

# Women and spirituality

## A Latin American perspective

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### ***Introduction***

I WOULD LIKE TO SET THE LIMITS of this article. This is because, in general, titles do not always reflect the bias of their point of view, and one always runs the risk of generalizing stances and opinions. My reflection on 'women and spirituality' is going to be limited to two precise perspectives: the first is that of the women of Latin America who were influenced by liberation theology, especially in the 1970s and 1980s; the second is a more general overview of the day-to-day spirituality of women living on the margins in the cities of the Northeast of Brazil. In this context I intend to introduce a broader concept of spirituality, emphasizing above all those experiences of life that give strength and energy to women in their daily lives. The Roman Catholic Church will be the institutional reference point of both groups. I believe that many statements made in relation to the Catholic Church could serve equally well for the Protestant churches. I will finish by sharing something of the life experiences of some alternative women's groups within both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions, which are open to a feminist, ecumenical and ecological perspective.

### ***Women and liberation theology***

Is it possible to say that liberation theology has influenced Latin American women towards a greater autonomy and affirmation of their dignity? Is it possible to say that it touched them so deeply that they became the agents of a new spirituality? In order to sketch an answer to these questions we must first of all remember some basic elements in our culture prior to the emergence of liberation theology. As we know, in Latin America, as in other continents, women were socialized into accepting a secondary role and, in most cases, a dependency on men. This fact is of primary importance if we are to avoid the idealizations commonly made of liberation theology, particularly in relation to women.

Despite the changes that have taken place in Latin American culture at the end of this century, the traditional patriarchal structure continues to be an important basis for the living out of our values, especially when it comes to the Christian faith. We are marked not only by a 'culture of obedience' where the cult of authority makes its presence heavily felt, but we have also been socialized not to undertake public roles or influential tasks. We have been socialized into thinking of 'the home' as the ideal place for the realization of our feminine identity. We have been socialized, above all in the religious milieu, to think that men know much more than we do about God, about Jesus, about the Bible, and that we should be filled with admiration and gratitude before such wisdom. They are the ones who have the best interpretation of Christian morality and are most faithful to the primitive tradition.

As we know, Catholic tradition is distinguished by the emergence of 'spiritualities' that are pre-eminently masculine. If we start with the proposition of the imitation of Jesus, the only Son of God, and pass via the structure of the Church itself, influenced by 'spiritual fathers', by confessors and doctors of the Church, and arrive even at the fame of the martyrs of the Latin American Church, we see that the heritage handed down to the Christian communities has always been dominated by the importance of men. Apart from the inclusion of certain women, the idea has developed that it is men who are the 'real' constructors of the Church. As well as this, women are always educated, on the one hand, to have a virile relationship with God, in the sense of imitating masculine models of holiness, to the extent of repeating the same models of liberation proposed by men, who were considered the 'liberators'. On the other hand, they developed a type of domestic spirituality founded on good works and on a certain fixation with the sufferings of Jesus and Mary. The seven sorrows of Mary, Jesus crucified, the wounds of Christ were always at the forefront of popular feminine spirituality. These forms of expression did not open up new possibilities for women, nor did they foster their self-worth. On the contrary, they helped them to remain within their domestic role, and limited them, most of the time, within their domestic function.

The exceptions to this cultural rule have always been looked upon with fear, amazement and even a certain contempt by women themselves.<sup>1</sup> The media of social communication have often emphasized this fear, as if an intelligent, pretty, active and influential woman were some extremely rare being. Within this cultural context we

could say that liberation theology has not introduced anything new to modify the centuries-long submission of women to men either at the domestic level or at the public and ecclesial level. Liberation theology has provided no concrete critique of the cultural oppression in which the women of Latin America exist. We can see the truth of this oppression, expressed through submission, not only by means of sociological analysis but also by means of ecclesiological analysis.

There were many women, especially among those working in base communities, who spread in a simple form the most important tenets of liberation theology. I think it could be said, without false modesty, that it was women, lay and religious, who brought liberation theology to the people, especially through catechesis and liberating political action. From outside the academic discussion, which characterizes masculine discourse, they were able to take on board and then transmit this new way of analysing the Christian faith from within the option for the poor. There were many women who not only gave their support to groups and political parties on the side of the people but helped to form a framework through which to respond to the different needs of popular organizations. It is certain that many women, inspired by liberation theology, took extraordinary steps of political and social commitment. Nevertheless, these steps did not touch directly on their quest for social emancipation and did not lead them to discover and analyse the oppression and discrimination of which they were victims. In this context we can therefore say that liberation theology has made no difference whatsoever to what we might call the tradition of the 'masculinization of religious experience'. When I speak of liberation theology, therefore, I am primarily speaking of masculine liberation theology, given that, with a few rare exceptions, the 'classics' of Latin American liberation theology did not explore the specific oppression of women. In affirming this I am merely admitting, without making any value judgements, that the particular problems of women did not make up part of the basis for their reflection.

### *Feminist theology and liberation theology*

The most recent analyses made by theologians of liberation sometimes seem to suggest that indigenous, black and feminist theologies are developments of the theology of liberation that emerged within the Latin American continent.<sup>2</sup> Feminist theologians within liberation theology do not always feel at ease with this. Without denying

what we learned from liberation theology and its undoubted influence, I believe that feminist theology, over and above its continued affirmation of the option for the poor, has introduced new questions, so that it cannot simply be considered as a development of liberation theology. Putting it briefly, its originality consists in its critique of the patriarchal theological structures present within the Christian tradition itself, in which masculine domination is a given. This critique echoes those made by the international feminist movement within the different spheres of human knowledge. It therefore introduces questions which include a different anthropological vision and consequently a different theological vision. In this sense feminist theology is also critical in relation to liberation theology, while not wishing to break away from its socio-ethical perspective.

From a simple observation of what the theology of 'liberation' has produced we can see that the producers of this new way of thinking about faith were mostly men. The few women who published books or articles did so in the shadow of the classics of liberation or from more or less marginal positions.<sup>3</sup> This situation encouraged not only a certain intellectual dependency but also a spiritual dependency. Today we are evolving towards greater autonomy.

### *Liberation and forgetfulness*

We women became aware of the importance of the social struggle and of the unique contribution which liberation theology made in reinforcing that struggle. Nevertheless, the broader social struggle led us to forget the questions inhabiting our women's bodies, to forget our own experience and doubts in order to aspire to the ideals for life that men put before us. The masculine revolutionary project was presented so logically that we accepted it as the unique truth. Our ideal always lay in 'doing what they told us', because we were sure that this was not only the right path, but also the only one capable of bringing justice to life for our people.

In the spirituality of liberation we were never encouraged to imitate the great female figures of the Bible. What is more, these figures were accorded sparse mention both in the construction of the theologies and in the development of the spiritualities of Latin America. The quest for the reign of God, a reign in which the poor would at last have 'life in all its fullness', was basically the masculine political project of struggle, to be achieved through the masculine means of social conquest, elimination of the enemies of the

people and the enemies of God. We women entered upon these spiritual paths as if they were the unique fount of salvation and an incontestable means to achieve the realization of the values of the gospel of Jesus. No doubt these paths opened out others to us, and prepared us to take up challenges which we would see above all from within the women's movements.

But although it is important to stress this positive side, many of us lived in great interior distress, without always daring to make our doubts explicit. Sometimes our doubts came across as a betrayal of this fine masculine analysis and we were almost ashamed to think differently. Our doubts had to do with the repetition of violent attitudes even in the name of faith. They had to do with the secondary role which we held in all social, moral and ecclesial decisions. If we speak of this, it is not in order to accuse our male companions, but in order to make clear the different forms of oppression which our cultures are capable of producing and which do not even always appear as oppression. The important thing in this process, which is still under way, is that the doubts, little by little, became insights which helped us to open up new possibilities for liberation.

### *Liberation within liberation*

Nevertheless it is important to reaffirm that, as I said before, this form of 'liberation theology' brought new seeds of life for some women. Our feminine theology of liberation encountered feminism and this union began to produce new fruit in us. We opened ourselves up to a broader critique of masculine images of God and consequently we came to question the absolute nature of the tenets of masculine theology. We began to treat the question of the poor in a multiplicity of ways, realizing how liberation in general comes into being through smaller steps of liberation that take into consideration different cries of pain. This process could be considered as a 'liberation within liberation'. Concretely we were being led to take part in a broad historical process of liberation, no doubt as a global process, characterized by pluralism. Our experience of life brought us back to the reality that, if liberation is a fundamental goal for Christian faith, it can only be so as a process undertaken in plurality, a process in which different oppressions can be confronted.

The method for confronting sexual or racial exclusion is not the same as that for confronting economic exclusion. We cannot use the same method for speaking about rape and domestic violence as we

do for approaching questions related to trade unions. We women began to dare to take different paths, to dare to seek a diversity of traditions and formulations of our faith. It was as if we began to nurture and to introduce a different creed from the one we had learned by heart. It was a creed which included our history, our suffering, our convictions and our hopes.

Faced with this new departure, many among us are today experiencing difficulty in coping with institutional membership of a church or a religious group. We are also experiencing difficulty in coping with the things we are discovering and with the new convictions that are forming within our minds and hearts. We have taken great risks to open up new and surprising possibilities for a world where new forms of justice can be found within our relationships. But they are uncertain, fragile possibilities, tentative and insecure. They entail huge challenges, above all because we are trying to shift the bedrock of a centuries-long tradition that lies even within our own bodies. Nevertheless, we believe that the uncomfortable situation we find ourselves in will prove life-giving because it helps us to continue learning from the past and to take up new challenges in the present. It also helps us to abide by the critique that we make of patriarchal dogmatism, which is present within our own religious formulations, and makes us careful not to become dogmatic in our own turn.

We are aware that we can always fall into the same errors that we are denouncing, but this does not take away the duty that we have to continue searching out and risking new paths. Within this context we note a significant number of meetings both for biblical studies and for feminist theology which are organized periodically in Latin America. We are beginning to find and to develop a Latin American biblical hermeneutic.<sup>4</sup> A theology which is critical of patriarchalism is beginning to emerge especially through the intervention of gender.<sup>5</sup> A liturgical pluralism which takes as its point of reference the experience of women is beginning to grow through celebrations, music, dance and song.<sup>6</sup>

### *A spirituality of daily life and the life of women*

One of the most important steps forward for many women has been that of finding in the richness and monotony of daily life a source of spirituality that could nourish our own and other women's lives. The discovery that it is daily routine above all that makes our life consistent seems to have brought out something important in our

lives. Suddenly the present moment has developed a greater intensity. We see that this moment is the time in which to find happiness, that this present moment is the time to make justice spring forth among us. It was particularly the way in which women on the margins live among themselves that helped many of us to realize that, in the end, it is daily routine, in all its richness and complexity, that is a source of nourishment for our lives.

When we contemplated the simultaneously monotonous and varied life of women on the margins, a life lost in the midst of the struggle for day-to-day survival, we began to ask ourselves what kept these women going, what helped them to get through the difficult times and to continue the struggle. Then we began to realize that spirituality was not just one more isolated element within women's lives, but that this element of strength and vitality was intimately connected with their day-to-day routine, with the sound of pots and pans, the care of children, conversations with neighbours and cries for help to God. We realized that life itself has a spiritual dimension, that is, a dimension of meaning, and that we do not need to invent a 'spirituality' or a 'spiritual school' in order to motivate the respect for life and the struggle to keep it going. Simply within daily life itself we could find what was necessary to sustain it with respect and with dignity, in sharing and in justice.

Spirituality is not something foreign brought into daily routine from outside it, but daily routine has its own destiny and is capable of giving the necessary nourishment to life.<sup>7</sup> This spirituality certainly does not have, properly speaking, an organized structure, but it has developed through necessity, through the accidents and the quests that characterize the lives of poor women. Some of them attend different churches in order to seek consolation and help. But this attendance is just one more element in this spirituality of daily life.

I think that to emphasize this type of informal spiritual life is, on the one hand, to welcome the presence of the mystery of God among the poor over and above any religious institutionalization. On the other hand, it simply means to affirm the life force in every person. This affirmation brings into focus the search for different means to enable life to develop with a maximum of meaning and solidarity. All this means that, for us, daily routine is capable of generating its own vital strengths in the same way that it is capable of generating its own destructive forces. And it is from this mixture within ourselves that life is nourished and follows its own dynamic.

***Conclusion: women, feminism and ecology***

In the past eight years many feminist theologians and many leaders of Christian communities have realized the importance of bringing together their struggles with the fight for the environment. This is because we have seen how the struggle for just human relationships implies the establishment of just relationships with the whole ecosystem. This perception, far from being a purely theoretical preoccupation or a fad, has been lived out concretely in daily life with its struggles and its victories. Good human relationships, good health, good housing and good food signify a preoccupation with the actual health of the planet. The fight for full employment comes to mean the fight for employment opportunities that are not destructive of life but that are aimed at saving life. In the town of Jaboatão in Pernambuco state in the metropolitan area of Recife, a paper factory is in the process of polluting the local environment to frightening levels. This has caused serious respiratory problems and skin diseases, especially among children and old people. Among the different popular health organizations there is a growing realization that there is no point in keeping a factory in operation so as to give employment to a small sector of the population when at the same time that factory is seriously damaging the lives of the majority. The profit of the minority ends up bringing about the destruction of the majority. In the same way, in different towns throughout the Northeast of Brazil many women are fighting no longer just to gain access to water but to obtain water that is drinkable. There has also been an increase in small community vegetable gardens that do not use pesticides or chemicals. The health of the human community includes the health of the earth. Therefore the perception is growing that our conquest of the basic elements of life must be conquests of quality, that is, conquests which favour the health and balance of the whole life process.

***Ecofeminist spirituality***

From within these and other concrete situations being lived out in different parts of Latin America, an ecofeminist spirituality is developing, not only at the popular level, but at the level of a more theologically articulated reflection.<sup>8</sup> This is a reflection with an ecumenical basis, that is, a practical ecumenism which goes beyond the traditional divisions among the Christian churches or other religions. There is a growing realization among many women that we

are part of one living body, the earth, and that attacks against the body of nature signify equally attacks against our own bodies. Therefore our cause is increasingly becoming a common cause which helps us to see how much our respective religious institutions should insist on overcoming divisions and doctrines that have little relevance today. The destruction of the environment is an alarming fact, but our religious communities do not always point out the connection and interdependence between human life and the ecosystem.

Today a more holistic vision is beginning to emerge above all in some women's groups from different parts of the Latin American continent. This means a vision that is recovering little by little a sense of the integration and interconnectedness between the various elements in life. We realize that in economic analysis the dimensions of ecology and of gender are becoming increasingly significant. The same thing is happening in theological reflection. We can see how impoverished our theology is with regard to a concept of interdependence among all the elements which constitute life, and how theological values continue to be based on a hierarchy which has human beings, and above all men, at its summit. In this sense the change that we wish to make in broader social relationships includes theological concepts. This leads us to the recovery, particularly in our daily lives and in our celebrations, of an anthropological dimension connected with the forces of nature in their entirety. We feel called to rediscover a common sisterhood with all the elements, and through this attitude we will also recover some of the traditions of the indigenous and African peoples who are an integral part of Latin American culture.

The awareness behind this articulation and this vital interdependence leads us to bring about changes in the very way that we live out our Christian faith. We are trying to become more inclusive of the diversity present within our own and all other lives. We are trying to open ourselves up to an image of the mysterious God who sustains and moves through the fabric of our lives, while at the same time trying to reach beyond rigid hierarchical systems. We are trying to reach an understanding of salvation which not only brings into consideration a plurality of necessities and of situations, but which also includes the environment, our essential milieu, which is being destroyed for human gain. We are trying to read the Bible with a concern to be open to the dialogue between the perspective proper to the ancient Hebrew culture and the new perspectives that we have today. The Bible is becoming a book which contains the

memory of our religious traditions and a book whose message can be enriched by contemporary cultures and by the new questions which we face from the world of today. All of this is being authenticated in the new steps being taken within different groups of women.

### *Occasions of celebration<sup>9</sup> and daily life*

New occasions of liturgical celebration are being added to the feasts proper to our Christian tradition. Celebrations often take place in women's groups when they share their tears and their hopes, and when they mark the important events of life, especially those connected with their personal life or that of another. These celebrations take place during meetings or at times specially set aside for them. They are often marked by the sharing of food and drink, which forms an integral part of the celebration. There is a communion and an intimacy which happens when we eat together and above all when we eat things that we have prepared ourselves.

These initiatives in celebration are far removed from the traditional ceremonies presided over by priests or by their representatives, and above all they are far removed from any pre-established format. This way of acting has brought new breadth to what many women's groups view as liturgy. They are beginning to dare to include their day-to-day lives within the different celebrations and to believe in their significance. Their voices and their stories are gaining in importance. A connection is being made between liturgical celebrations and their lives, and liturgy is no longer merely something at which they 'assist' as if they were spectators at a performance.

These initiatives are being introduced slowly and differ from group to group. Some are more creative than others. The custom of centuries which characterizes our religious culture has not always been a good preparation for greater autonomy in liturgical creativity. And it has not helped us, as women, to feel capable of presiding over liturgies that can be considered as having worth and significance. There can be a sort of self-censorship and mutual criticism among women who lead groups connected to the institutional Church. But little by little steps forward are being taken, especially when, after a celebration, a feeling of well-being and of joy comes about within the body of women. It is as though they were experiencing something significant happening in their lives, something

which can help them to go forward in their daily lives. It is as if they were speaking a common language in which the presence of the Mystery which enfolds us becomes mingled with the things of everyday life.

The liberation found in the form of both dreams and small victories is lived out in the gratitude of sharing with the aim simply to 'give thanks' within the gathering and to sustain each other mutually in our daily routine. This is what I call the spiritual revolution in daily life, a revolution which, although it is open to the macro-social dimension, is also lived out in the micro-social dimension of the life in our *bairros*, in our cities and with people who are part of the daily fabric of our relationships. This daily revolution is the investment in hope for a better future and is an affirmation that, with the entire universe, we must always hope against hope.

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*This article was translated from the Portuguese by Gemma Simmonds IBVM.*

#### NOTES

1 I would like to recall the name of Sister Juana Inez de la Cruz, the seventeenth-century Mexican religious, poet and writer, condemned by the Inquisition for her great dedication to literature and to drama, and for refusing to fulfil the domestic role determined for women. Today she is considered the first feminist theologian of Latin America.

2 Diego Irarrazaval, 'How is theology done in Latin America?' in *Voices from the Third World* (Bangalore: Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, June 1995).

3 Theologians such as Maria Clara Bingemer, Ana Maria Tepedino and myself began our work by occupying the little space which the male theologians of liberation opened up to us.

4 Nancy Cardoso, 'Mary goes with us', *Cadernos do CEBI* (São Paulo, 1997).

5 Ivone Gebara, *Eco-feminist theology*, ed Olho d'Agua (São Paulo, 1997).

6 See various publications from the Con-Spirando group, Santiago, Chile.

7 Ivone Gebara, 'Mysticism and politics in women's lives' in *Grande Sinal, Review of Spirituality*, ed Vozes (1990).

8 *Con-Spirando Review*, Latin American review of ecofeminism, spirituality and theology (Santiago, Chile). See also the publications of the 'Talita Cumi' group of Lima, Peru and of 'Mandragora', São Bernardo do Campo, São Paulo.

9 *Translator's note*: The term 'celebration' in this context always implies a liturgical element.