

# Liberation Theology and Sexuality

*Edited by*  
**Marcella Althaus-Reid**



# LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND SEXUALITY

*This book is timely and well-planned and more such books are needed as theologians engaged with the Gospel in Latin America have developed new themes and new challenges. The authors reflect well such type of contemporary liberation theology and the editor is an internationally well-known theologian. Students, teachers and researchers in the field should find this volume invaluable.*

Mario I. Aguilar  
Director of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics  
St. Mary's College  
University of St. Andrews, UK

*Liberation Theology and Sexuality* is a book about 'doing Liberation Theology in Latin America' in the Twenty First Century. The style of doing theology remains the same, but this book reflects the work of a new generation of liberation theologians developing a theology that offers a wider and more complex critique of reality, with new perspectives on issues of sexuality, race, gender, culture, globalization and new forms of popular religiosity.

*Liberation Theology and Sexuality* shows how Christianity in Latin America needs to take into account issues concerning sexuality and poverty, together with traditional religiosity and culture when reflecting on the construction of Christian faith and identity in the continent. For the first time, *Liberation Theology and Sexuality* presents a unique combination of Latin American theologians from more than one generation, reflecting on depth on the ongoing project of the liberation of theology from economic and sexual oppressions in the continent.

*¿Se acuerdan, queridos? ¡Qué épocas! Dictadura, miseria, represión y nosotros en la iglesia militante. Nosotros, pensando en Bonhoeffer. Nosotros, leyendo a Gutiérrez. Nosotros, mientras Cardenal leía salmos con los campesinos en Nicaragua. Nosotros haciendo obra en las comunidades de base, releendo los profetas ... (pero el corazón siempre estaba entre paréntesis; el corazón, en el armario, esperando tiempos mejores: otros corazones, otros amores y otras liberaciones).*

# Liberation Theology and Sexuality

Edited by

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to the women of the Buenos Aires Sexual Rights Collective *Ají de Pollo*: Paula Viturro, Lohana Berkins and Mónica D'Uva. *Y la lucha continua, compañeras.*



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# Introduction

Marcella Althaus-Reid

The doing of a Liberation Theology grounded on issues of sexuality, and specifically in queer theory and sexuality, has been and still is a much-debated issue inside and outside the Church and academic circles in Latin America. Surprisingly, although the discussions have been fierce at times, arguments concerning the legitimacy of doing a theology of liberation grounded on people's own sexual life and struggles are scarce. Historically, liberationists may have considered issues concerning gender and the transgression of heterosexual norms a deviance and distraction from the class struggle. Most of the pioneer theologians of the 1970s, Catholics and Protestants alike, concurred in a naïve Marxist understanding that the social revolution was going to expunge every single area of injustice from our lives, including injustices relating to gender and race. While Liberation Theologians developed ideals of the new family, and the new man and woman who would live in this new society, these ideal pictures did not envisage any substantial changes in the way we understand loving relationships in society. In fact, they did not even consider the traditional patterns of family life and sexuality already present amongst the different Latin American cultures. So far as Liberation Theology was concerned, the Kingdom of God on earth was going to be composed of men who were men, and women who were women, without introducing any hermeneutical suspicion about the construction of gender and sexuality within Christianity itself. The concept of sexuality and gender outside the realm of the private, but as part of a structure of sin, took at least another decade to be developed.

In spite of Liberation Theology being, by definition, a dynamic theology representing an orthopraxis, that is, a Church and a dogma in movement, the fact is that over time Latin American Liberation Theology also developed its own orthodoxy. It is this orthodoxy, or the *guardia vieja teológica* ('theological old guard') responsible for it, that are generally identified by those who claim that Liberation Theology has lost its way. Indeed, the criticism has some force: the *guardia vieja* has lost its way, hermeneutically and thematically. The hermeneutical circle ceased to enquire, to distrust the accommodation of ideological discourse into theology; and the 'issue-based' theology pre-selected and actively banned the issues that were relevant to the people although inconvenient for the churches. Paradoxically, the liberationist orthodoxy, as it exists now, was not necessarily created by a core of

Latin American theologians but rather by those in the West who wanted to canonize the liberationist praxis and discourse from the 1970s. There are reasons for this, including the tendency among North Atlantic Christian scholars to fix the theological agenda according to a colonial perspective which included the nativization of sexual and racial stereotypes. However, as this collection of essays shows, doing 'Liberation Theology and sexuality' is an occasion for Latin American thinkers to bring together issues of theology, culture, sexuality and class analysis.

Interestingly, Liberation Theology and sexuality is one of the more grounded examples of theological praxis. It does not arise from within academia, which originally would not consider these issues to be part of the liberationist agenda: it comes from the people, excluded from Church discourses for centuries in Latin America. Issues of sexuality, and specifically issues pertaining to the struggle for identity and the rights of those who do not conform to heterosexual norms, come from basic ecclesial communities and the urban poor, as well as from academics who have continued doing theology that requires listening to the sexually excluded. There has been, for a long time, a kind of closet Liberation Theology developed at the fringes of the churches that has been closer to popular Latin American spirituality and culture than the orthodox liberationist discourses.

The authenticity of Liberation Theology and sexuality can be ignored but not denied. Moreover, it is not the exclusive domain of second- (or third-) generation liberation theologians: Latin America has had theological pioneers in this area since the 1970s. Two of them have contributed articles in this collection. Jaci Maraschin and Otto Maduro are first-generation liberationists who have pioneered a radical theology of liberation in dialogue with many elements that today might be considered part of a queer theology. In their work, issues concerning the body of the poor, sexuality and traditional religions and culture are combined with political analysis.

As a Latin American sexual theologian, my work in the area of queer studies and Liberation Theology has always been developed in dialogue with compatriots. Doing theology and sexuality is part of a community reflection, and this book is an example of that. This collection of essays not only comes from the reflections of Latin American theologians, but is in part the result of some years of sharing and discussing issues of Liberation Theology and sexuality amongst the contributors, both personally and through the Internet. Informally, we have called our group *La Virtual QTL* ('The Virtual Queer Liberation Theology Group'), a title that suggests a tango ensemble rather than an academic association, no doubt reflecting the presence of several Argentinians within its membership. However that may be, this informal network has produced collective reflections on Liberation Theology and sexual dissidence, while at the same time sharing research and other everyday issues of our lives as academics and/or ministers.

Many of the articles in this book come from members of *La Virtual*: Hugo Córdova Quero, Jaci Maraschin, Mario Ribas, Claudio Carvalhaes, Roberto

González, Norberto D'Amico, and myself. Others are Latin American colleagues whose participation in the exchange of ideas in recent years has been important: Otto Maduro, Ivan Petrella, Nancy Cardoso Pereira and Elina Vuola. This collection of essays is an interaction of more than two generations of Latin American liberationists, nurtured in different political situations, church traditions and even cultural contexts. Taken together, they represent Liberation Theology in motion: dynamic, unsettling, still struggling with orthodoxy while engaging in the broad struggle for justice that includes sexual justice.

Liberationists doing a sexual theology are somehow difficult to classify. They may be considered part of a lesbian, gay, bisexual/transsexual theological movement, and yet they also exhibit the peculiarity of the Latin American way of doing theology. There is almost always an analysis of production, based on Marx, which makes them consider the links between consumerism, desire and production in the present global capitalist expansion. Although liberationists will always be primarily political theologians, issues of culture and popular religiosity are equally important. The use of post-colonial analysis in Liberation Theology reflects the need for a deeper understanding of the sexual identity and spirituality of Latin American people. These issues are also considered within the framework of European Continental philosophy. Moreover, reflection on sexuality has important implications for systematic theology, and pastoral theology and spirituality, two fundamental pillars of Liberation Theology. These essays confront us with twenty-first-century liberationist action and reflection, which come not only from an alliance of struggles for justice, but more decisively, by an alliance in the continuous task of unveiling ideological formations of sexuality, class, gender and race in theology and in Church praxis. At the end of the day, a change in sexuality *per se* would not be a revolution, but a change in the production of sexual epistemologies would help to denounce and transform the roots of many mechanisms of power and control.

It is my hope that this book might signal the beginning of a friendship and wider dialogue between different generations of liberationists, doing a political and sexual theology of liberation. This would enable Christian people of Latin America to continue the struggle for justice and peace by subverting a totalitarian sexual theology that is still responsible for much suffering and oppression amongst our people, amongst our poor in particular.



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## Chapter 1

# ‘Let Them Talk ...!’ Doing Liberation Theology from Latin American Closets

Marcella Althaus-Reid

Lambe lambe  
Um beijo seu  
Revelação

Boca a boca  
Um beijo seu  
A salvação

...  
na boca do povo  
un beijo seu  
revolução

...  
Deixa que digam!  
E so um beijo  
De homen com homem  
Mulher com mulher  
Um beijo qualquer.<sup>1</sup>

Nancy Cardoso Pereira (1998: 116)

In Santiago de Chile in 1992, a group of people marched in the streets of the capital city, to demonstrate against the violation of human rights and the atrocities of the Pinochet regime, which left the country with thousands of murdered and disappeared. Inspired by the *Informe de Verdad y Reconciliación*<sup>2</sup> (the Chilean Document on Truth and Reconciliation), a group of transvestites, homosexuals, bisexuals and lesbians decided to take the streets of Santiago by storm, to show their solidarity with current human rights organizations. They also wanted to demonstrate the links between a homophobic society and a repressive military one. The march was organized by Chilean citizens and socio-sexual activists, denouncing a terrorist state, while at the same time proclaiming the need for a democracy based on participation and respect for human life in its political, religious, racial and sexual diversity. However, according to press reports from the time, the



demonstration received little sympathy from human rights activists in general. Señora Sola Sierra, founder of the *Agrupacion de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos* (Association of Relatives from Detained-Disappeared People in Chile) was aghast at the 'bunch of faggots' in the streets (Núñez Gonzalez 2004: 23).<sup>3</sup> She considered that a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transvestite group of people demonstrating for human rights belittled and ridiculed the political struggle of the mothers of the disappeared. Thus part of a published letter written by the Chilean writer Pedro Lemebel recalling the occasion reads as follows:

... the bunch of faggots (*ramillete de locas*) in the procession had full make up on their faces and used all their finery as if the occasion was a carnival. All the poof art folk were there, parading in *La Alameda*, and shouting 'Justice! Justice! We want justice!' ... Next day, all the newspapers gave plenty space to the homosexual [sic] march, which, with their scandalous behaviour, only helped to obscure the denunciation against [state crimes committed with] impunity.

(Núñez Gonzalez 2004: 26)

It is somehow paradoxical and revealing to find that the name that Lemebel gave to the 'bunch of faggots' in Spanish is a *ramillete de locas*. '*Ramillete*' means a small bunch of flowers; '*locas*' means 'mad women' but also is an adjective given to sexually deviant people, including women and gays transgressing gender and sexual codes. For instance, in Argentina during the dictatorial regime which also cost us at least 30,000 disappeared, *locas* was the name of ridicule given to the Mother of the Disappeared by the press of the regime. The paradox involved in the use of the term *locas* both for queers as for the mothers of Plaza de Mayo thus becomes clear. As the gay, lesbian, bi and transvestite movements in Chile started to organize their political aims, their opponents did not realize that they all faced a surprisingly common struggle. To start with, the regime of the times considered all as deviant. They were abnormal, not only politically, but on grounds of gender and sexuality as well as religiously. They stood up to challenge the regimes of normality imposed by a criminal state informed by some Christian codes of submissiveness. For a fascist mentality in Latin America imposing tight control on people's lives and thoughts during the Cold War, the difference between a mother as a political activist, thus challenging a gender role, and a transvestite asking for human rights was negligible.

It is sad to realize that there was little solidarity between political activists and socio-sexual activists at the time. Perhaps the only solidarity experienced was achieved in the midst of common suffering and persecution because, after all, heterosexuals and queers died together in the jails of the dictatorial regimes of Chile, Uruguay or Argentina.

However, there was also little solidarity on the part of the militant churches, informed by Liberation Theology, with the people who lived in fear and suffered persecutions and violence due to their sexual and gender options.

The brutal military regimes of the 1970s were profoundly heterosexual regimes. That was manifested in their organization and expectations of what elsewhere I have called 'decency': a 'Christian way of life' manifested by the length of women's skirts, approved haircuts for men, and strict gender codes applied across everyday life. Moreover, many human rights activists, sometimes distinguished religious leaders, were subjected to state campaigns that accused them of 'homosexuality'. This was an attempt to undermine their work in the defence of human rights by linking it to disapproved behaviour and illegal activities. But the question we need to ask must be more specific concerning Liberation Theology. We need to consider how it was possible that a highly sophisticated, critical theology, its characteristic feature being the courage that leads religious and lay people to martyrdom, was never able to consider issues of sexual ideology in theology? I personally do not believe that liberationists were blind to issues of sexual ideology in theology. We need to consider the extent of the skills on which Liberation Theology was based: Ricoeurian and Marxist influences on biblical hermeneutics and an ecclesiology inspired by Freirean thought.

In reality, the answer to our question must be complex. First of all, we need to acknowledge that Liberation Theology does not arise from a homogeneous church or doctrinal body. Varying from country to country, the militant churches were made up of a mixture of Roman Catholic dioceses, historical Protestant churches, and also some Pentecostals and Evangelical churches such as the Baptists, particularly in Nicaragua.<sup>4</sup> The Pentecostal Church of God of Buenos Aires, a church informed by issues of social justice, was part of the original group of churches that founded the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) in 1982. Therefore, the various militant churches came from organizations with very different sexual and gender codes, as well as different traditions of political participation. For instance, some militant churches, such as the Church of God, did not ordain women, while a church with a long tradition of women's ministerial equality and social action, such as the Salvation Army, abstained from involvement in any form of political theological praxis.

In general, all theological reflection on sexuality and gender, during the early years of Liberation Theology, were done in private. Liberationists were too sophisticated to ignore these issues and, as I shall claim later, there may have been an underground sexual theology in the making. Even the argument that gender and sexuality were ignored because Liberation Theology was done by mostly male, celibate priests, who as a group are notorious for their sexual conflicts, does not make sense. It has been suggested that in Liberation Theology people's issues sooner or later became the focus of theological reflection. One can be tempted to think that the conflicts over celibacy and homosexual desire amongst the priests should have been addressed with the same theological honesty that was required of political reflection.

But what about the people in base communities, for instance? Even if the first generation of (male, celibate priest) theologians did not take those issues

on board, people in the communities may have done so. That may be true in an idealized understanding of how theologies perform, and specifically Liberation Theology. Common people do not have ecclesiastical power. They are not the ones required to rethink the organization of their dioceses or parishes, or approve the theological programmes to be taught in Latin American universities or seminaries. They do not publish books or have space in the media. To unveil political or sexual ideologies in church and theology requires some power, or alliances of power, to be in place. The natural alliance of power should have been with the existent movements defending gays and poor transvestites forced into prostitution and persecuted by the state, but that did not happen. Freire should perhaps have said that for change to come about these issues had to become part of the formation of new priests and ministers, and the ministry needed to be opened up to people of different genders and sexualities.

### **Sexuality and Liberationists: Some Arguments**

To reflect on the main issues arising from the historical silence of Liberation Theology on sexuality, we must address a few foundational issues. Briefly, we need to consider the following points, which should have been part of the Latin American hermeneutical circle:

- 1 Issues concerning a post-colonial reflection on indigenous sexual and economic cultures. There was a lack of reflection on the process of church formation and the sexual evangelization of the Latin American people, and how this related to the economic disorganization of the existing efficient agricultural structures.
- 2 The early influence of the work of Enrique Dussel, a distinguished Marxist theologian and philosopher of liberation, who homologized capitalist desire with gay desire. The hermeneutical work of J. Severino Croatto on original sin was connected with Dussel's homophobia.
- 3 Finally, the development of a type of feminist Liberation Theology which was complementary and did not question the ideological formation of sexuality. The development of Mariology (and Mariology of Liberation) may be related to this.

### **Evangelization and Sexuality in the Americas**

One of the causes of the public theological indifference to issues of sexuality in Liberation Theology was a serious lack of post-colonial analysis. Liberationists did not research or reflect in any depth on the sexual indoctrination which accompanied the so-called evangelization of Latin America. There is a wealth of archival material and studies in this area,

especially on issues of sexuality and the (hetero)sexual indoctrination relating to the Jesuits in Latin America.<sup>5</sup> These studies include issues of the sexual imposition of the new power structure of the Americas made by Conquistadores and priests, for example in the work done by the Paraguayan theologian Graciela Chamorro. There has also been specific work done on issues of the legislation of marriage and education according to the sexual laws of colonial Latin America. Moreover, there are testimonies of indigenous people who fiercely struggled against diverse issues such as Christian prohibitions on marrying certain members of a family, or monogamy, or marriage itself.

It has been part of the paradox of Liberation Theology in Latin America that it could not recognize the need to extend the analysis of the formation of ideological apparatuses beyond the field of political economy into wider cultural impositions in church and theology. However, love and affectivity as emotional exchanges occur under frames of ideological construction. The hegemonic absolutization of Western heterosexual manifestations of love in Latin American society (such as the legal status of Western marriage) is highly institutionalized. This goes beyond personal and individual expressions of love, for it includes also, apart from the traditional theological discourses, the formation, organization and expectations of Christian institutions, where love is the point of all convergence of the churches' praxis. Christianity in Latin America has been a sexual enterprise: it de-legitimized public structures and interfered in the domestic spaces of affectionate exchanges. Missionaries used linguistic strategies to enforce their own sexual theologies onto the natives, for instance the concepts of a fallen nature in women after Eve's sin, the idea of women as sexual temptresses, and the representation of a virtuous heterosexual masculinity as Christian.

Graciela Chamorro, in her original book *Teología Guaraní* (2002), has specifically reflected on the construction of womanhood and manhood amongst the Jesuit missions in Paraguay, particularly the work of translation by Ruiz de Montoya, the creator of the Guaraní-Spanish lexicon, which was systematized in dictionaries, grammar books and catechisms (Chamorro 2002: 31). According to Chamorro, there is a strong (hetero)sexual European matrix in the reconceptualization of the original Guaraní words for 'man' and 'woman'. Montoya resignified the original indigenous concepts by introducing a qualification of woman as bad, and man as good.<sup>6</sup> The Guaraní Nation was forced to reconsider their own language with new theological connotations, thus introducing a whole sexist cosmovision into the everyday vocabulary of the Americas. Chamorro points out how a Guaraní expression meaning 'a dishonest man' was translated into Spanish as 'an adulterous man'. The phrase meaning 'to desire a woman' was linguistically deformed to mean 'a woman inciting a man to have a carnal relationship with him'. The pervasiveness and extension of the processes of sexual colonization in Latin America need to be considered as playing a key part in the theological enterprise of the Roman Catholic Church. The post-colonial insecurity of

Liberation Theology meant that the liberationists were in denial of their own hermeneutical circle. What happened to the continual assertion that Liberation Theology was to be mediated by social sciences such as anthropology?

Although the theological project can never take us into an ideal return to a pre-colonial Latin America, Liberation Theology needs to reflect on the sexual past of the Church in the continent. The history of the Church in Latin America needs to assume its own sexual responsibility for having produced a symbolic discourse that married divinity to heterosexual structures and systems of power. Moreover, the sexual understanding of the native nations also has important contributions to make to the understanding of exchanges not only of love and divine cosmovisions, but also of labour. Traditional economic institutions such as the Ayni, to mention one, depend on a different idea of affectionate exchanges (Althaus-Reid 2003). Even if Liberation Theology wanted to reflect only on economic issues, it would have been worth paying attention to the understanding of sexuality in the traditions of the Original Nations, today sadly represented by the poorest of the poor in the continent.

### **Gays and Capitalists: In Search of a Primal Structure of Sin**

Early in the 1970s, Enrique Dussel produced a sophisticated political condemnation of non-heterosexuality which gave rise to non-heterosexual desires becoming a part of a theological reflection on structures of sin. Marxist theologians who wanted to condemn sexuality outside structures of heterosexuality reflected not by grounding issues of sexuality, but by producing a theological Marxist discourse. They needed to prove how homosexual affections reproduced political, economic and cultural imperialism. Dussel produced the first liberationist dismissal of non-heterosexual desires, not by condemning homosexuality as part of a *petit bourgeois* evangelical argument (he is too sophisticated for that), but by devising a political space for sexual criticism. Dussel reflected on sexuality as part of what he called a project of 'erotic liberation'. He presented his ideas in his influential books *Para una Ética de Liberación Latinoamericana* (1973) and *Filosofía de la Liberación* (1977).<sup>7</sup>

Paradoxically, Dussel's argument is interesting and it could have been a pioneering base for a non-heterosexual theology of liberation. In brief, his argument, based on Levinas, is as follows. The origin of any liberative praxis starts always by our confrontation with Otherness. It is in the encounter with the Other that we encounter God and have the opportunity to act morally. This liberative praxis is produced by our openness to an alternative order, characterized by a relation opposite to that expected in a capitalist system. This encounter with the Other is in reality, according to Dussel, a 'dis-order', which establishes the fact that a liberative practice needs to be also an illegal