with a continuing presence in Liberation Theologies, perpetrates anthropocentrism.

Scientists reject this view of the world in contemporary debates on climate change and by continuing to use this outdated theological doctrine, theology is hampered in its attempts to engage ‘the science of climate change’. In other words, it is not about *us* (humans), it is about the life of others.

Secondly, Liberation Theologies need to reengage with contemporary critical biblical scholarship with regard to the text of Genesis. If it is now clear that the choice of texts from Exodus as an organizing principle of commitment to the poor is no longer sustainable in light of the ‘post-exilic consensus’ in biblical studies, equally a historic and poetic reading and interpretation of Genesis as a creation story need to be challenged in light of critical biblical studies.

Clearing space – a task that Ivan Petrella suggests is necessary and urgent for Liberation Theologies in the 21st century – in this way liberates theology to engage scientists and faith communities with a theology of love rather than a theology of the created order (or even an order of creation). Love is at the center of Christian theology, not doctrines of creation. However, Western and Liberation Theologies also need to confront the Augustinian legacy and turn to embodied (materialist) theologies of love thereby shifting the paradigms of theology to under the ‘shade tree’. It moves theology beyond a *summa theologia* of an outdated (European) systematics. It reengages theology with advances in critical biblical. Moreover, it removes the genesis of the problem in the book of Genesis.

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⁴⁶⁵ PRIMAVESI, Anne. *Sacred Gaia: Holistic Theology and Earth System Science*. London: Routledge, 2000.



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