

# Ecofeminism in Latin America

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PART I

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**THE DEVELOPMENT  
OF ECOFEMINISM**

## The Development of Feminist Theology in Latin America

Latin American feminist theology was born and matured within liberation theology, although today it is in critical dialogue with that theology. The evolution of Latin American feminist theology, which spans more than thirty years, can be divided into three stages paralleling the decades of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Feminist consciousness within Latin American theology evolved from the total identification of women theologians and biblical scholars with liberation theology (first stage), to a growing awareness of—and discomfort with—liberation theology's patriarchal mindset (second stage), to challenging the patriarchal anthropology and cosmology present in liberation theology itself and calling for a total reconstruction of theology from a feminist perspective (third stage).

Scholarship on this evolution continues to grow. However, three Latin American feminist theologians have systematic studies of this historical development: Mexican feminist theologian María Pilar Aquino,<sup>1</sup> Costa Rican feminist scripture scholar Elsa Tamez,<sup>2</sup> and Brazilian ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara.<sup>3</sup> Aquino describes the first two stages in rich detail, using women's testimonies and women's group reflections throughout Latin America to substantiate her research. Tamez's periodization is the most systematic and succinct of the three; she describes each stage by setting it in the context of three congresses that gathered together Latin American women theologians in 1979 (Mexico),

1985 (Argentina), and 1993 (Brazil). In each stage she describes the political, economic, ecclesial, and theological context, the development of feminist consciousness, feminist hermeneutics, and the use of inclusive language. Gebara, while also describing the first two stages, concentrates on the third stage. Indeed, Tamez places Gebara's work on holistic ecofeminism at the center of third stage of Latin American feminist theology.<sup>4</sup>

Because of my focus on ecofeminism, which comes to the fore at the third stage in the 1990s, I will limit my summary of Latin American feminist theology to the schemas of Tamez and Gebara.

### THE SCHEMA OF ELSA TAMEZ

Tamez first described the stages of feminist theology in Latin America in a lecture at the ecumenical congress of women theologians and biblical scholars and teachers held in Rio de Janeiro in December 1993. She continues to reflect upon and update her schema with rigor.<sup>5</sup>

While three fairly clear stages are observable in the evolution of feminist consciousness among women working in theology and biblical hermeneutics, Tamez insists: "It is important to recognize that the hermeneutical experiences of one decade do not cancel out those of another. Very often different, even conflicting experiences coexist, sometimes within the same person. . . . Nor is one phase to be treated as more important than another."<sup>6</sup>

Tamez describes the *first phase* of Latin American feminist theology (the decade of the 1970s) as an exciting period that saw the emergence of left-wing political parties and grassroots movements of *campesinos*, workers, and neighborhood and solidarity groups. In this same time period, however, the region's revolutionary struggles, which had coalesced a decade earlier, were severely repressed by military dictatorships in South America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay). Military governments were already in place in Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras in Central America. These dictatorships were infamous for their use of torture, assassination, and disappearances

of activists. However, in the midst of this repression, there was an amazing growth in the number and strength of small Christian communities (CEBs), whose members were mostly urban slum dwellers. They gathered together in their small communities to reflect on biblical texts from their own experiences as militants. The book of Exodus, stories of the Babylonian captivity, and liberation texts from the Gospels were favorites.

During this decade women theologians and biblical scholars were enthusiastically committed to liberation theology's method and practice. They saw women as historical subjects in their own right, capable of being protagonists of liberation. They also lifted up the double oppression women suffer, that is, both as women and as members of an oppressed and impoverished class. Tamez notes, however, that there was practically no dialogue with either secular Latin American feminist organizations or with first-world feminist theologians. In those years most women working in theology saw feminism as simply another imperialistic invasion from the North, which could even be dangerous in that it diverted poor women from the primary contradiction of their economic and political oppression as a *class*. Women were seen as an implicit part of the category of the poor; therefore, the option for the poor meant the option for poor women. Time was spent studying Old and New Testament stories in which women were leaders (Deborah, Judith, the mother of the Maccabees), or renowned for their subversive acts (the midwives of Egypt), or women like Hagar, who was triply oppressed because of her class, race, and sex, and yet was blessed by God, who allowed her son to found a new people. Tamez underlines how reflections on these selected texts of liberation nourished hope in a new society based on socialist ideals, where it was assumed that egalitarian relations between the sexes would fall into place. However, in this period there was no awareness of the possibilities of inclusive language, and God was always addressed as masculine.

In the *second phase* (the decade of the 1980s) Tamez notes that an uneasiness was beginning to be felt by Latin American women theologians and biblicists about the affirmation that women were implicitly included in the category of the poor, and they began to see the need to read the Bible from the standpoint of women.

In this decade the political context shifted to Central America, where the Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua and left-wing revolutionary struggles made headway in El Salvador and Guatemala. At the same time, most of the dictatorships in South America were replaced with restricted democracies in which the military remained vigilant watchdogs. In these years it became more and more evident that the foreign indebtedness of Latin American governments was sucking the lifeblood out of their peoples—so much so that the 1980s is seen as “the lost decade” in terms of the region’s development.

This decade saw a right-wing backlash to liberation theology, especially from Rome. The Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a document warning against the dangers of liberation theology. Leonardo Boff, one of Latin America’s most widely known liberation theologians, was summoned to Rome and subsequently silenced for a two-year period.

Theological reflection grappled with these realities by centering on themes of the kingdom of God and human history, a theology of life and of death, idolatry of the market, the discipleship of Christ, martyrdom, and a spirituality of liberation. At last, a dialogue began between male liberation theologians and their female counterparts on the oppression of women as women. Also, by the mid-1980s gatherings were taking place to reflect on black and indigenous theologies.

During these years more and more activist Christian women became involved in theological and biblical reflection. They gradually realized that liberation theology’s discourse was tainted with androcentrism and patriarchal constructs, and they began to insist that theology done from the viewpoint of women’s experience should reflect different cultural, biological, and historical experiences from those of men. Especially challenged was liberation theology’s emphasis on economic oppression as it championed the option for the poor, often at the expense of cultural oppression and domestic violence. These were years of much creative theological production by women in liturgy, art, and poetry. Also, attempts were initiated to reach out to the region’s feminist movements and to first-world feminist theologians.

With regard to hermeneutics, women began to search for female images of God and to refer to God as both mother and father. The Holy Spirit was seen as feminine. Women called not only for the practice of justice, but also for the need for tenderness, loving solidarity, and comfort toward those who suffer unjustly. Tamez, herself a biblical scholar, calls attention to three aspects of women's biblical work in these years. The first was the search for greater freedom in speaking about God, especially in the area of life's daily joys and sorrows. Second, there was a need for critical analysis of those biblical texts that were clearly patriarchal and discriminated against women. When a text did not allow for a more inclusive reinterpretation, it was dismissed as non-normative. This posture raised the question of the authority and inspiration of the Bible as the word of God. Third, there was also a need to affirm womanly virtues such as motherliness, unselfishness, and tenderness—virtues that historically society did not consider important. The virtues of commitment, resistance, and sacrifice were also seen as liberating.

God-language began to change in some circles because of the influence of some Christian feminists who began to address God as both father and mother. However, the word *feminist*, although widely accepted in some areas, was still shunned by many as an import from the North. "Doing theology from the standpoint of women" and reading the Bible "through women's eyes" were more acceptable.

The *third phase* (the decade of the 1990s to the present) is characterized by a radical, anti-patriarchal hermeneutical approach that proposes a new, inclusive, and non-patriarchal theology, indeed, a total reconstruction of theology itself. Ivone Gebara calls this phase "holistic ecofeminism."

During the 1990s progressive forces in Latin America were profoundly shaken by the collapse of the Communist governments of Eastern Europe and the demise of historical socialism. The defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua also dampened the region's hope for an alternative to the capitalist order. Economically, the current neoliberal economic model, which gives supremacy to the demands of world markets, appears to be seen as the only viable alternative. Socially, once effervescent grassroots

movements have stagnated, including the CEBs, which have gone into steep decline.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the inroads being made by Pentecostalism throughout Latin America are indeed remarkable. (A common phrase heard among Latin American pastoral agents these days is, “Liberation theology may have opted for the poor, but the poor have opted for Pentecostalism.”) All this has affected the vibrancy of liberation theology, a topic that will be treated more thoroughly below.

One bright spot in an otherwise dismal political landscape has been the rise of the indigenous movement as a result of the five-hundredth anniversary in 1992 of the European invasion of the Americas. Indigenous theologians are calling for liberation theology’s option for the poor to be expanded to include an option for the impoverished other, because the “otherness” of the continent’s diversity needs to be taken into account along with economic disparities.

For a growing number of women, it has not been enough to speak of the feminine face of God. They find current theological discourse androcentric and patriarchal to the core and see their task as reconstructing the whole of theology from a feminist perspective. A major influence on these women has been the introduction of gender analysis into their theological and biblical work, along with new insights coming from feminist anthropology. In this area there is a much more open, welcoming attitude toward both Latin American feminism and colleagues in the first world.

One of the most forceful new hermeneutical categories for this feminist theological and biblical scholarship is the body. Concrete bodies of women and men are becoming a new locus for doing theology. Efforts are also being made to offer a non-sacrificial reading of redemption to free many poor women from accepting violence, especially domestic violence, as somehow “the will of God.” New non-gender-specific names are emerging for the Divine, such as Grace, Compassion, and Energy. As Tamez concludes: “We are aware of the radical nature of this challenge, which means reworking, or rather reinventing, the whole of Christian theology. There is difficulty in re-reading the great theological themes such as Christology, the Trinity and ecclesiology because of their androcentrism. It is recognized that

the implications of reconstruction take us beyond orthodoxy.”<sup>8</sup> She ends her overview by emphasizing that the priority for feminist theologians and biblical scholars and teachers in Latin America is always to link their work to the basic concerns of the poor.<sup>9</sup>

### THE SCHEMA OF IVONE GEBARA

While Gebara’s systematization is not as detailed as that of Elsa Tamez, she also sees three stages in the development of Latin American feminist theology. She points out, however, that they are not necessarily chronological and that they often overlap, depending on historical circumstance and the level of feminist consciousness in a specific country or group. Gebara elaborated on this development in a course she taught in Chile in April 1993. When the course was finished, I interviewed her on these stages, focusing especially on the third stage.<sup>10</sup>

For Gebara, the *first stage* of feminist theology is characterized by women’s discovery of their oppression as historical subjects—an oppression present in theology, the Bible, and the churches. She credits the secular feminist movement—not the churches—with nurturing this insight among Christian women. In this stage women rediscovered many women in the Bible, such as Sarah, Hagar, Miriam, Ruth, Esther, Judith, Mary, Magdalene, and the women at the empty tomb, and reclaimed them as key actors in the history of liberation. For Gebara, this was important but not sufficient in itself. She says that women tended to overvalue the feminine during this stage and to fall into the patriarchal trap of lifting up those domestic qualities historically associated with women, such as motherhood and the double-duty workday. Gebara also challenges work done in those years to hold up women liberators such as Judith as models without questioning the violent patriarchal framework in which the book of Judith is situated. She also believes that during this stage (which she also situates in the 1970s), women tended to think that they were the “good” gender and somehow spiritually superior to poor, weaker men. There was also a certain desire to “even the score” with their male counterparts.

Gebara calls the *second stage* the “feminization of theological concepts.” This was a time when women theologians worked to rediscover the feminine, maternal face of God in biblical texts. She also notes that during those years (the decade of the 1980s), women were given a voice within the churches and within liberation theology so they could present “the women’s perspective.” This pleased progressive male theologians and pastors and particularly male liberation theologians who had always insisted that their ranks were open to women theologians. However, according to Tamez, Gebara has pointed out that what women had been doing was “patriarchal feminist theology.”<sup>11</sup>

Gebara finds that liberation theology in general has not challenged the underlying patriarchal structure of Christianity itself. While she acknowledges that liberation theology offers a more collective understanding of God and stresses the social nature of sin and that God is a God of life and of justice who has a preferential option for the poor, she finds that its anthropology and cosmology remain riddled with patriarchy.

Gebara situates the *third stage* of Latin American feminist theology in the postmodern paradigm and invites us to consider what she calls “holistic ecofeminism.” I will be dealing with Gebara’s understanding of and contribution to ecofeminism in Chapter 3.

The schemas elaborated by Tamez and Gebara are very useful in describing the development of Latin American feminist theology, although both Gebara and Tamez insist that these are not fixed periods; often two phases can overlap in the same country or area or church. The following section combines the insights of both.

## THE THREE PHASES OF LATIN AMERICAN FEMINIST THEOLOGY

### First Phase (1970–80)

#### *Political/Economic Context*

- effervescence of leftist political parties and popular movements (union, barrio, etc.)

- revolutionary struggles, which provoked military coups, followed by dictatorship
- repression through massacres, disappearances, torture, generalized human rights abuse

#### *Ecclesiastical/Theological Context*

- CEBs spring up all over Latin America
- grassroots reading and interpretation of the Bible (*lectura popular*)
- option for the poor; texts read with the “eyes of the poor”
- Medellín and Puebla documents
- ecumenism based on option for the poor, cutting through denominational lines
- theology of liberation comes into its own with its methodology of reflection based on praxis
- the poor become the theological locus
- key themes are the Exodus, the “valley of tears,” the historical Jesus

#### *Construction of Feminist Consciousness*

- women theologians and biblical scholars identified totally with liberation theology
- women seen as oppressed historical subjects in the Bible, in theology, and in the churches
- women began to reclaim a more equal space within society
- theological point of departure became the double oppression of women based on both sex and class
- a tendency to overvalue the feminine and a certain wanting to “even the score” by making women the “good gender”
- almost no dialogue among feminist theologians from Latin America or between those from Latin America and the North (instead, a good deal of suspicion)

#### *Hermeneutics*

- biblical interpretation was both militant and grassroots-based
- liberation texts were emphasized over other texts
- the task was to rediscover biblical women as key players in the history of liberation (Sarah, Miriam, Ruth, Esther,

Deborah, Judith, Magdalene, Mary, the Egyptian midwives, Hagar), which took place without awareness of the patriarchal context of the text itself (for example, the history of Judith)

*Inclusive Language*

- no awareness of sexist language
- a masculine divinity
- the word *feminist* is rejected as a foreign concept, imported from the North

**Second Phase (1980–90)**

*Political/Economic Context*

- in Central America the Sandinista triumph, revolutionary movements in El Salvador, Guatemala
- in the southern cone dictatorships give way to restricted democracies
- Bush-Reagan era; Santa Fe documents
- foreign debt becomes a crushing weight on the poor

*Ecclesiastical/Theological Context*

- ideological polarization becomes acute (in Latin America, CLAI vs. CONELA)
- Vatican documents condemn liberation theology
- liberation theologians become interested in the “women’s perspective”
- liberation theology becomes more receptive to the topic of “women” per se
- key themes are theology of life vs. theology of death; idolatry; martyrdom; spirituality of liberation

*Construction of Feminist Consciousness*

- growing commitment to see women’s perspective at every turn
- growing critique of all theology for its anthropocentrism and patriarchal mindset

- starting point in women's experience, bringing a different discourse to theology because of biological, cultural, and historical influences
- efforts to rescue discourse related to God, for example, the maternal face of God
- efforts toward the feminization of theological concepts
- praxis of love and caring
- lots of innovation in liturgy
- openness to feminist contributions from both Latin American and northern feminists

### *Hermeneutics*

- biblical interpretation sees every text from women's perspective
- search for feminine images of God (mother/father, Holy Spirit as feminine)
- commitment to feminize theology, to combine justice with tenderness
- biblical work centers on valuing the ordinary, pleasure, play; reinterpreting of virtues traditionally linked to women such as maternity, tenderness, sacrifice, commitment
- confrontation with patriarchal texts and insistence that they are not normative
- reconstruction of texts and questioning of sources of biblical authority

### *Inclusive Language*

- God as mother/father; as he/she
- identification with the word *feminist* becomes more common

## **Third Phase (1990 and onward)**

### *Political/Economic Context*

- fall of the Berlin Wall, and with it, socialism as a model
- Gulf War, invasion of Panama, defeat of the Sandinistas
- neoliberal economic model firmly entrenched; market ideology reigns supreme

- state as benefactor of people is dismantled
- popular movements in general are weakened, lackluster interest in reform

*Ecclesiastical/Theological Context*

- CEBs stagnate
- ecclesial crisis within both Protestantism and Catholicism
- Santo Domingo document (Catholic) is weak
- CLAI III document (Protestant) is weak
- amazing growth of Pentecostalism
- new energies coming from indigenous movement (anniversary of five hundred years)
- Chiapas becomes a rallying cry, “a society where all fit!”
- women’s movement gains strength, as well as the black movement
- key themes are the market and the gods of sacrifice, the new evangelization, ecology and the land, dialogue with other religions
- option for the poor evolves into option for the impoverished other

*Construction of Feminist Consciousness*

- feeling of being “boxed in” with no room to expand
- need to reconstruct all theology from a feminist perspective
- use of gender theory to analyze situation of oppression
- growing contributions from black and indigenous women
- new theories coming from the anthropology of symbolism
- challenge to confront the patriarchal structures latent in Christianity itself
- challenge to confront the patriarchal anthropology and cosmology present in liberation theology
- calls for redefinition of both the human and the Divine
- openness to holistic ecofeminism (Ivone Gebara is key figure)

*Hermeneutics*

- body and the ordinary are considered hermeneutic categories

- call for a non-sacrificial reading of redemption
- key themes are the fiesta, joy, embodiedness, sexuality
- gender theory is applied to biblical texts
- creative reconstruction of texts to hear the lost voices of women
- major challenge is to reinvent all Christian theology in relation to the concepts of God, Jesus, Trinity, sin, and redemption, going beyond what is currently considered orthodox
- key question being raised is how to articulate a feminist hermeneutic that takes into account the basic problems of impoverished peoples

### *Inclusive Language*

- non-sexist names for the Divinity (Energy, Mercy, Infinite Compassion, Grace)
- terms *feminist* and *ecofeminist* now commonly accepted

## **MY PERSONAL JOURNEY TO FEMINIST THEOLOGY**

In 1996 Elsa Tamez's systematization of feminist theology inspired me to review my own life journey, which, curiously enough, closely parallels the three stages of feminist theology in Latin America described by Elsa Tamez and Ivone Gebara. Since the key starting point for doing feminist theology is one's own experience, I thought it appropriate to share my own journey. In writing this brief account of my journey, I was also struck by how closely it resembles or fits into the ecclesiology and theology of the times.

I was born on a May morning in 1942 to a close-knit family in a small US Midwestern town famous for its high school football team. My grandparents and all their children and grandchildren lived on the same short street. We all went to the same parish, which also provided most of our social life. I went to Catholic grade and high schools, where I found myself incredibly attracted to the sisters who taught me.

After high school I entered a convent and spent three years as a novice at the motherhouse farm in western Pennsylvania.

During those years my prayer was “Dear God, let me just keep up with this dedicated bunch.” My fellow novices (forty of us!) were a healthy, happy crowd, and the sisters in charge of our formation were warm and caring. I will always link my continual searching for community to my experience among the Sisters of the Humility of Mary. I belonged to this community for fourteen years.

After the novitiate I was sent to college, destined to become a high school teacher. Many of us entered an academic track to major or minor in Spanish because the community, responding to Pope John XXIII’s call to re-Christianize our “sister continent” of Latin America, had just opened a mission in Temuco, Chile, to work with Mapuche women.

After graduation from college I taught Spanish and social studies for four years in one of the community’s flagship schools for wealthy young women. I “wore lots of hats” in those very busy years, but two events in particular stand out. The first was when we took students across the country on a school bus to live with Cesar Chavez and the migrant farm workers for a month. The second was also a trip; we took a small group of girls to Mexico for summers (and one summer in Spain) to study Spanish.

By my third year as a high school teacher, I found myself getting restless. In 1969 I applied for and was awarded a fifteen-month East to West grant to study at the University of Hawaii, including three months of fieldwork in India. However, about a month after receiving the grant, the mother superior of my community called to say that one of the sisters was leaving the school. She asked me to postpone my grant and reapply the following year so I could take her place. I did as asked, but to my great disappointment I did not receive the grant the following year. On the rebound, I decided to join the Cleveland Mission Team to El Salvador. Throughout the ensuing years I’ve mulled over my being denied the chance to study in India and ending up instead in El Salvador, as that decision has so shaped my life. Since 1970, with only some short intermissions, I’ve been living and working in Latin America.

As I moved about—from teaching in a Catholic high school to doing mission work in Latin America—my ideas of the Divine also moved from where they had been. They seem always to be

closely connected with the women with whom I'm working. Having grown up in the pre-Vatican II Catholic tradition of the 1950s, my earliest image of the Divine was Mary, Mother of God and Mother of Christ. Mary was truly my mother: I went to her to be comforted when I was hurt or confused. All my prayers of petition were to her, because—as the popular theology of the times taught—“to Jesus through Mary.” She was the mediatrix par excellence; how could Christ refuse anything asked in his dear mother's name? As a young girl, God the Father was some remote being. (I supposed he looked like Michelangelo's old man with the beard, but I never had a very vivid vision or much interest in this faraway force.) Jesus, of course, was Jesus, and I trotted faithfully behind him through the liturgical cycle of his birth, boyhood, public life, suffering, death, and resurrection. But, if the truth be known, although Jesus was God's son and thus somehow also God, he was, in the end, the child of Mary. It was Mary who really mattered.

I cannot stress enough the importance of Mary as my *root image* of the Divine. My childhood was marked by May crownings, May altars, and novenas to Mary—all in the context of the liturgical cycle of my parish, St. Mary's, which was known for celebrating all the Marian feasts with great gusto. As a teenager I joined the Sodality, an organization whose members consecrate themselves in a special way to Mary, and became one of its leaders. Through the Sodality I felt called to serve the poor and less fortunate in the spirit of Mary (and her son) and engaged in a variety of apostolic services. All through these years there were strong female models in my life whose devotion to Mary—and love of life—continually inspired me.

The religious congregation I entered also had a special devotion to Mary. For several months during my novitiate I even consecrated myself secretly as a slave of Mary (a rather macabre series of observances taught by the French saint Louis de Montfort) until my novice mistress found out and forbade my “slavery.” Today, given the wealth of feminist research about patriarchal repressions of the goddess image in our history, I am much better able to put my Marian devotion into perspective. At the time, it was extremely attractive to me and to many other novices.

However, my religious training in the convent introduced me to more rigorous study of the Jesus of the Gospels and to a more enlightened understanding of trinitarian theology. Jesus became more pivotal: it was he who introduced us to his Father as Abba; it was he who left us his Spirit to be with us always. But not only did Jesus become an attractive historical figure, he also became my “spouse.” (My convent formation was right on the cusp that divided a more scripture-based Vatican II theology from a more pietistic theology where vowed religious women became “brides of Christ.”) I clearly remember the day of my first vows, when I had a mystical experience of being wed forever to this God-bridegroom, who, because he loved me in such a special way, would be most demanding of me (“to whom much is given, much will be asked”). And so, at the age of twenty-one, wearing his betrothal ring, I set out to save the world for Christ.

While the Second Vatican Council was taking place, an eruption of Catholic social encyclicals from Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI called the church to “open the windows” to let in the Spirit of justice and compassion. Key to those times was the conviction that the church was not a structure or an institution but the people of God on a journey. Ever a product of my times, I became an enthusiastic Vatican II Catholic, preaching, teaching, and trying to put into practice the new social doctrine of the church. Nourished by a simpler, more understandable liturgical cycle in which the Mass became a meal shared among friends, I found myself involved in the civil rights movement, in the anti-war movement, and in the grape boycott to promote justice for the migrant farm workers. Radical to the core, my habit and veil gradually changed to jeans and a sweatshirt. By 1970 (not entirely altruistically, having just lost the chance to go to Hawaii and India) I had decided that the most authentic way to live out the gospel was to become a missionary in Latin America.

### **The First Stage: The 1970s**

Living in El Salvador in 1970 was a major change from teaching at an upper-class girls’ school. Tremendous poverty, heat,

government corruption and violence, and the growing political restlessness of the people overwhelmed me. I was twenty-eight years old, and my only qualifications as a missionary were that I was a high-school Spanish teacher and that I had been deeply “converted” to establishing peace and justice in the world by taking to heart the social doctrine of the church!

I still remember the evening I arrived in El Salvador. Some of my future colleagues met me at the airport in a jeep. After what seemed like hours of bouncing over dark mountain roads in a downpour, we arrived at what appeared to be the end of the world. I descended from the jeep and found myself knee deep in mud. Dressed as I was in my Sunday best “cool nun duds,” the villagers in the tiny hamlet of Chirrilagua must have thought I was a creature from another planet. I was so relieved to have finally arrived that I didn’t cry over my mud bath. However, when folks amiably conversing outside my window awakened me at 4:30 the next morning, I did weep. I quickly learned that because of the heat, the best hours for socializing are those of the very early morning. I soon found myself rising in those cool predawn hours to stroll in the refreshing breeze and visit with folks—all of whom were up and ready for a new day.

I went to El Salvador as an idealistic young nun ready to serve the poor. Since I had been a popular high school teacher back home, I assumed I would be equally successful working with teenagers in the barrios. Very quickly, however, I realized I was in a different world, a world where poverty was so acute that children really did die of hunger and disease. I learned that in El Salvador unjust structures were so embedded in the very air we breathed that only something like a revolution could change the stifling status quo.

I only lasted two years. During that time I formed a youth center in La Union that brought together most of the town’s young people. It lasted until the local bishop—who was also the chaplain of the local military barracks—shut it down for being “subversive.” After that major setback I began working to solidify the several CEBs that the mission team was forming both in La Union and in the outlying *cantones*. Another sister and myself developed a group-dynamics program for rural women

because it soon became evident to us that women needed to be able to express what they were feeling, but were timid about speaking out in a group.

I clearly remember the *campesinos* with whom I worked. As they discovered their dignity and their power through a militant reading of scripture, they would often tell us that they would rather “die on their feet than live on their knees.” Engraved in my memory forever is the moment during those first CEB meetings when we pastoral agents would ask: “Brothers and sisters, is there injustice in our world?” A long pause, then, finally, *Si, madre, hay mucha injusticia en nuestro mundo*. And then the process of what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire called *concientización* would begin. It was in these CEB meetings that I too discovered a new way of reading scripture. I discovered a Jesus who took sides with the oppressed and downtrodden in their struggles for a more just society. However, I couldn’t see a role for myself in this struggle: I was a naive *gringa* who couldn’t even play the guitar. I also realized that the same injustices and class divisions in society that cried out for vengeance also existed within the church, which was polarized around the causes of the extreme poverty of El Salvador’s majority. I was fortunate to meet Archbishop Oscar Romero—and this was before his conversion when he was still known for being a conservative. He visited a course I was giving for young *campesinas*. I have a vivid recollection of his frayed cassock, his kindness, and his real concern for the girls.

I left El Salvador in 1972, disillusioned about the possibility that the kingdom of God might come to this suffering people—at least during my lifetime. I left convinced that I had seen what liberation theologians called social sin—the exploitation, torture, hatred, and utter disrespect that the wealthy and powerful aimed at the poor. I felt I had confronted the “powers and principalities” of a dominant class so entrenched in its position of privilege that it would never willingly relinquish anything that would compromise that position. I became more sympathetic to armed struggle because I saw no way out other than some sort of violent revolution.

I must note that the woman who replaced me on the mission team in El Salvador was Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel. She was

murdered in 1980, along with three other religious women, by the Salvadoran security forces. “There but for you, go I.” This has had and continues to have a great impact on the meaning and direction of my life.

I returned to the United States in crisis regarding both faith and identity. I left religious life. I felt I had been a failure as a missionary. I went to Chicago where I roomed with a good friend who had left the community a year before. Almost immediately, I fell in love with a theology professor at Loyola—an ex-Jesuit seminarian. When the relationship did not develop, I spent a rather dreary year as a “single.”

Then one day I saw an ad in the *National Catholic Reporter* inviting people to be a part of a missionary team to a small village in the Peruvian Andes. After several letters back and forth, I met David, the priest coordinating the effort, and agreed to be a part of his team. I spent the next three years (1973–76) living at an altitude of ten thousand feet and working as a pastoral agent in Huarochiri, a small town with a population of two thousand. I taught school, worked with a women’s group, and helped form a consumer’s cooperative. I grew to know firsthand the church of the poor and those working in liberation theology. We were committed to Paulo Freire’s method of conscientization and to the “see, judge, act” method of praxis to delve into the roots of oppression. In those years I came to know Gustavo Gutiérrez and his circle of Christians who were developing liberation theology and its practice. David was deeply involved in the progressive priests’ movement, ONIS, and we were both committed to what we all called a new way of being church. For me, the years in Huarochiri were also a time of contemplation because of the absolutely breathtaking beauty of the Andes. Also, because the villagers went to their fields around six in the morning and came home around six in the evening, it was hard to do much organizing, so I would walk the hills and valleys of this majestic part of Peru. Little by little I drew close to a people and a culture very rich in history and tradition. This period has left a lifelong mark.

With hindsight, I realize that I was quite dogmatic in those years. My letters home to my family and friends were filled with revolutionary zeal and condemnations of capitalism. I stubbornly

wore my “revolutionary uniform” of jeans, poncho, and boots everywhere. I identified with my biblical namesake, Judith, who killed the oppressor Holofernes to save her people.

My relationship with David also deepened during this time, but he was very committed to the priesthood, as it was understood by liberation theologians in those days. Many regarded the Colombian guerrilla priest Camilo Torres as a heroic figure. In 1976, however, the bishop of our area, a member of Opus Dei, dismissed all the priests, sisters, and pastoral agents working in the six parishes up and down the valley and replaced us with missionaries from Spain. This caused a major crisis, for us and also for the Peruvian church. In the end, after succumbing to a bad case of hepatitis, I went back to the United States. David, although he had left his community, continued to work as a priest in the mining camps in southern Peru.

Back in the United States, I was at my lowest ebb. I made a retreat with a good friend, while trying to let go of David and my life in Peru. In the fall of 1976 I enrolled in the Graduate School of Social Research in New York and earned a master’s degree in economics. I learned from friends at Maryknoll that Sergio Torres, a Chilean priest and liberation theologian in exile, was trying to organize groups who were doing liberation theology in the United States. I took a position as Sergio’s bilingual secretary and assistant in the Theology in the Americas office (which would eventually also become the office for EATWOT, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians). I worked during the day and studied at night—until one day in October when David called to propose marriage.

Many who had been “brought up” on liberation theology frowned on marriage as a step that would lead to “abandoning the struggle.” Inevitably, they felt, one became bourgeois and forgot the option for the poor. But we married in 1977. The songs at our wedding reflected our determination to continue accompanying the oppressed “as long as we both shall live.” On our honeymoon we went to Appalachia, where we thought we might find meaningful work. Midway through our trip, however, we received word from the American Friends Service Committee

(AFSC)—the Quakers—that the committee would like to interview us about being their representatives in Chile.

We arrived in Chile in October 1977. I was seven months pregnant, and our first son, Peter, was born on Christmas Day. Our second son, Benjamin, was born in Chile in 1979. I loved being a mother, and my maternal sentiments awakened a surprising link to the struggle against Chile's dictatorship. I felt a deep connection to the mothers whose loved ones had been "disappeared." I became more aware of the role that women—as women—were playing in the resistance movement. Although I had worked closely with women's groups in both El Salvador and in Huarochiri, my overriding commitment was to the class struggle. Although I was still firmly within the liberation framework of class analysis, in my last year in Chile I began to read about feminism.

The four years we spent in Chile (1977–81) were intense. This was the height of the Pinochet dictatorship, and our work involved supporting human rights groups, soup kitchens, artisan groups, and Mapuche groups, as well as sending reports monitoring the human rights situation back to AFSC headquarters. We worked closely with the Catholic church's Vicariate of Solidarity and also participated actively in a CEB located in a shantytown on Santiago's west side. In June 1981 David was arrested and interrogated by Chile's secret intelligence service for twenty-four hours. After some negotiation he was allowed to stay in Chile until October, when we agreed to leave the country.

### **The Second Stage: The 1980s**

I spent much of this decade trying to make sense of all that happened to me in El Salvador and Peru and in Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship. In early 1982 we arrived in Lima to work with the weekly *Latinamerica Press/Noticias Aliadas*. David served as director, and I was managing editor. We spent seven years reporting on the church and the world of the poor in Latin America—always from the perspective of liberation theology.

This was a privileged time. We were in contact with the key actors struggling for structural change in the 1980s, working for a viable socialism that would take into account the idiosyncrasies of Latin America. I interviewed many of the key liberation theologians in those years, including Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, Jon Sobrino, Sergio Torres, Diego Irrarázaval, and Ronaldo Muñoz. I also interviewed *comandantes* in the liberated areas of El Salvador, women who were searching for their disappeared loved ones, pastoral workers, and religious sisters and priests who were committed to a new way of being church among the poor. We worked to show the region's "other face," which was ignored by the mainline media.

In 1983 I joined several women who had participated in a workshop entitled "Patriarchy and the Church" at a meeting of Latin American feminists. At our meeting on the outskirts of Lima we formed what would become the Circle of Christian Feminists (Talitha Cumi), a collective of women committed to a feminist perspective on issues of faith and society. Two of Talitha's founders, Maryknoll sisters Rose Timothy Gavin and Rose Dominic Trapasso (the famous Roses of Lima), became mentors for me. Working with these women, I began to see the implications of patriarchy—especially as it exists within the Catholic church and even within liberation theology. I also began to search for more relevant images of the Sacred to nourish my spirituality. I started to question the obvious absence of women among the liberation theologians and the absence of concern within liberation theology about issues involving the lives of poor women, such as domestic violence. By the end of the decade I was deeply engaged in proposals coming from feminist theology and its challenges to liberation theology. And, in the end, I had become tired of so much martyrdom and so many calls for sacrifice to bring about a revolution that never seemed to come.

We left Lima in 1989 and went to Rome, where David became executive secretary of IDOC, an international documentation center, and I was named editor of the bimonthly magazine *IDOC Internazionale*. We were supposed to turn a dying organization around, but, in the end, it couldn't be done. My work there was exciting, though, because my mandate was to give the

magazine a new focus—a fusion of ecology and theology from a third-world perspective. Slowly I began to rethink my world view and my place within the larger story of the universe.

### **The Third Stage: The 1990s to the Present**

David and I had been close to the Maryknoll missionaries for many years. In 1990 we decided to leave Rome and return to Latin America through Maryknoll's lay mission program. As lay missionaries, we returned to Chile in early 1991, and our two sons, now teenagers, rediscovered their Chilean roots.

I returned to Chile as a convinced feminist and as a budding ecologist. In Rome I had devoured books and articles dealing with discoveries from what has come to be called the new science. Basic to this conversion was Thomas Berry's *The Dream of the Earth*. Berry, along with authors such as Brian Swimme, Charlene Spretnak, and Starhawk, captivated me with their new understanding of the universe as an ever more complex, transformational cosmogenesis. I began to realize that everything is—and always has been—interconnected, but that somewhere during our development as a species we managed to forget that basic fact. It seemed that our thought processes and systems were themselves permeated with dualism and patriarchy. My feminism evolved toward ecofeminism, and my theological questions veered toward more cosmological quests. Today I am comfortable describing the developing Mystery in which we live as “the call of the future,” because it is compatible with my understanding of cosmogenesis.

I searched for a community in Chile like the one I had experienced in Lima with Talitha Cumi. Such a Christian feminist organization did not yet exist in Santiago, but several women expressed interest in forming a group where we could celebrate our lives and our spiritualities without fear of being criticized. This is how the Con-spirando Collective was born.

In 1993 Ivone Gebara came to Chile and gave a course on holistic ecofeminism. Her insights were like rain on dry land. I felt she was naming and contextualizing my questions and doubts about how to define God, the place of Jesus in my life today, and

how to be faithful to the option for the poor and to the struggle for a better world when I no longer have the revolutionary fervor of the previous decades.

Compared with the 1970s and 1980s, I seem to have no “great project” to struggle for, although I admit being drawn to the idea of being part of a bioregion, an ecological village, a “shared garden.” I continue to search for a sustainable economic and cultural model that can be an alternative to current neoliberal capitalism. We try to eat lower on the food chain; to commit to recycling, composting, organic gardening; and to use the bus more and the car less. David is much more diligent at this than I am. I do focus on planning and celebrating rituals to capture where we are on our journey. Over time these rituals have become less verbal and more embodied through a freer use of dance and movement.

I still am searching for ever more authentic answers to the meaning of life. Although I have grown tremendously uncomfortable with the androcentrism and anthropocentrism of the central doctrines of Christianity, I do not consider myself post-Christian. I am a pilgrim who, along with many others, is searching for post-patriarchal theological *and* cosmological answers that will give us energy and pleasure in being alive at this time in history in this small corner of the planet.

In the end all of us, our history and our future, are radically connected to the fate of this fragile green planet we call home. We are entering a new epoch where we humans need to engage in a profound listening to voices long forgotten: those of the sea, the rivers, the mountains, the forests, the stars, the moon; those arising from our genetic memory—our ancestors, both human and otherwise; those of our own bodies—mine, yours, the friend who has been abused, the new baby, the youngster, the old woman now wrinkled and worn, the Earth itself. Key to this is a broader sense of kinship. In a very real way there is no “other”; the other is myself, because we all come from the same source.

## **THE CURRENT STATUS OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

While Latin American feminist and ecofeminist theologies grew out of liberation theology, they now take a more critical

view of several of liberation theology's key tenets. A review of the current status of liberation theology can be helpful. A heated debate is now taking place within liberation theology as to whether or not it is in crisis, given what appears to be the collapse of historical socialism. Some theologians, like Gustavo Gutiérrez, continue to insist that the end of the communist world does not affect liberation theology because its commitment was never to Marxism but to the poor. He argues that liberation theology is more urgently needed than ever in the face of neoliberal capitalism, which has aggravated the disparities between rich and poor.<sup>12</sup> Gutiérrez reaffirms the preferential option for the poor, reminding us that poverty has human and socioeconomic causes. While he acknowledges that liberation theology may have overemphasized economic factors, he insists that in its description of the poor as the "insignificant ones of history," women, especially poor women, as well as ethnic minorities were always implicitly included. He particularly welcomes current reinterpretations of the Bible from a women's perspective.<sup>13</sup>

Juan-José Tamayo, a Spanish liberation theologian who has written and taught extensively on Latin American liberation theology for more than thirty years, is one of the more enthusiastic protagonists of including emerging Latin American theologies under the general heading of liberation theology. Tamayo believes that while at first liberation theology emphasized the socioeconomic aspects of poverty and class conflict, now, conscious of its own reductionism, it has opened itself to the new faces of the poor—marginal races and ethnic groups, cultures that have been overlooked, religions that have been outlawed, doubly and in many cases triply oppressed women, oppressed nature, abandoned street children, entirely excluded peoples and countries, and so on.<sup>14</sup> Convinced that liberation theology must grapple with the major changes of the twenty-first century, he welcomes challenges coming from "new faces."

Tamayo is also aware of the discomfort feminist theologians feel about the androcentrism of much of liberation theology, and he lauds feminist theologians' use of the hermeneutics of suspicion to deconstruct categories that exclude women not only from theological discussion but from the Christian experience itself. He underlines the work feminist theologians are doing in initiating a

post-patriarchal reconstruction of Christianity. Familiar with the ecofeminist posture of *Con-spirando*, he sees ecofeminism as a logical development in the search to discover the root causes of women's oppression and the destruction of the Earth. Tamayo views these as exciting, viable themes that liberation theology must address, and he speaks of both feminist and ecofeminist liberation theology.<sup>15</sup>

However, some leading Latin American liberation theologians are not as enthusiastically open to these new faces. Tension was evident at the theological congress sponsored by the Sociedad de Teología y Ciencias de la Religión (SOTER) held in Brazil in July 2000, where many of the "fathers" of liberation theology were present. It became evident during the congress that humanity is not only facing a major change in epoch but an end to a theological era "characterized by fragmentation and a search for new theological spaces, an enormously complex time in its pluralism, but at the same time promising and fruitful in its resources."<sup>16</sup>

It was neither feminist nor ecofeminist theology that produced a heated debate at the congress, but rather Leonardo Boff's work in the area of ecological theology. In his presentation Boff expanded his definition of the option for the poor. In the 1960s, he said, liberation theology emphasized the economically and politically poor; in the 1970s the definition was extended to the culturally poor and included indigenous peoples, blacks, and other discriminated minorities; in the 1980s emphasis was given to the question of gender and the oppression of women; and now in the 1990s, liberation theology had begun to hear the cry of the earth,

also impoverished because it is unjustly despoiled and exploited systematically. For each concrete oppression, we responded by developing a corresponding strategy and liberating pedagogy. Never has the Theology of Liberation fallen victim to an impoverished concept of the poor. It always tried to deepen its understanding of the complex reality of any poverty imposed unjustly.<sup>17</sup>

The great "poor" at this time, then, is the Earth itself, which humanity can collectively destroy. We must change, or we will

perish, Boff warns, using the metaphor of the spaceship with a few first-class passengers and many poor, the latter confined to the baggage department. But both groups depend on the welfare of the ship. There will be no Noah's ark this time round to save a few while the rest perish.<sup>18</sup>

Boff calls upon liberation theology to situate its reflection in the context of the new cosmology that has emerged from the latest scientific discoveries and that contemplates a broader understanding of evolution. He argues that all of us are being held hostage by a way of living and ways of production and by relations with the environment that imply systematic violence against persons, social classes, countries, ecosystems, and the Earth itself. He concludes:

The option for the poor—the hallmark of Theology of Liberation—must be integral: all the poor with all their many faces, and the great poor one, the Earth, known as Gaia, Pachamama, and Great Mother. It is important to free all. But there are priorities. First is the urgent need to liberate the Earth through a real revolution in our paradigm of relationality with her. . . . This suggests a holistic paradigm based on reverence, respect and care for her biodiversity, integrity, and beauty.<sup>19</sup>

Boff's expansion of the option for the poor to include the Earth itself caused a major altercation between him and his brother Clodovis at one of the plenary sessions. Clodovis Boff represents those liberation theologians who find Leonardo Boff's embracing of the new cosmology dangerous to liberation theology's traditional commitment to poor and downtrodden *people*. In Gustavo Gutiérrez's words, *¿Dónde dormirán los pobres?* (Where will the poor sleep?). It is the poor majorities of Latin America who have always been the central focus of liberation theology. There is a growing fear among some liberation theologians that the concrete lives of the poor will no longer be the locus of their theology and that the issue of the poor seems to be losing its theological and ethical prominence.<sup>20</sup> There is also fear that the traditional concerns of liberation theology will be watered down by new

paradigms, such as the new cosmology. It seems likely that this debate will continue.

José Comblin, another of liberation theology's pioneers, is more blunt in his assessment of liberation theology's future: "Liberation theology is at a standstill," he says, "because Catholic theology and Christian theology in general are at a standstill; nothing new is coming out . . . there is no more interest in theology."<sup>21</sup> Comblin is pessimistic about liberation theology's accomplishments. Now eighty, he feels free to be blunt. He says that the major reason there has been stagnation in people's willingness to participate in CEBs is the arrival of television. Even more pointedly, he says that the CEB movement arose not from the people but from pastoral agents who saw in them a new form of church and the promise of a new society. When such hopes were frustrated, pastoral agents often gave up.<sup>22</sup> He finds the CEBs riddled with clericalism and therefore condemned to wither on the vine. He notes that Catholics, along with everyone else, are consulting other wisdom traditions and constructing their own belief syntheses.

Comblin believes that if liberation theology had been grounded in a strong autonomous culture, it too could have been autonomous. But given the current state of Latin American culture, he notes, such a situation is still a dream. He asks: "Where is Latin American liberation theology taught today? Who reads it? In Latin America, a tiny minority of the educated religious public. Rejection has produced an isolation, the upshot of which is that liberation theology is better known and more read in Europe and the United States than in Latin America itself."<sup>23</sup> For Comblin, the value of liberation theology is that it questions theology as a whole. It directs Christian thinking beyond traditional Scholastic theology and the church's traditional social teaching inspired by that theology.<sup>24</sup> However, he challenges some of liberation theology's most prized affirmations. For instance, he says that the "irruption of the poor" happened only in the sense that the church became aware of the poor. He also argues that while liberation theologians and pastoral workers were proposing radical change, most of the poor simply wanted to improve their lives. The real revolution, in his opinion, took place in the second half

of the twentieth century with the migration of millions of *campesinos* to the cities. That migration meant moving from one civilization to another.<sup>25</sup> He also criticizes consciousness-raising as “injecting ideology into the mind of the popular classes: a task of instilling doctrine so that the people would learn to feel what the theory said that they ought to feel and to want what the theory said that they should want.”<sup>26</sup>

Comblin notes that the last stronghold of Christianity was the family. But with the sexual revolution and the discovery of effective means of birth control, women were able to cut the cords of total economic dependency on their male partners. He marks other effects of the sexual revolution: the manifestation of those “repressions, fantasies, and taboos—an unconscious or semiconscious world that had never been brought to awareness. . . . For many women, the sexual revolution was—and still is—experienced as the most visible and most vital manifestation of personal freedom.”<sup>27</sup>

Comblin concludes that women, indigenous people, and blacks have been unwilling to be assimilated into liberation theology, and rightly so; the starting point for feminist theology has been a questioning of almost the entire history of humanity from the perspective of patriarchy. “For women, it is not enough to return to early Christianity: the solution will not be found there. And it is not very likely that the issue of women will be resolved through a theology, because it has much deeper roots which go beyond the domain of Christianity.”<sup>28</sup>

Comblin’s frank evaluation concurs with what other analyses have pointed out. Although the problems of poverty, marginality, and inequitable income distribution have been exacerbated in recent decades, there is a growing shift in consciousness. The current situation does not result from capitalism alone but from a system, which today we name patriarchy, that goes back more than five thousand years. Although liberation theology has been persecuted by an increasingly conservative papacy, this is not the major cause for its apparent demise. The collapse of historical socialism has meant the loss of a utopian horizon, without which it becomes difficult to focus, mobilize, and sustain a struggle for a different, more just world. That world must be

able to be imagined, and at this juncture of history, it cannot be. No revolution can survive without a utopian vision, and today, the old words and symbols that once energized a generation of liberation theology activists no longer evoke such revolutionary energy. It appears that a deep historical shift is taking place.

Some would see this shift as a call to go deeper and address issues neglected by liberation theology and to seek new paradigms and new sources of inspiration. Many liberation theologians see this as an enriching experience, while others maintain that questions coming from feminist and cosmological perspectives go beyond the basic commitment of liberation theology to the poor. New issues include analyzing not only neoliberal capitalism as the cause of oppression but also the older oppression of patriarchy; questioning the traditional theism of an omnipotent, anthropomorphic Creator; and addressing the lingering dualism that separates mind from matter, natural from supernatural, and the human from the rest of the life community. At the same time it is important to stress that liberation theology has opened the door for those who have gone on to newer theological perspectives—indeed, it unveiled the possibility of dreaming in new ways. It is also necessary to acknowledge that the realities of poverty, injustice, and oppression that liberation theology addressed in the 1970s and 1980s have not gone away and that the blood of the martyrs still cries out. But the new millennium brings urgent new challenges and questions to be addressed:

- Can we speak of the poor and their children inheriting the Earth if it is devastated and poisoned, bereft of so many soulful presences?
- Can we live out an option for the poor without rediscovering our deep kinship with all living beings, our spiritual belonging to the wildly creative, deeply spiritual, unfathomably interdependent network we call the cosmos?
- Can we be of service to the Latin American poor, mostly *mestizos*, without more deeply imbibing the religious wisdom of their largely forgotten indigenous heritage?

- Can love for the people be sustained without a profound re-discovery of our bodies, of the healing and animating power of tenderness and sensuality?
- Can we expect the poor to be empowered while failing to deal with our gender issues, our hierarchical habits, our Western craving for control?
- Can our solidarity bear fruit if our allegiance is to an immutable anthropomorphic deity with a ready-made plan for the human future?
- Can the God-images of traditional theism fill us with the energy, the burning passion required to face these historic challenges?<sup>29</sup>

### **THE FEMINIST AND ECOFEMINIST CRITIQUE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

Although Latin American feminist and ecofeminist theologians do not dispute their origins in liberation theology they are now experiencing varying degrees of ambiguity about whether they are still doing liberation theology, or if their criticisms of patriarchal theology place them outside this playing field. While most feminist theologians are increasingly critical of liberation theology's ingrained androcentrism, many first-generation liberation theologians—and most are clerics—have been the teachers of today's feminist and ecofeminist theologians. Thus there is a long history of friendship and a certain reluctance to criticize one's mentors. In addition to these strong personal relationships, feminist theologians still agree with much of liberation theology's analysis, especially regarding the devastating effects of the current neoliberal economic model on the region's poor. They ask, "What can feminist theology from Latin America and the Caribbean contribute to the knowledge, criticism, and defeat of this globalized, neo-liberal economy?"<sup>30</sup> They also engage in theology from the locus of the poor, focusing on poor women and continually deepening their analysis of the feminization of poverty in a globalized world.<sup>31</sup>

One of the severest criticisms feminist and ecofeminist theologians level against historical liberation theology is its avoidance of the issues of sexual and reproductive rights, especially as they affect poor women. Finnish feminist scholar Elina Vuola has examined this gap in her book *Limits of Liberation*. She charges that the stances of Latin American liberation theologians on sexual ethics have not moved from traditional Catholic teaching, which reflects the church's misogynist view of women. She notes, "One of the first causes of death for women of reproductive age all over the Third World, including Latin America, is the complications after an illegal abortion, [but] preventing the death of poor women has not been an explicit part of liberation theologians' 'agenda' of defending the poor."<sup>32</sup>

Vuola views the concept of the poor in liberation theology as vague and homogenized. Until recently the poor were defined principally in economic terms and as productive and political subjects.<sup>33</sup> She points out that "there has been a yawning gap in LT [liberation theology] which has to do with human corporality, sexuality and sexual ethics. The right of a female subject to her body and 'bodiliness' has been absent."<sup>34</sup> There seems to be an inability to see "domestic" problems as "real" problems, given the supposedly more pressing survival struggles of the poor majorities. Furthermore, the unequal power struggles existing between men and women have been largely ignored. This, Vuola charges, underlines liberation theology's disconnection between theory and practice: "Nothing is said of the reality of illegal abortions and the high rates of domestic violence and households headed by women, which are some of the most burning problems for Latin American women."<sup>35</sup> She concludes that sexual ethics is an area in which liberation theologians are far from their stated ideals and method as a praxis-oriented theology that considers ethical reasoning and action key. She insists that defending poor women has not been part of liberation theology's priorities. The reason is that "'the poor' are seen mainly as productive subjects, understood in the framework of Marxist class analysis, and not as bodily, gendered, and reproductive subjects as well."<sup>36</sup>

Mexican feminist theologian María Pilar Aquino argues the same point:

The masculine theological focus has covered up the oppressive relations lived in the private area, and concealed relationships of domination exercised in the domestic sphere, where it is women who always endure the worse part. Ordinary daily life for an androcentric vision does not have epistemological value, nor does it form part of its attempts to understand the horizon of reality, that is, it does not influence the doing of theology. What, in effect, happens here is that the masculine theological focus grants a character of *naturality* to private, everyday life.<sup>37</sup>

Criticism of liberation theology's androcentric vision has come to the fore in the third phase of feminist theology. Ecofeminist theologian Ivone Gebara argues that while feminist theology embraces liberation theology's critique of Euro-centered universalism, liberation theology is guilty of a similar masculine and androcentric universalism—the result of the education and formation of most male liberation theologians (primarily clerics, she stresses) in Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy and theology. This, she says, is where the two perspectives are most in conflict. Ecofeminist theology relies on different philosophical sources and conducts its research outside clerical circles and at the margins of ecclesial centers of power.<sup>38</sup> Liberation theology's frame of reference continues to be one of underlining the discontinuity between God's life and human life. Gebara argues that

the fundamentally anthropocentric and androcentric character of liberation theology appears unquestionable. It speaks of God in human history, a God who in the end remains the Creator and Lord. . . . It senses no need to re-examine the cosmological and anthropological foundations of the Christian faith. It reaffirms the goodness and justice of God's being without raising questions about the

repercussions, throughout human history, of traditional or historically conditioned images of God.<sup>39</sup>

I will return to these arguments in Chapter 3 when I review Gebara's understanding of ecofeminism.

## **FEMINIST BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS**

There are two very clear currents within the third stage of Latin American feminist theology: holistic ecofeminism and feminist biblical hermeneutics. The two are not exclusive and can indeed complement one another. But those feminist scholars working to reinterpret biblical texts from the standpoint of feminist hermeneutics are, perhaps, more committed than their ecofeminist counterparts to redeeming biblical traditions from their patriarchal interpretations.<sup>40</sup> According to Colombian feminist biblicist, Carmita Navia Velasco, feminist biblical scholarship is alive and well in Latin America. She reports that today it is not just a question of rereading texts with a critical feminist eye but also of searching for and examining the scriptures on topics that range from themes such as the body to violence and peace. She mentions feminist biblicists such as Alicia Winters, Tania Sampaio, Elsa Tamez, Irene Foulkes, and herself, among others, and cites the biblical journal *RIBLA*, published in Costa Rica, as a major publisher for their work.<sup>41</sup>

Navia Velasco says that ecofeminism in Latin America is especially rich in offering a more vibrant spirituality, including "a full reconciliation with one's being born a woman; a rediscovery of one's female genealogy and the role played by mothers, grandmothers, aunts, etc. in transmitting the faith; a joyful and full reconciliation with our bodies; a search for alternative forms of tenderness; and above all, a recovery and reworking of traditional symbols of the sacred."<sup>42</sup> Here she mentions the contributions of Ivone Gebara and the Con-spirando Collective.

This second current, ecofeminism, along with its implications for theology, ethics, and spirituality, will be explored in the following chapters.

I sense that “all creation is groaning” for a new vision of who we are. We are in a time of Great Turning, of the Great-in-Between, some would say even a dark time. We are experiencing the waning days of some larger historical period but cannot yet glimpse the rebirth to come. Who are we? What do we want? What appears to be happening at the psychic level to many of us? I have no answers, only intimations, most of which come from a more holistic perspective offered by ecofeminism. So, along with a growing number of Latin American women, I invite you to consider ecofeminism, its theory and its practice.