



# LIFT EVERY VOICE

## Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite  
& Mary Potter Engel, Editors

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James  
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Credits are found on page 330.

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Mary Potter Engel, &  
Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, 1989

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# Introduction: Making the Connections Among Liberation Theologies Around the World

MARY POTTER ENGEL  
and SUSAN BROOKS THISTLETHWAITE

This textbook is an introduction to the theological task from the perspective of the theologies of liberation. It is, in fact, not wholly correct to say that the theologies of liberation share a perspective, for each liberation theology, whether Black, Hispanic, feminist, or Latin American, is characterized by its distinctive viewpoint. What these different theologies do share is their commitment to social justice.

In the past twenty years an explosion has taken place in Christianity. All around the world popular movements are rising up out of the culture of silence and finding their voices.<sup>1</sup> In Latin America, Asia, Africa, and North America the spirit is moving and communities of the oppressed are forming, crying out against their suffering and the social, political, economic, and religious structures that give rise to that suffering. But that is only half the story. These cries of protest are the signs not of a mass outpouring of hatred and revenge, but of a movement committed to working for liberation toward abundant life. Realizing that “only justice can stop a curse,”<sup>2</sup> these communities have begun a new practice of Christianity, experimenting with new ways of being the church, engaging in the practice of justice, and reflecting critically on the meaning of this practice. Theology done in these communities grows out of solidarity with those suffering and in need and is rooted in particular social justice contexts.

In the course of their work toward liberation, these communities have given birth to theologians and spiritual leaders who accept the responsibilities of being “organic intellectuals.” Grounded in the life and practice of these specific communities and accountable to them, these

theologians have accepted as their tasks the representation of the community, the articulation of a foundation for the intra- and extra-communal demands, and the specification of the fundamental elements appropriate to the community's possibilities for knowledge and analysis of reality.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the "organic intellectuals" of the liberation movements around the world, or liberation theologians, are not part of an intellectual elite that fabricates ideas for the theologically illiterate and helpless masses. Rather, they are formally trained individuals who, because they are engaged in the struggle for liberation of a particular community and committed to it, contribute their skills of analysis to their community's discernment of the way of life. As Anita Hill and Leo Treadway put it, these theologians are advocates who do not speak "to or for" certain communities, but "with and on behalf of" them.

This crucial shift in the role of the theologian from individual scholarly authority to reflective community advocate is perhaps most evident in the growing number of theological working groups and collectively-authored publications in liberation theology. A theological working group formed the discussion upon which Juan Luis Segundo based his five-volume series, *Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*. Three recent volumes, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*, *God's Fierce Whimsy*, and *Revolutionary Forgiveness*, were all written by theological collectives.<sup>4</sup> Whether actually written down by individuals or collectives, liberation theology is clearly a communally-based and authorized theology, with liberation theologians lending their voices to the movements of which they are a part.

Many responsible teachers of systematic theology today have sought to include in their courses representatives from the theologies of liberation. Those who have participated in the making of this volume, however, contend that it is not possible to force theologies which represent radical methodological shifts into other normative theological schemas. New wine bursts old wineskins. The location of theological doctrines in an overall constructive schema determines their meaning. This volume proposes a new constructive outline, beginning with contextual method. In order to enter the theological task from liberation perspectives, it is necessary to begin by learning its method, an approach characterized by a commitment to doing theology contextually, communally, and concretely.

## CONTEXTUALITY

Our intent in bringing together these diverse voices is not to suggest that in the end there is a kind of liberation theological Esperanto, a single language shared by all. That would be to make the same mistake liberation theologians have accused North American white male theologians of making: namely, to assume that there is one universal theology. On the contrary, liberation theologies have argued from the beginning that social location is important, that the context in which one



does theology significantly shapes the method, content, and structure of theology.<sup>5</sup> By bringing together this variety of liberation theologians, therefore, we intend to underline the differences among them that occur because each comes out of a different social, economic, political, and cultural context.

There are two reasons for emphasizing the differences among liberation theologies. It concretely demonstrates the general point that all liberation theologies have made from the beginning: that all theology, including so-called universal theology, is inevitably and inescapably contextual and must acknowledge its limits. And it corrects the common misunderstanding that many white North American theologians and Christians have of liberation theologies. In their attempts to understand this novel movement many have inadvertently lumped all liberation theologies together, ignoring the differences among them. The First World's invention of the term *Third World* is one example of this. As Shiva Naipaul comments, the term itself exhibits imperialism, for it is a term of bloodless universality that robs individuals and societies of their particularity. In the spirit of clarity we go forth and denude them. Adapting the opening sentence of *Anna Karenina*, we might say that each society, like each family, is unhappy in its own way.

Even the one banner of "third worldhood" is as absurd and denigrating as the old assertion that all Chinese look alike. People look alike only when you cannot be bothered to look at them closely.<sup>6</sup> "Third World" then is "a flabby concept," and "an ideological instrument of the West."<sup>7</sup> As Naipaul suggests, to throw Asian, African, and Latin American all together in one heap is to miss the very real differences among them. The same may be said of all liberation theologies: North American feminist liberation theologies, gay and lesbian liberation theologies, Black liberation theologies, Native American theologies, Latin American liberation theologies, and *minjung* theologies. They are not clones. They are not interchangeable. Each has its own peculiar interests, emphases, viewpoints, analyses, and aims, dependent upon the requirements of its own particular social context.

For example, while Latin American theologians have focused their attention on developing the notions of human agency, freedom, and history (see chapter 9), Native American and feminist theologians have concentrated more on constructing a new view of nature. Or, while North American Black theologians and Latin American theologians have contributed new understandings of evil as structural and systemic, feminists have offered creative ways of understanding sin as self-denial (see chapter 11). For this reason it is as important to speak of liberation theologies as liberation theology.

In order to emphasize the contextuality of all theology and the specific contexts of different liberation theologies, we have included a wide variety of theologians in this text. Though our selection is not exhaustive, and is,

indeed, flawed by the absence of certain voices, we hope to provide enough diversity to allow the reader listening to these new voices to discern the differences among them and to learn that "one of the greatest honors we can confer on other people is to see them as they are, to recognize not only that they exist but that they exist in a specific way, and have specific realities."<sup>8</sup>

This recognition of diversity is equally important on the individual level. No one of our contributors presents her- or himself as (or should be taken as) *the* spokesperson for her or his particular community. They are certainly voices responding to and accountable to their communities, advocates within and on behalf of particular communities, but by no means are they irreplaceable or exclusive representatives.

The distinctiveness of social location in liberation theologies has not always led to celebration of diversity and a search for connections with one another. It has also led to unnecessary divergences. Many liberation theologians, while advocating liberation from the oppression they are familiar with, have remained blind to other forms of oppression. Thus, while working to liberate individuals and societies from one particular form of oppression they have perpetuated others. For example, in the earliest years of Black theology, male Black liberation theologians ignored sexism altogether, concentrating on racism from a Black male perspective and assuming this included every Black. When Black feminist liberation theologians challenged them, they began to change.<sup>9</sup> For many years Latin American liberation theologians, focusing on economic exploitation, also ignored sexism, though they, too, have responded to recent criticisms from women within their movements.<sup>10</sup> White North American feminist theologians have long ignored classism and racism, focusing on sexism *from a white middle-class perspective* and assuming their description of the problems and possibilities included all women. Challenged by Black, Native American, Hispanic women and women of the Two-Thirds World, some have begun to change.<sup>11</sup> And, until recently, almost all liberation theologians have ignored heterosexism and homophobia and sexual and domestic abuse as significant modes of oppression. Liberation theologians have begun to recognize that these "isms" form an interlocking chain of oppression, which collectively may be called patriarchy. This recognition is now replacing old arguments over which oppression is the root of all others or, alternatively, the neglect of any oppressions beyond one's own immediate experience. Much more still needs to be done in this direction. The connections among the liberating responses to those interlocking oppressions require much deeper investigation than they have yet received. We are talking about the need to recognize both the particularity of context and the links between the structures of oppression. Gail Peterson's distinction between solidarity and alliances illustrates this idea. In a study of women's groups composed of Black, Hispanic, white, Jewish, and Christian lesbian and heterosexual women, Peterson

and her colleagues discovered that both solidarity and alliances are important to liberation movements. Solidarity she defines as “the knowledge of, respect for, and unity with persons whose identities are in certain ways common with one’s own” (e.g., with those who share a similar racial, economic, sexual orientation, or religious context or concrete experience of oppression). She defines alliances as “the knowledge of, respect for, and commitment between persons who are in essential ways different but whose interests are in essential ways akin” (e.g., among those who have chosen to work together for social reconstruction).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the single task of liberation entails both recognition of the particularities of personal and social contexts *and* recognition of the interconnections among struggles against oppression in those different contexts. This is as true for those trying to understand various liberation movements as it is for those immediately engaged in them. Otherwise, we are in danger of substituting a narrow, constricting, and closed particularism for the false objectivity and universalism of dominant theologies.

Though liberation theologies are embedded in different contexts and give rise to distinct voices that are not interchangeable, monotonal, they are also linked. As we listen to them, then, we need to listen for harmonies and points of convergence. One of the clearest ways to do this is by focusing on their shared method.

## CONTEXT AND METHOD

If each of these liberation theologies is unique because of its context, what justifies including them in a single volume on liberation theology? The answer lies in the general approach to theology that these different theologies share and that distinguishes them from other types of theology. This shared method, characterized by a commitment to doing theology contextually, emerged early as the distinguishing feature of liberation theologies and has remained its single most significant indicator.

Contextuality is an often misunderstood premise of the theologies of liberation. It does not mean what North American Protestant liberals have often meant by this word. Liberalism, the opening of theological reflection to the modern world, views theology as rational discourse necessary in a world that challenges Christianity’s basic claims. Protestant liberalism in North America understands itself as contextual theology because it takes individual human experience, an obvious point of commonality between religion and the secular world, as the starting point for theological reflection. In this contemporary North American liberal sense, then, context often means “me and my personal experience.”<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, when a liberation theologian speaks of context, s/he means that one’s *social location* is central to the theological task. Social location is not particular to the individual. It is a perspective shared by others of the group or class. For example, when Goba says “Our blackness is a given

thing,” he is not referring to his personal reaction to having been born Black. Rather, he is speaking of the socio-economic-political construction of what it means to be a Black person in capitalist-apartheid South Africa. That is what context means in his theology.

One meaning of contextuality in liberation method, therefore, is one’s shared social location. It is this understanding of context that must be kept in mind as one hears liberation theologians speaking of contextual theology. As Goba states, “Every context of a political struggle has tremendous influence on the political perceptions of those who engage in it.” In his landmark work, *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutiérrez begins his theological reflection only after a lengthy critique of the economic policy of developmentalism in Latin America. He argues that the Latin American context is one of structured economic and political dependence, and that it is *this* socio-economic-political situation that conditions his Christian theological reflections.<sup>14</sup>

These perceptions structured by political struggle are called an ideology. An ideology is a deeply held, comprehensive, and interlocking set of beliefs about the nature of the world and how the world works. Ideology has often been used as a pejorative term to indicate perceptions distorted or warped by unreflective prejudice. Yet recently scholars in the field of the sociology of knowledge have shown that all knowledge is structured by social, political, and economic factors.<sup>15</sup> There is no such thing as objective knowledge free of ideological taint. “Each society has a regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth,” wrote Michel Foucault.<sup>16</sup> That is, what counts for the known, that which is true, is a function of what a given society accepts as true. Thus there are no truly objective knowers, only knowers who are or who are not critically aware of the context of their deeply held beliefs and the advantages and limitations of their belief system. Awareness of one’s own and others’ ideological bent is called critical consciousness. Lack of such awareness is often called false consciousness or ideological blindness. To call to our attention this reality, liberation theologians often engage in ideology critique, using the tools of economics, sociology, or political science.

Not all liberation theologians find ideology critique the most adequate or appropriate way to analyze their contexts. Native Americans, for example, along with *minjung* and other Asian theologians, do not share the intellectual heritage of Euro-Americans and do not find even its most radical tools of critique congenial. Many theologians in these cultural situations share a commitment to contextualize via narrative. They employ folktales, stories, poems, and chants to set and reflect on context. Doing theology contextually in their case is better understood as extending the imaginative horizon. As Young-chan Ro points out, they prefer *mythos* to *logos* as a way of transforming theology so that it can become a theology of transformation.

Feminist contributors to this volume often find themselves sharing several contexts, and feminist method reflects this. In patriarchal culture women are objects and not agents. That is, women are socialized by their culture to perform the roles (mostly private, not public) assigned to them, and these roles are not flexible. So a woman/academic finds herself able to move in more than one context, e.g., in 1) the traditional women's world of home maintenance and child nurture and 2) the male academic world of ideas and publications, but she cannot combine them into a third context of 3) women's academics, because this context does not exist. Black women sometimes have several additional spheres since Black culture in a racist society is itself constricted. Black women do not share the same "women's experience" as white women, even when both groups are constricted by sex. Lesbians will add another sphere of constriction, and so forth. Each patriarchal context (Asian, Latin American, South African, North Atlantic, etc.) will divide these spheres differently.

Feminist method should therefore be contextually adaptable. While Mary Daly has argued "patriarchy appears to be 'everywhere'. . . even outer space and the future have been colonized,"<sup>17</sup> her analysis seems to assume that patriarchy looks the same everywhere. She does not acknowledge the particular permutations of patriarchy in different social, political, economic, and cultural contexts. Feminist liberation theologians tend to break down their analyses of patriarchy and interface them with other modes of critique such as class and race. Adrienne Rich offers a comprehensive definition of patriarchy: "Patriarchy is the power of the fathers; a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labor—determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male."<sup>18</sup>

All of these ways of analyzing context, the sociopolitical, the imagistic horizon, and the feminist are represented in the chapters that follow. While these modes of analysis may differ from one another, they are similar in that context is not interpreted individualistically or intrapsychically. These latter characterize modern liberalism. Further, the emphasis on the central role that context plays in the theological task distinguishes theologies of liberation from much of the neo-orthodox tradition, which so radically separated God's revelation from the vagaries of the human situation.

## COMMUNAL AND CONCRETE

Theologies of liberation are profoundly *communal* theologies serving to express and explain the faith, hope, and charity of the community of Christians.<sup>19</sup> They are also *concrete*, practical, and historical theologies,

grounded in and continually referring to the actual practice of Christian communities in particular times and places.<sup>20</sup> For this reason the traditional shorthand definition of theology as “GodTalk” does not adequately describe liberation theologies. They are better understood as *GodWalk*, to use Frederick Herzog’s term.<sup>21</sup>

Liberation theology as *GodWalk* is built upon the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, between theological reflection and the life of the Christian community lived toward liberation. This differentiates it from deductive (classic orthodox) and inductive (classic liberal) theologies. Active commitment to a specific struggle for liberation, far from being a distorting and unfortunate occurrence, is the first necessary element in this theology. Critical reflection upon the communal practice that one is engaged in is the second. Both are continually related to one another. One implication of this, in traditional terms, is that a new relationship between faith and life is being envisioned that calls into question the dominant understanding that relieved theology and religious life of all political decisions and responsibilities. No longer are faith and life, theology and politics split apart, nor are abstract principles imposed upon the life of faith. Instead, liberation theologies stress the obligation of the Christian community and Christian theology to reflect and act upon their responsibilities in *history*.

## PROPHETIC AND CONSTRUCTIVE

Liberation theology is also prophetic and constructive. It is both a theology of protest against unjust social orders and a theology aimed at social transformation toward greater justice for all. This twofold task is reflected in the definition of liberation offered by Ismael García. Liberation, he says, “expresses the longing to be free from all that represents a significant limit to the realization of one’s potential, as well as the desire to be free to realize one’s potential to the fullest.”<sup>22</sup> This understanding of liberation and theology assumes that human beings are agents in history rather than merely passive victims of oppression or pitiful sufferers; that individuals are the subjects of history who are collaborating in the making of history, rather than the objects of the conquerors’ history. Thus, another of the goals of liberation theology, in addition to prophetic criticism of unjust structures and social transformation, is the empowerment of individuals.

The inspiration and guidelines for this prophetic criticism and social transformation come from many sources, as the reader will note in the various chapters: the experience of faith; the experience of oppression; the scriptures; the Christian tradition; non-Christian instruments of social analysis (class, race, or gender analyses); and a wide variety of art forms, including poetry, folktales, novels, and popular songs. Though the way these materials or sources are integrated varies from one theologian

or community to another (e.g., feminist theologians generally tend to use more contemporary poetry and popular songs than other forms of liberation theology), all liberation theologians agree on one basic principle for the use of any source: suspicion. All sources, whether Marxist analyses, ancient Christian texts, the scriptures, or "classic" literature, must be used critically and approached with the suspicion that they further the dominant mode of oppression. (See chapters 19 and 20.)

## CONCEPT AND STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

As the above comments imply, this text has three aims. The first aim is to dispel the romantic notion that liberation theology is an exotic phenomenon existing "over there" or "out there" in "foreign" countries by including North American Black, Native American, feminist, and gay and lesbian liberation theologies. The second aim is to correct the idea that liberation theology is a uniform movement by introducing readers to the variety of liberation theologies that have arisen in different parts of the world. The third aim is to describe the relationship among the various struggles against oppression and to illustrate the basic method common to liberation theologies that identifies them and that challenges mainstream theology.

There is a fourth aim of this text, which may, indeed, be the most significant one: to stress the point that liberation theologies are developing as full-fledged *constructive* alternatives to dominant theologies. Their challenge is not only to the method but to the content and structure of Christian theologies as well. Liberation theologies, then, also call for the liberation of Christian theology from oppressive concepts and structures.

From its first appearance on the scene liberation theology has been met with harsh criticism. It has been called "a modern-day anti-Christian heresy," "trendy theology," "genitive theology," or, at best, "occasional theology." Too few have considered it as a serious constructive challenge to theological method and to the structure and content of theology.<sup>23</sup> Three significant works demonstrate that the goal of liberation theologies is the complete transformation of Christian theology. Each of these books is a constructive liberation theology covering all the major doctrinal *loci* of the tradition: James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, the five-volume series by Juan Luis Segundo, et al., entitled *Theology for Artisans of a New Humanity*, and Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk*.<sup>24</sup> Anthologies of liberation theology and works on liberation theology to date have not paid sufficient attention to this challenge.<sup>25</sup>

We have organized this volume with this constructive task in mind, deliberately selecting a different order of topics than is usually found in volumes of Christian systematic theology. We have chosen to reorder the topics to reflect more accurately the concerns, emphases, and goals of liberation theologians.



This is significant for a number of reasons. First, liberation theology is not just a slightly different look at Christian theology from different perspectives. We cannot simply insert a liberation chapter into the old structure of a systematic course and think we have understood its full meaning. On the contrary, the full meaning of liberation theological reconstructions of specific doctrines comes out when they are seen in their own systematic context. This point was made by Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, when he observed (by way of justifying his own reordering of the Christian system) that the meaning of a doctrine was in part determined by its place in the total system.<sup>26</sup> We may call this concern with the placement of doctrines in a system the theological location, which is analogous to liberation theologians' concern with social location. It is for this reason that we have chosen to order the volume in a way that may at first appear confusing to the reader familiar with traditional Christian systematic theologies.

The point of reordering the theological *loci* in this way is to stress that liberation theologies challenge the method *and* the content of dominant theologies. Liberation theologies are not about rearranging the furniture in the house of theology, or even about redecorating or remodeling the house. Rather, they are about rebuilding the foundation (method) and redesigning the floorplan (categories).

What is the rationale for the ordering of topics in this textbook? We begin with part 1 on method, context, and commitment because this alternative approach to theology is the key to understanding the entire movement and the work of the individual theologians. In this section the contributors focus on the importance of context and commitment and discuss the nature and method of theology in this new model.

We have included the topics of revelation and the relation of Christianity to other religions in this section because it is here that these questions have come up for liberation theologians. As one reconsiders the appropriate sources for theology and the development of a theology of critical reflection on faith and social justice, the question of if and when to use non-Christian sources is intensified. Examples include the debates within North American Black liberation theology about the use of African folk religions, the debate within feminist theology about Goddess religions, the debate within Native American liberation theology about the use of their own religious traditions, and the debate surrounding Latin American liberation theology about Marxism.<sup>27</sup>

Part 2 focuses on the doctrine of God. We have isolated this from the remainder of the *loci* in order to highlight the distinctive questions within the doctrine of God that arise within liberation theologies, such as "What does the power of God or the judgment of God mean?" (chapter 6), or "How is God related to the threat and possibility of nuclear war?" (chapter 7). Part 2 illustrates the manner in which liberation theologians approach this most traditional of theological doctrines. Two things the reader



should not expect in part 2 are 1) a discussion of “classical” theological issues, such as formal versions of the trinity and 2) a metaphysical argument for the reality of God. Part 2 could have been located at the end of the volume, to point out that the pertinent issue in the doctrine of God for liberation theologians is not the reality of God in itself (aseity) but God in relation to the world.

The location of the discussion of eschatology in part 3, between the discussions of God and the multifarious workings of God’s grace in the world, is meant to highlight the fact that eschatological vision has fueled many liberation movements and theologies. The vision of the reign of the gracious God in the world in love and justice (or the “kingdom of God” as Isasi-Díaz puts it) has guided and sustained those struggling with oppression. The shared hope that the ongoing transformation of society in light of the kingdom of God is possible has inspired oppressed peoples to begin to work for change and to persevere in that work in the face of otherwise overwhelming opposition.

Hence eschatology is no longer “the last things” but “those things in our midst.” The stress is on a God acting in history and on the need to discover God’s direction for abundant life in the midst of our ambiguous and conflict-ridden history. Prophecy, then, so intimately connected to eschatological vision and hope, does not involve predicting the future or mapping out the endtimes, but discerning God’s activity in the world now, the meaning of that activity for the community of faith, and the appropriate response. The ultimate vision or hope that one holds, as chapter 8 suggests, affects this process of discernment.

Everything after “eschatology” comes under the heading of “grace,” by which we mean the dynamic presence, power, and activity of God continually working to bring the world toward greater wholeness through justice and love. We believe this common term and the distinction between various ways or modes of God’s relation to the world in parts 4 and 5 underscore the importance of the ongoing generative and regenerative connection between God and the world in liberation theologies. This connection in turn serves as the foundation for the strong connection between faith and life, theology and politics. Part 4 discusses creating and governing grace, part 5 reconciling, liberating, and sanctifying grace.

Creating and governing grace has been an important concern to all liberation theologians, though in different ways. Their radical revisioning of the relation between God and the world, between faith and life, focuses on the notion of human beings as agents collaborating with God to reshape the world in love and justice. Liberation theologies differ in their view of the relation of human beings to the rest of nature. Latin American and North American Black liberation theologians, because of their emphasis on history and politics, have tended to emphasize the distinctiveness of human beings in the world and their freedom in relation to