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Liberation Ecology

An Interview with Leonardo Boff

Theology can play a central role in defining the moral fiber of a society, including its commitment to poverty alleviation and stewardship of Earth. Allen White, Senior Fellow at Tellus Institute, talks with Leonardo Boff, a founder of liberation theology, about the origins of the movement and the vital connections between ecology and social justice.

Half a century ago, you were among a small group of theologians who were instrumental in conceptualizing liberation theology. What spurred this synthesis of thought and action that challenged the orthodoxy of both Church and State?

Liberation theology is not a discipline. It is a different way of practicing theology. It does not start from existing theological traditions and then focus on the poor and excluded populations of society. Its core is the struggle of the poor to free themselves from the conditions of poverty. Liberation theology does not seek to act *for* the poor via welfarism or paternalism. Instead, it seeks to act *with* the poor to tap their wisdom in changing their life and livelihood.

How, then, do we act with them? By seeing the poor and oppressed through their own eyes, not with those of an outsider. We must discover and understand their values, such as solidarity and the joy of living, which to some extent have been lost by society's privileged. Some of those who subscribe to liberation theology choose to live like the poor, sharing life in the slums and participating in residents' organizations and projects. This method can be described as "see, judge, act, and celebrate." Seeing the reality of the poor firsthand awakens an outsider to the inadequacy of his perceptions and doctrines for judging it and how to change it. This occurs in two ways: first, through understanding the mechanisms that generate poverty and, second, by awakening to the fact that poverty and oppression contradict God's plan and that actions must thus be taken to eliminate them.

How does this understanding and awakening manifest itself?

Following understanding and awakening is action: How can we work with the poor to end oppression and achieve social justice? The opposite of poverty is not wealth but justice. This

commitment to action spurred the birth of thousands of ecclesiastical communities, Bible circles, and centers for the defense of human rights, all focused on the rights of the poor, the landless, and the homeless, and the advancement of people of African descent, the indigenous, women, and other marginalized groups. These expressions of liberation theology are not rooted in rituals, but rather in the celebration of life and its victories in light of the Gospel. This approach is visible in the words and actions of Pope Francis, particularly in his encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*. This style of theology has created a type of priest and religious life that unites faith and social commitment to the poor and welcomes all who wish to participate. This method of living and thinking faith has helped the Church to better understand the reality of the poor and to shift away from doctrines and rituals. The Church of Liberation helped found political parties such as the Workers' Party of former president Lula in Brazil that embody the commitment to social change that Jesus viewed as essential to a more just and fraternal society. This kind of thinking encouraged Latin American countries to introduce social policies that embraced millions of people who previously lived on the margins and in misery.

What led you to such social activism?

What drove my commitment to social change was my work in the slums of Brazil. The poor were our teachers and doctors. They challenged us to answer the question, how can our Christian faith inspire us to look for a different, more just world where brotherhood and sisterhood are deeper and richer and love is made easier? It was not the politics and works of Karl Marx, Johann Baptist Metz, or Jürgen Moltmann that inspired us to get close to the poor. Marx was neither father nor godfather of liberation theology, though he has helped us in fundamental ways. He showed how poverty results from the way society is organized to exploit and oppress the weakest among us, and he called attention to the fact that the ruling classes, in conjunction with certain segments of the Church, manipulated the Christian faith to be a source of passivity rather than a force for indignation, resistance, and liberation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, liberation theology took root most deeply in Latin America, especially in Brazil. Why this region, and why this country?

The Church in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s was unique in Latin America and, I would say, even the world. We had many prophetic bishops who opposed the military dictatorships, denounced torture, and publicly defended human rights. Thanks to the great Bishop Hélder Câmara, a coordinated pastoral meeting was organized for the first time. It involved more than 300 bishops and led to the creation of the National Conference of Bishops, which, in turn, developed strategies for social change that became widely adopted. For a long time, the Conference advocated for basic social justice and agrarian reform.

This initiative led to a shift away from the concept of “development of underdevelopment,” which draws attention to the historic and structural roots of underdevelopment, to a focus on the process of liberation. The educator Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Education as the Practice of Freedom*, helped to shape the minds of bishops, theologians, and

pastors. It marked the beginning in Brazil, and soon Peru, of liberation theology as a foundational concept in the Catholic Church.

In 2009, you wrote that “everyone must be freed from this system that has continued for three centuries and has been imposed across the planet.” What is the “system,” and what makes escape so urgent?

Every modern society is indebted to the founding fathers of the Enlightenment worldview beginning in the seventeenth century with Descartes, Newton, Bacon, and others. Together, their work gave rise to the idea of conquest of people and the Earth. The Earth was no longer viewed as the great Mother, alive and purposeful. Instead, it was reduced to something to be exploited by humans for wealth accumulation. In the capitalist system that emerged out of this, value is ascribed to accumulated capital rather than to work, now simply a vehicle for such accumulation. This system creates vast economic inequalities as well as political, social, and ethnic injustices. Its political manifestation is liberal democracy, in which freedom is equated with the freedom to exploit nature and accumulate wealth. This system has been imposed worldwide and has created a culture of limitless private accumulation and consumption. Today, we realize that a finite Earth cannot support endless growth that overshoots the Earth’s biophysical limits and threatens long-term human survival and Mother Earth’s bounty.

Your recent writings suggest that ecology should be an additional pillar of the movement. What is the connection between ecology and social justice?

The core of liberation theology is the empowerment of the poor to end poverty and achieve the freedom to live a good life. In the 1980s, we realized that the logic supporting exploitation of workers was the same as that supporting the exploitation of the earth. Out of this insight, a vigorous liberation eco-theology was born. To make this movement effective, it is important to create a new paradigm rooted in cosmology, biology, and complexity theory. A global vision of reality must always be open to creating new forms of order within which human life can evolve. The vision of James Lovelock and V. I. Vernadsky helped us see not only that life exists on Earth, but also that Earth itself is a living organism. The human being is the highest expression of Earth’s creation by virtue of our capacity to feel, think, love, and worship.

After publication of your 1984 book *Church: Charisma and Power*, the Vatican prohibited your writing and teaching, a turning point in the strained relationship between liberation theology and the Church. How did you respond to this?

The imposition of “*silentium obsequiosum*” in 1985 by the Vatican forbade me from speaking and writing. That is when I began to study ecology, Earth science, and their relation to human activity. This coincided with an invitation to participate in a small, international group convened by Mikhail Gorbachev and Steven Rockefeller to explore universal values and principles essential for saving Earth from the multiple threats she faces. I had the opportunity to meet leading scientists while actively participating in drafting a text that significantly inspired Pope Francis’s recent

encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. I was determined to ensure that the views of the Earth Charter would be based on a new paradigm incorporating the interdependency of all creatures—indeed the whole living fabric—and the need for mutual care. This paradigm must extend beyond a purely environmental ecology to an “integral ecology” that includes society, human consciousness, education, daily life, and spirituality.

This must start with the new paradigm for physical reality that has emerged from the thinking of Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Stephen Hawking, Brian Swimme, Ilya Prigogine, Humberto Maturana, Christian de Duve, and many others who see the universe as a process of cosmogenesis—expanding, self-regenerating orders of increasing complexity. The basic law governing this cosmological vision is that everything has to do with everything else at all times and in all circumstances. Nothing is outside this integrated vision. Knowledge and science are interlinked to form a greater whole. Contrary to the earlier atomized paradigm, this helps us develop a holistic view of a world in continuous motion. Mutation, not stability, is the natural state of the universe and Earth. And we humans are intrinsic to this process. So I believe there are four major trends in ecological thinking: environmental, social, mental, and integral. Together, these form a reality in which the component parts are dynamically in tune with each other.

Do you see elements of liberation theology in Pope Francis’s recent encyclical *Laudato Si'*?

The encyclical *Laudato Si'* is the fruit of the theological ecology that developed in recent years in Latin America. The Pope adopted the method of “see, judge, act, and celebrate” and used it to organize the encyclical. He makes use of the basic categories that we used in Latin America, such as the “relatedness of all with all,” the focus on the poor and the vulnerable, the intrinsic value of every being, the ethics of care and collective responsibility, and—especially—the condemnation of the system that produces the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth, a system that is anti-life, perhaps even suicidal. The document is full of the resonances of liberation theology and encourages liberation theologians as well as like-minded churches and theology everywhere.

Many view religion in the contemporary world as a source of strife and exclusion rather than the harmony and inclusiveness needed to foster global solidarity. Do such critics have a valid point?

Almost all religions show signs of the sickness of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is not a doctrine but a way of understanding doctrine. Fundamentalists think that their doctrine and their truth is the only one. Others are wrong and deserve no rights. From these conflicts is born the bloodshed we know too well, conflicts pursued in God’s name. But this is a pathology that does not eliminate the true nature of religion. Everything healthy can get sick. That is what is happening today. On the other hand, compare the conflicts driven by fundamentalism with the

hopefulness of leaders like the Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Pope Francis, who are clamoring for cooperation among religions and spiritual paths to help overcome the current ecological crisis.

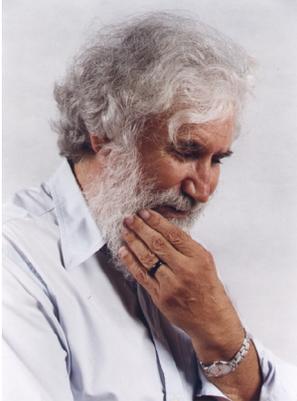
What is your view on the prospects for a progressive transformation of religious institutions and for the overall shift in of planetary civilization we call the Great Transition? And what role would religious institutions play in this transformation?

I think the legacy of the financial crisis is the insight that the global capitalist system met its limit in 2007–2008. More than an economic crisis, it was a crisis of Earth's limited resources. Shortly after the onset of the financial crisis, scientists announced the infamous Earth Overshoot Day, calling attention to the fact that the pressure we put on Earth exceeds its biocapacity. But this moment, which should have provoked reflection on our profound lack of environmental consciousness, passed with little public reaction.

Because of the inseparability of the ecological and the social, the looming depletion of resources could lead to social unrest of great proportions. Today, at least forty armed conflicts afflict the world. Our system does not have the tools to solve the problems it has created. As Albert Einstein eloquently stated, "We cannot solve the problems using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

We have to think and act differently. The Earth Charter explicitly states, and Pope Francis [has repeated](#), "Common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning. This requires a change in the mind and in the heart. It requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility to reach a sustainable way of life locally, regionally, nationally and globally." This is the foundation for a different way of inhabiting the Common Home in which material resources are finite. In contrast, human and spiritual capital are inexhaustible because they are intangible and include limitless values such as love, solidarity, compassion, reverence, and care. This places life at the center: the life of Mother Earth, the life of nature, and human life.

About the Interviewee



Leonardo Boff is the founder of the liberation theology movement. He entered the Franciscan Order in 1959 and was ordained a priest in 1964. After receiving his PhD from the University of Munich in 1970, he served as Professor of Systematic Theology at the Franciscan Institute of Theology in Petrópolis-Rio de Janeiro and Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Ethics at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro. He is a co-author of the Earth Charter and the author of more than eighty works, including *Jesus Christ Liberator*; *Church, Charisma and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*; *Ecology: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*; and *Essential Care: An Ethics of Human Nature*.

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