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ECO-THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVES FROM LATIN AMERICA

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The following essay presents some empirical analysis and considerations about the role of ecological reflection in protestant theological education institutions in Latin America. We do not pretend to present this analysis as a comprehensive picture of all realities in theological education. However, we maintain that after having worked for more than 6 years with protestant theological institutions in the region and after having seen several educational projects and their crisis from close distance, we can contribute some meaningful and relevant insights about the status of eco-theological reflection in Latin America.²³⁷

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²³⁷ For more information on theological education in Latin America see: Matthias Preiswerk, *Contrato intercultural. Crisis y refundación de la educación teológica*, La Paz: Plural. 462 pp.

17.1 The Ecological Crisis as a Structural Crisis

Talking about ecological issues today indisputably is involved with speaking of a fundamental crisis. The crisis we are facing is not just a problem or a difficult situation, but it points to a fundamental rift which exists in the current state and structure of our humanity. In other words, if we talk about ecology today we have to face some grave structural challenges of injustice within world society. However we believe that every crisis is also an opportunity, a situation which also provides some space capable of accommodating new and creative alternatives for alternative solutions.

The global ecological crisis today has reached unprecedented levels, as every day more forests cease to exist and no day is passing in our context, where we do not hear or read of foreign multinational companies which indiscriminately exploit Latin American soil and resources leaving indelible marks of destruction on the ecosystems of this region and the world.

The ecological or environmental crisis presents a structural crisis for at least the following reasons:

- 1) There is no element in nature that does not affect other elements. There is no ocean without ocean currents and ocean currents are not isolated from the wind. It is not possible to speak of crops without taking into consideration the rain and the seasons; it is not possible to refer the wealth of the soil and to leave aside the wealth of water.
- 2) It is not possible to speak of human beings without talking about the environment in which they live, breath, multiply and perform.
- 3) The relationship between nature and the human being is a relationship of dependency. There is a finite and directly

proportional relation between the human being and the resources that it takes for its subsistence.

Many have argued that climatic and environmental changes which we are experiencing now are not new, instead that these phenomena already existed in ancient times and that the planet has suffered very similar processes before. However, what those views do not recognize is the speed and extent at which these dramatic environmental changes are happening in our time.

If cooling cycles and global warming in the antiquity occurred every 10 million years or more, they now take place within a period of just few hundred years. The speed in which environmental changes occur today is 10 times higher than in previous eras.

Scholars have emphasized that the components of this planetary system are not working independently from each other, rather each element of what we know as reality is closely interrelated to other elements. The ecological balance of the planet therefore is a balance within a very complex structure, integrating multiple and variable components in a perfect fit which has given origin to life on this planet. Only this complex system of interrelation and perfect equalization keeps this planet alive as a whole. Any alteration of one of those elements directly affects everyone else and potentially endangers the survival of the whole system.

In the Latin American context many efforts have taken place to face the aggravating environmental crisis by multilateral actors (governments, companies, NGOs, universities, etc.) which try to reduce or stop the negative impact of these changes. It is very important that we also realize the special role and potentials which universities can and should play within these multilateral efforts in countering the ecological crisis. Those agents which deal on the platform of knowledge and undertake major programs of education have a crucial responsibility and

essential role to change our mindsets and the value systems and ethics which undergird environmental destruction.

We have looked at programs and trends in protestant theological education in Latin America as theological education could have a major role in deepening the understanding of ecological changes as structural challenge and should deepen special competence in this area. Actually protestant theological education has developed a special study area related to this ecological dimension. That field is called “eco-theology”. By this we refer to those efforts in theological reflection and research which address the environmental, ecological, and all other matters relating to the relationship between God, human beings and ecology in its broadest sense.

17.2 Theological Education as a Modularized Study – Limitations for the Role of Eco-Theological Orientation until now

One of the key points which we have found out in looking at theological education curriculum and practices in Latin America today is that eco-theological education in Latin America is mainly treated within a context of modularized studies, i.e. as a study area and subject understood as one small area among many others, in theological education curricula (TE). Some modules in theological education are interrelated, some others are independent in the study programs. Courses on eco-theological reflection for most formal institutions of TE (universities, Bible schools, theological seminaries, etc.) are mainly independent and just one optional subject to work on; i.e. one additional option of the overall number of modules, courses and disciplines which a student must complete in order to forward and complete his or her theological studies. However the interrelationship and integration of

eco-theological reflection with other areas of theological knowledge often still is very poor, as courses on eco-theological reflection are almost never mentioned in the daily theological discussion or mainstream theological discourse.

In Latin America therefore while formal centers of TE recognize the need for eco-theological work and reflection in a general sense the actual space which is provided for it is very limited. The majority of theological education courses are related to other topics and it remains reduced to rather specific isolated seminars or small workshops on this subject. Thus, very often eco-theological reflection is nothing more than an annex to be treated in addition or even outside the compulsory and normal agenda of theological education.

A review of current curricula and course outlines of most institutions of theological education in Latin America clearly provides evidence that until now only a small space is provided for environmental and ecological issues within the general body of theological studies and knowledge in this context. However, there are also important positive exceptions with pioneering projects involving and integrating eco-theological reflection within other courses within the various theological study areas, namely Old and New Testament, Dogmatic Theology, Liturgy, etc. These new initiatives need to be strengthened, evaluated and improved in order to serve the ecological transformation of theological education as a whole. From these positive examples of an integration of environmental concerns into the mainstream of theological reflection and education we can learn a lot, so that we move beyond a situation in which eco-theological learning is just understood as an unintegrated and arbitrary annex to a normative mainstream of theological training.

17.3 The Pioneering Role of Non-Formal Centers and Agents for Ecological Reflection and Transformation

An interesting observation should be added: If we compare formal protestant spaces of TE in Latin America (i.e. Universities, Theological Seminars, Theological Faculties) and non-formal spaces of education (NGOs, Online spaces, Multilateral forums, Social Networks, Online research groups, Interreligious groups, etc.) the trend clearly is that it has been mainly the non-formal centers of theological education and ecological learning which have carried on major initiatives for eco-theological awareness-building and theological reflection so far.

It has been in these new spaces of non-formal education that gradually educational processes have led to the formulation of an environmental knowledge that in the long run also sensitizes theological reflection in general. It is in this context that leading specialists like the philosopher Enrique Leff have called for the promotion of a new form of an “environmental rationality” seeking a more intense and critical interaction between the ecological discourse, eco-social movements and networks and established theological thinking and training.²³⁸

Latin America then, is presented as a region with great challenges in establishing an inclusive dialogue between ecology and TE. In this regard we would like to close our considerations with the following questions, none of them intended to be immediately answered, but on the contrary intended to initiate a new and broad reflection process challenging Latin American theological identities to properly face their responsibility in increased and explore dynamic eco-theological reflection:

²³⁸ See Smith, P. and A. Tenner (Eds.), *Dimensions of Sustainability, Proceedings of the Congress Challenges of Sustainable Development*, Amsterdam, 22-25 August 1996, Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, Baden-Baden.

- Is theological education relevant without an ecological epistemology?
- Is it possible to incorporate some of the rich Latin American indigenous ecological resources of religious experience into the current model of theological education?
- Could we rethink and deconstruct classical educational concepts of Latin American theological education in order to integrate ecological dimensions of theological in an interactive and transversal way?
- Could Latin American theology develop a conceptual framework to speak about ecological sins as becoming a recognized part of the Christian body of doctrines?

In concluding we can state that there are some important and creative eco-theological initiatives around in the region, which are an encouragement and a good example further to built upon. But still there is no broader Latin American eco-theological movement yet that makes its voice being heard in the formal spaces of TE. The only and major exception however to this statement is a current movement which has become known under the title “Environmental Multireligious Convergence (Green Faith – Interfaith Partners for the Environment)”, a learning forum of civil society initiatives which will be held in Rio de Janeiro at the end of the year 2016 and will bring together a large number of religious institutions and organizations working towards eco-theological education.²³⁹

Given the above we conclude that time has come to re-conceptualize Latin American TE in a new epistemological framework taking seriously political, social and environmental concerns and willing to

²³⁹ <http://www.greenfaith.org/success-stories/convergencia-de-rio-de-janeiro-inscripciones>

contribute a serious and substantial reflection on the current ecological crisis on behalf of the Christian churches.

In this regard we believe it will be necessary to consider a few actions to be initiated for the future, some of these could be:

- The preparation of an Eco-theological collection of articles and resources: “Summa of Latin American ecological theology” which could consist of rewriting some of the theological statements or theological agreements according to the new ecological paradigm.
- The preparation of a major collection of popular practical materials on ecological spirituality.
- The initiation of a series of specialized theological studies on the challenges which the new ecological paradigm brings to world religions, especially to those which arise from a more anti-ecological paradigm, and which have not yet become converted in terms of its traditional symbolic heritage (including Christianity); this initiative should not aim at popular levels, but more to specialized levels of academic institutions and educators.

For more information on some important Latin American resources and networks related to initiatives of eco-theology in this regard one can consult the following websites:

- REPAM (Red eclesial Panamazónica)²⁴⁰
- Radial series: *Laudato Si*: about the care of our common home.²⁴¹
- GEMRIP - Program on eco-theology (virtual course).²⁴²

²⁴⁰ See: <http://redamazonica.org/>

²⁴¹ <http://redamazonica.org/multimedia/el-cuidado-de-la-casa-comun/>

²⁴² http://gemrip.org/essential_grid/nuevo-programa-de-estudios-sobre-eco-teologia/

Finally in concluding our reflections highlighting the new and powerful Papal encyclical “*Laudato Si*”, which is a great document and tool published 2016 by the Latin American Pope Francis and which has found attention and support very much also in protestant churches in Latin America. *Laudato Si* emphasizes (from a roman catholic perspective which could perfectly be translated also for protestant thinking) the need for new, deeper, and interrelated environmental education in Christian churches and beyond as in most parts of the current educational systems there still is not too much in terms of promotion and conceptualizing basic ethical and moral values for care for creation. In words of Pope Francis:

*“Environmental education has broadened its goals. Whereas in the beginning it was mainly centered on scientific information, consciousness-raising and the prevention of environmental risks, it tends now to include a critique of the “myths” of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market). It seeks also to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God. Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.”*²⁴³

²⁴³ Encyclica “*Laudato Si*”, page 210; accessed in: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Therefore we affirm once again: eco-theological education has to be emphasized, deepened and broadened both as a core and compulsory element within the mainstream of protestant theological education in Latin America.