

## Article

# Theology Facing Religious Diversity: The Perspective of Latin American Pluralist Theology

Paulo A. N. Baptista 

Departamento de Ciências da Religião—Programa de Pós-graduação em Ciências da Religião,  
Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais—PUC Minas, Av. Dom José Gaspar, 500,  
Belo Horizonte MG 30.535-901, Brasil; pagostin@gmail.com or ppgcr@pucminas.br

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**Abstract:** Life is plural and diverse, biodiverse. This reality has always provoked philosophy, the sciences, and also theology. But how does theological thinking reflect on this eco-human diversity? What about religious diversity? Are diversity and pluralism the same phenomenon? These questions express the aim of this article: to reflect on theology in the face of diversity and pluralism. With the methodology of bibliographic analysis, the article begins by discussing the challenges of this reality. Then it deals with how theology confronts diversity and pluralism. In the end, it reflects on the possibility of Latin American Liberation Theology being conceived as pluralist, articulating itself with the Theology of Religious Pluralism—especially from the 1990s. One of the exponents of the Latin American Liberation Theology that justifies such a paradigm shift is the theologian Leonardo Boff. With his outputs, Latin American theology starts to realize, from the ecological paradigm, the articulation between liberation and dialogue, then being called pluralistic liberation theology. The conclusions of the article point out that cultural change, the ecological paradigm and, recently, the questions of decolonial theology, have led theological thinking to transform more, facing the socio-environmental challenges of diversity, conflicts, and interreligious dialogue, accepting even more the awareness of pluralism.

**Keywords:** religious diversity; cultural and religious pluralism; pluralist theology of Latin American liberation; dialogue

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To

José Maria Pires († 27 August 2017, in memoriam)

Bishop, black man and prophet of liberating and dialogical praxis.

*“The time has come for blood to be so much seed, so much seed to germinate. ...The journey is long and painful. Almost everything has to be done. ...but we protest not to admit that hatred and violence settle in our hearts.”* (José Maria Pires. Homily for the mass of the Quilombos, Recife 22 November 1981. In (Ribeiro 2005, pp. 117–18))

## 1. Introduction

Diversity is one of the main characteristics of nature and shows the riches and beauties of life through its biodiversity. As part of nature, which has developed as consciousness in the human being, everything that refers to the human also holds this condition. Therefore, one cannot speak in the singular about culture, youth, or theology. There are youths and cultures, just as there is a diversity of theologies and religions.

Theologies seek to be the intelligence of faith, placing the light of reason on these human experiences of meaning. In a classic definition of Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), theology is faith which seeks intelligence and knowledge—*fides quaerens intellectum*. Well before, Augustine of

Hippo (354–430) had already affirmed *Intellige ut credas, crede ut intelligas*—understand to believe, believe to understand. In this sense, theologies want to understand and interpret the experiences of faith, which are diverse, in the diversity of religious forms and traditions. If there is a diversity of faith, there will also be a diversity of theologies. It is not possible to think of universal, general, or world theology, as defended by W. Cantwell Smith (Smith 1981). Therefore, every theology is confessional, that is, it comes from a place of faith. This locus, however, should be open and not particularist, it should have, even, the pretension of doing a “public theology” (Tracy 1981), and address all people, the *oikouméne*.

From this perspective, the aim of this article is reflecting on how theology, particularly Latin American Christian theology, stands before religious diversity and pluralism. And, delimiting, it can be said that there are several theologies produced in Latin America, including several theologies of liberation, which emphasize this or that aspect, method, theme, or perspective along the way. A Latin American feminist theology of liberation or a decolonial theology of Latin American Liberation can be postulated or, even more pertinent to the theme of this article, a pluralist theology of Latin American Liberation.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the fundamental assumption of this article is thinking of religious diversity from a place and a tradition, Latin America and Christianity, before the richness of cultures and religions, facing the oppression of poor and excluded women and men, which makes everyone’s lives complex by the predatory exploitation of species and nature.

Such a Christian perspective thinks and reflects critically on religious diversity, religious and cultural pluralism, interreligious dialogue, and liberation and decolonization, and understands that pluralism, as well as biodiversity, is part of creation and therefore longed for by God. Having as a methodology the systematic and hermeneutics analysis of bibliographical nature, the article begins by discussing the challenges of diversity and pluralism. The following is a discussion of how theological thinking confronts these phenomena. Finally, we discuss the possibility of a pluralistic theology of Latin American Liberation, not as a theology of “genitive” or sectorial, but a new way to theologize.

## 2. The Challenges of Diversity and Pluralism

Diversity and plurality are realities that have always been perceived by the human being. In Greece, Hesiod, in VIII BC, showed the diversity of the gods in his Theogony. The philosophers had already made lists on the variety of species and forms of life, as did Aristotle who initiated the taxonomy in biology. Before, the Presocrats, Empedocles and Anaxagoras, defended a pluralistic position on the origin, on the principles that originated the universe. We find something similar in religions, such as Hinduism (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva), and even in the radical Islamic monotheism the plurality appears, with the 99 names of God, plus one more mysterious name, known only by the mystics. Christianity is not left out with its sui generis conception of a trinitarian monotheism. But diversity has gained another perspective with modernity, which ushered in a new era, widening in all senses the horizons of knowledge and the inhabited world, producing new colonizations and hierarchies (Dussel 1994). In this journey, the twentieth century made other great leaps in human history: the boom in population growth, the ease and speed of travel and locomotion, the rapid advance of science and technology, the increase in trade and its flow, the growing and diverse migration among populations—voluntary or involuntary, for social, economic, political, religious, or environmental reasons—and the diffusion of religions with a chance of dialogue, but also the growth of conflicting identity affirmations and fundamentalist closures.

Space travel made for a fantastic experience: the Earth from the outside, as a “pale blue dot” (Sagan 1996), an integrative unit of many diversities. The wars have become global and the process of climatic and social imbalance is now a serious threat to human life and most of the plant and animal species, producing unpredictable reactions from the Earth system. The process

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<sup>1</sup> About Liberation Theology, religion and politics on the violence context, see (Moreira 2014).

of communication became worldwide and produced an “illusion”, favored by the advent of television and social networks, now accelerated by the multiplicity of media, open with the internet, which made what was distant, near.

Such a scenario was described in the 1960s by the Canadian Marshall McLuhan, who referred to a global village: “Electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village” (McLuhan 1964, p. 19). In the view of the Brazilian geographer Santos (2000), there is an ideology that, through this expression, wants “to make believe that the instantaneous diffusion of news really informs people. From this myth and the shortening of distances...the notion of time and space is also diffused. It is as if the world had become for all within “hand’s reach” (Santos 2000, pp. 18–19). It seeks to present the market as capable of harmonizing diversities, with the capacity to “homogenize the planet, when in fact, local differences are deepened” ... (Santos 2000, p. 19). In the context of globalization,<sup>2</sup> the debate about “glocalization” emerges (Tulloch 1991, p. 134; Robertson 2003, pp. 261–84).

This context created the conditions for the emergence of the consciousness of pluralism, which had in modernity a significant vector. But this consciousness has been and is being constructed in a procedural way: it is slow, conflictive, generates resistances, and is lived as a threat by many groups, because they fear the loss of identity, and with that, they close themselves. Globalization and the complex dynamics of secularization affect societies and people in different ways. They have produced a threat to the identities, especially of the middle and popular layers, and in the Latin American and Caribbean context, of great social conflict, of precarious schooling, and of poor quality, the poorest, black, indigenous, and the LGBT community, for example, are increasingly feeling such a process. Alongside, there is the strong work of conservative political and religious groups, which associate themselves with electoral and economic interests, taking advantage to combat the rapidly changing culture, with the social inclusion of rights and the defense of the coexistence with diversity, creating a media battle, symbolized in the struggle between God and the devil.

The sociology of Peter Berger (Berger 1985), for example, understands that the crisis generated by secularization reaches the structure of plausibility of people: “if the structure of plausibility is weakened, so will the subjective reality of the religious world in question” (Berger 1985, p. 161). Structures of plausibility are fundamental to subjective reality. The world or the “world-building” is something very precarious, fragile. But from the moment that such world is externalized, objectified, and recognized, it becomes “the world”. Not only the world for all, as social recognition, but especially “my world.” Internalization is the recognition that the world, the objective reality, exists as my world, becomes the structure of the subject. However, it can not only be “my world”, it is something shared, confirmed by “significant others” and “less significant others.”

The plausibility structure is the necessary social basis which confirms that the world is real. The world, therefore, is a “nomos both objectively and subjectively” (Berger 1985, p. 33). And the current, pluralist, postmodern, neoliberal context is conducive to such a phenomenon. Questioning the religious bases of the world, generating separation of spheres (religious and temporal), casting doubt on the *autoritas*, and the notion of subject and identity, secularization created the conditions of the appearance of pluralism and the conditions of having it as conscience. Pluralism, on the other hand, also provokes a situation of “crisis” in subjective reality. There is competition from various plausibility structures. Unlike the premodern world—not in the chronological sense—where the world appeared very solid and unique, modernity, and even more, postmodernity, establishes a doubt: with pluralism, the stable world is destabilized, dissolved and, for many, is lost. You only need to observe the resistance produced by cultural, multicultural, subaltern, intercultural, and postcolonial studies (S. Hall, R. Hoggart, R. Williams, H. Bhabha, C. Taylor, P. Gilroy and others). Nowadays, the controversy over the issue of gender and the various forms of family constitution strongly affects

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<sup>2</sup> About the concept and the discussion over globalization, religion, and sociology religion, see (Pace 1999).

religions, such as Judith Butler's (Butler 2015) position on the dispossessed subject and her fluid notion of gender, her critique of "the injunction to be a Gender necessarily produces failures" (Butler 2015, p. 189).

Although this phenomenon and its reactions are understandable, even more because of the need to defend the rights of diversity and inclusiveness, sometimes militantly, in the context of a history of oppression and discrimination, what is perceived is the growth of intolerance and even violence. In Brazil, the case of the 11-year-old girl who was beaten in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro in June 2015 by radical neo-Pentecostal groups when she left a Candomblé cult is nationally known.

Here the debate on tolerance appears, along with power relations among religions and states, the challenge of secularism, and the challenge of interreligious relations in a "competitive" market in the context of religious monopoly, as discussed by James Beckford (Beckford 1999, 2003) by addressing the distinctions and differences between diversity and pluralism.

Historian Norberto Bobbio has already addressed the issue of tolerance in his book "Era dos Direitos" (Bobbio 2004). For him, from the perspective of the positive and negative senses of tolerance and intolerance,

Tolerance in the negative sense...is synonymous with guilty indulgence, condescension with evil, with error, for lack of principles, for the sake of a quiet life or for blindness to values. It is evident that when we praise tolerance, recognizing on it one of the fundamental principles of free and peaceful life, we want to speak of tolerance in the positive sense. But we must never forget that defenders of intolerance use the negative sense to denigrate it: if God does not exist, then everything is allowed. (Bobbio 2004, p. 192)

For the Brazilian philosopher Meneses (1996, p. 6), tolerance has a fundamental meaning, especially in its positive aspect:

Affirming the 'sacred right to diverge' is to deny anyone—especially the state and majorities—the right to suppress the diversity of others, to persecute dissidents, to try to reduce divergences by force. It is to proclaim the duty of States and social groups to respect otherness, to persecute no one for their opinions, and more broadly, to not discriminate against anyone because of differences of religion, race, sex, Age, etc. So the breadth of tolerance is unlimited: it is the reverse of the proclamation of the 'equal dignity of human beings'.

The respect and acceptance of diversity faces the challenge of a conscience of pluralism and of its complex relationship, which are sometimes problematic and conflicting in public space, and the question of understanding, which led C. Geertz (Geertz 1985) to say his famous phrase "We must learn to grasp what we cannot embrace." In this sense, theology is also prompted to reflect on this and to understand such phenomena in the light of faith.

### 3. Theologies Challenged by Diversity and Pluralism

In the face of the emergence of pluralism's consciousness, theologies did not and could not have remained passive in this process of transformation of which it produces, especially the Christian ones, for being either open or closed to pluralism. The reason for this is that theologies take place historically, making the hermeneutics of faith for the present time. For Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the forerunners of the Latin American Liberation Theology, theology must be intimately articulated with the society of its time, as "would then necessarily be a criticism of society and the Church insofar as they are called and addressed by the word of God; it would be a critical theory, worked out in the light of the word accepted in faith and inspired by a practical purpose—and therefore indissolubly linked to historical praxis." (Gutiérrez 1972, p. 34).

The Second Vatican Council was a fundamental event of change and openness in Christianity, including the emergence of Liberation Theology, which also opened the field for the production of a theology on diversity and religious pluralism. There were remarkable theologians in this process

like Heinz Robert Schlette (Schlette 1964, p. 126)<sup>3</sup> and, especially, Karl Rahner, who was one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. Schlette would reverse traditional theology by conceiving that religions are the ordinary way of salvation and that the way of the Church would be extraordinary. K. Rahner's theology, on the other hand, would have a significant influence on the Council, especially in opening it up to religions. It is worth remembering, despite the criticism, his thesis of "anonymous Christians: (Rahner 1989, p. 178), but also the view that salvation can reach all men "in the concreteness of their human and religious life and therefore, notwithstanding religions, but in and through religions" (Gibellini 1998, p. 511; Rahner 1962). Thus, more explicitly, a Theology of Religious Pluralism and the Second Vatican Council made possible the opening of this perspective of relation of Christianity with the culture and the religious traditions. Nowadays, it is theologically understood that pluralism is not only a fact but also a result of diversity. It has another profound dimension, since it is a "pluralism of principle", longed for by God: "the various religious traditions represent the various ways (Heb 1:1) as God has spoken and revealed himself to men throughout history" (Dupuis 1999, p. 253). However, only recently in the 1990s did the reflection in this theological field gain a greater citizenship, expressing itself more broadly as "theology of religious pluralism" and not as "theology of religions", an initial title of this area of theological reflection. Of course, the context of globalization and postmodernity was fundamental for understanding the breadth of this phenomenon. The ongoing transformations, both in thematic and methodology, and especially in the pastoral, are causing, theologically, Religious Pluralism to be considered; as Geffré (2001, p. 92) states, this is "a new horizon" for theology, a true paradigm, a theological response to the new global context.

In theology, this awareness of the legitimacy of "religious pluralism" is recent, although it began to give its first glimpses in the work of some Christian missionaries on continents where Christianity was a minority. Such consciousness is beyond the immediate perception of diversity and plurality. It seeks dialogue, respect to others, and wonders how its tradition is able to integrate religious difference and include this diversity in its theological conception; that is, it requires a re-reading of tradition and its re-actualization.

Also, another very important type of consciousness today, like ecological consciousness, is new. It may have been situated at the same time that the consciousness of pluralism emerged, beginning in the 1960s. Some concepts related to this consciousness are, for example, *biodiversity* or *biological diversity*. They appear in a publication organized by the entomologist Edward O. Wilson with the title *Biodiversity* (Wilson 1988), and his name was coined by Thomas Lovejoy, an American biologist in 1980.

Eco-Rio 92, the "United Nations Conference on Environment and Development" (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3 June 1992), produced a "Convention on Biological Diversity", and, in addition, documents on "Desertification", "Framework Declaration on Climate Change", "Rio Declaration on Environment and Development", "Agenda 21", "Declaration of Principles on Forests", and beginning of the proposal to draw up the "Earth Charter." And the concept of *biodiversity*, according to the Convention, means "the variability of living organisms of all origins, including, but not limited to, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; including diversity within species, between species and ecosystems" (Ministry of the Environment 2000). This conceptualization shows that there are many levels and environments where life manifests itself. The diversity of species is certainly the area of greatest research. The botanists in Brazil present, on average, "250 new species per year" (Fioravanti 2016, p. 43). Other diversities can be mentioned: genetics and ecosystems. It also reveals that life is relationship. Everything interacts with everything. If there is an important step towards protecting biodiversity with the signing of the "Convention on Biological Diversity" by more than 150 countries, such a signature does not mean anything effectively about this protection. The destruction of biodiversity—through native forests and species, and indigenous peoples as

<sup>3</sup> A work by Schlette was originally published in Germany in 1964.



well, by agribusiness and mining—as it is happening this year in Brazil, with the extinction of the “National Reserve of Copper and Associates”—RENCA, in the Amazon, follows a catastrophic rhythm. The Brazilian government has opened a region of about 47,000 square kilometers between the states of Pará and Amapá for the extraction of gold and other noble minerals, a preservation area that is larger than Denmark. It is known that “most of this biodiversity is concentrated in tropical forests”, which may be living in the last century (Marques 2017). This political decision has already been reversed, although not definitely, as can be feared. The debate on the rights of diversity, as it appears in the Constitution of Ecuador, has expanded, going beyond the defense of the rights of forests and plant species. Ecuador constitutionally guarantees the rights of nature, ecosystems, mountains, and rivers, which must be respected and cared for through the maintenance and regeneration of its cycles and evolutionary processes, its structures, and its functions. But “citizenship” also gains the fight for the defense of animals, combating “speciesism” and the end of their suffering, exploitation, and confinement (Paul 1990; Linzey 2009).

Latin American theologies, especially Liberation Theology, have not been and are neither passive nor ommissive in the face of all these realities. Since the 1960s, Liberation Theology has been positioned directly in theological production, in pastoral, social, and political action, and in the formation of leaderships which are able to act against this process of oppression and colonization. And with each social and environmental challenge, theological subjects and places were enlarged, as well as their theoretical and methodological contributions, facing the issue of diversity and the horizon of the conscience of pluralism. What changes can be seen in this trajectory?

#### 4. Latin American Liberation Theology as Pluralist Theology

Theologies have, more and more in recent decades, faced religious and cultural pluralism. The reactions were diverse and problematic. Historically, there has been a predominance of an exclusivist conception in religious traditions, which in Christianity was known with the Latin expression *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: outside the Church there is no salvation. This axiom dates back to the Fathers of the Church “Origen and Cyprian” in the third century, with no intention initially of intolerance towards non-Christians, referring in the beginning to the Jews, in the sense that they were not restricted to the Old Testament. It also referred to Christians, in a context of crisis of communities that threatened to split. It was also attributed to schismatics, heretical and pagan, “when Christianity becomes the official religion of the Roman Empire” (Teixeira 1998, p. 64). But exclusiveness, or ecclesiocentrism, only became official in Christianity at the Council of Florence (1442), which took advantage of the thesis of a disciple of Augustine, Fulgentius de Ruspe (468–533), which was extremely rigid as to the meaning of this axiom. Such a conception has grown in diverse religious traditions and is a great impediment to the dialogue.

Another theological position developed in Christianity in relation to “religious pluralism”, especially in the context of the Second Vatican Council, was called inclusivism or also “Christocentrism.” The center of the *ecclesia* was removed and it was passed to *Christ*. It was an opening step but was limited, not enough for the prospects of interreligious dialogue to be effective. The theory of finishing (J. Daniélou, H. de Lubac, H. von Balthasar)—religions find their “finishing” in Christianity and in Christ—and the theory of the “presence of Christ in religions”, which says that self-communication Of God is absolute and manifests Himself where He wants, even in an “anonymous” way (the thesis of the anonymous Christians of K. Rahner), contributed to the dialogue, but ended up being very limited. (Teixeira 1995).

Variants of this second theological conception have been produced, known as open inclusivism. Authors such as J. Dupuis, M. Amaladoss, A. Queiruga, E. Schillebeeckx, C. Geffré, Hans Küng, and others are in this tradition, despite their differences. Without abandoning the fundamental reference to the person of Jesus Christ, with singularities in relation to the oneness of Christ and his constituency, many of these *inclusivisms* also affirm pluralism of principle. Diverging more radically from earlier conceptions, the third theological conception was called pluralist or theocentric, and its main exponents

are J. Hick, P. Knitter, and R. Panikkar, along with others such as Manuel Fraijó and S. J. Samartha. There are innumerable differences among them, but they start from the fundamental thesis that God is “the center of humanity’s saving plan” (Teixeira 1995, p. 59), not Christ. This pluralistic conception, as a paradigm of interreligious dialogue, is the center of attacks by religious orthodoxies that feel threatened and unable to engage in dialogue. An example of this was Cardinal Ratzinger’s *Dominus Iesus* Declaration in 2000 which caused many reactions. The reason is that pluralism puts the religious monopoly at risk, it “always puts alternatives before the eyes, the alternatives make them reflect, reflection undermines the foundation of all versions of a ‘healed world’—that is, its self-evidence.” (Berger and Luckmann 2004, p. 58).

The Latin American Liberation Theology, based on these ideas and promoted by the Second Vatican Council, also had to face pluralism and learn to engage in dialogue once the reality of the continent, with the diversity of native peoples, black communities, and religious cultures demanded it. But this was not initially a thematic and neither a perspective nor its formal object. It was born having the poor and oppressed as the fundamental subject. The theme of interreligious dialogue and pluralism was not considered important. In addition, the various fundamentalisms, especially Christian groups, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Pentecostal, were associated with the ideological and political positions of the dominant forces and persecuted those who fought for change. The theological priority was the urgency of creating the *effective* conditions for the liberation of every condition which caused misery and impoverishment: “The main interest of liberation theology is creating an action of the Church that effectively helps the poor. Everything must converge to practice (love)” (Boff and Boff 1979, pp. 13–14). This is how the Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs), the Missionary Indigenous Council (CIMI), the Land Commission Pastoral (CPT), the Worker, Prison Ministry, Children, Youth Pastoral, Marginalization Women, Street People, and many others emerged.

For this reason, the Latin American Liberation Theology has been harshly criticized, for example, by Asian theologians such as Aloysius Pieris, who also considers himself a liberation theologian. For him, the discussion of the three European conceptions or paradigms (exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism) of European matrix does not make sense and does not fit in the classification of his Asian reality. On the other hand, the poor, the liberation, and the formation of a “basic human community” (Pieris 2008, p. 15) are fundamental. In the analysis of the anthropologist Marcos Rufino about this situation of the Latin American Church and theology, he realizes that “the problematic of cultural otherness was of very little concern to the bishops present in Medellín” (Rufino 2006, p. 240), as well as in Puebla, because there was “no adequate vocabulary and categories to think of the evangelization of peoples from the ‘dialogue’ with cultures” (p. 268). Urgencies and their own theoretical contributions led to the “sociological reduction...to an agenda of economic, political and social rights issues” and—one might say more fundamentally—in reducing the differences “to a common denominator: the ‘excluded’.” (p. 246).

Thus, this category—or even the poor, impoverished, or marginalized—is assumed by the Liberation Church as an aggregation of the “diversity of social, cultural, and everyday experiences in the same vector” (p. 248). The model of insertion or “incarnation” led the church to reduce the differences. It will be the question of culture, introduced especially by the missionaries with the Indians, but also in distant boundaries like Asia and Africa, which will eventually be revolutionary, bringing fundamental theological implications.

If the theology of culture finds in Paul Tillich one of its important references (Tillich 1959), in the Second Vatican Council the theme of culture finds an important space in *Gaudium et Spes*. Subsequently, it reappears in the discussion of the rupture between Gospel and Culture in the Apostolic Letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Paul 1974). Timidly, in the late 1970s, it takes a step forward with the idea of “acculturation”, but only advances when one begins to think of “inculturation”, reversing the historic colonizing vision of evangelization.

Developing in the following decade, especially at its end, emerges the consciousness of diversity and discussion about theological subjects. And Liberation Theology then becomes the face of

the “others”, who did not appear in the poor category, the black face, feminist, Indian, and religious pluralism.

In this dynamic of change and opening horizons, from the mid-1980s and the beginning of the 1990s there was a very important theological turn: theology meets the “ecological paradigm” (Moltmann 1993; Berry 1988; Boff 1992, 1993).<sup>4</sup> We can also situate at the end of this decade, and the beginning of the 2000’s, an important growth from Religious Pluralism Theology. It should be highlighted that several authors (L. Boff, José Maria Vigil, Elsa Tamez, Eleazar López Hernández, Faustino Teixeira, Ivone Gebara, Juan José Tamayo, Luiz Carlos Susin, Marcela María Althaus-Reid, and so many more) end up finding themselves in these debates between liberation and religious pluralism, rooted in Libertarian Theology and opening themselves to the ecological paradigm, even embodying other methodological and theological contributions like Feminist, Indigenous, and Queer Theologies.<sup>5</sup>

In Latin America, Leonardo Boff was one of the first theologians to take this turn. And not without being criticized by many fellow colleagues. He researched physics, biology, chemistry, and the earth sciences, which revolutionized the theories of science, and which have helped to produce ecological consciousness (Bateson 1972; Guattari 1989) and the ecological paradigm, as well as the ecosystem view and complex thinking (Morin 1973, 1977).

Adhering to the paradigm conception (Kuhn 1962; Küng 1987), Leonardo Boff considers that the philosophical foundations and the scientific theories, based on the modern paradigm, that supported theology, were no longer enough. Also the context of the Vatican’s persecution of Liberation Theology, with Boff’s punishment of “obsequious silence” (1984), and his retreat in the Amazon rainforest in the State of Acre (Brazil), as well as the situation of environmental crisis on the eve of Eco Rio 1992, contributed to this turnaround and the emergence of Boff’s new consciousness. Finally, a set of scientific, philosophical, and historical factors created the conditions for a new vision of the world and of the human being, a new cosmology that could make a new ecological paradigm emerge in Latin American theology.

In this historical conjuncture, Leonardo Boff makes a paradigmatic theological shift: from the ecclesiological emphasis to the theoanthropocosmic theology (Baptista 2011), articulating the conception of God Trinity, the human being as a “knot of relationships”, and nature and its biodiversity, since the dynamics of the complexity that sustains life reveals this dialogic and inclusive perspective:

<sup>4</sup> About the change of Liberation Theology under the ecological paradigm, especially the change of Leonardo Boff, and the articulation between Liberation Theology and Theology of Religious Pluralism, see (Baptista 2011).

<sup>5</sup> On the new challenges regarding theology, see Luiz Carlos Susin’s book (Susin 2006): “Teologia para outro mundo possível” (Another possible world: reclaiming Liberation Theology, (Althaus-Reid et al. 2007)). It is advisable to be familiar with the collection “Pelos muitos caminhos de Deus”, from the Ecumenical Association of Theologians of the Third World, at the ASETT/EATWOT website (ASETT/EATWOT n.d.), the primary editor being the theologian José Maria Vigil. This collection begins its publication in 2003 and its first book’s prologue is written by Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga. The chapters provide very significant questions like the text on Libertarian Theology of religions from Paul Knitter, demonstrating how TdPR and TdL can be mutually enriching, through praxis and spirituality. There are also the texts from Faustino Teixeira (pluralism in Latin America), from D. Irarrazaval (indigenous reality), from Antonio Aparecido (the situation of Afro-Brazilian religions), from Luiza Tomita (feminist libertarian theology and pluralism), and from Vigil himself, approaching the spirituality of religious pluralism. The volumes are originally titled as follows: Vol. I: Desafios do pluralismo religioso à Teologia da Libertação (ASETT/EATWOT n.d.); Vol II: Pluralismo e Libertação: por uma Teologia Latino-Americana Pluralista a partir da Fé crista (Tomita et al. 2005); Vol III: Teologia latino-americana pluralista da libertação (Tomita et al. 2006); Vol. IV: Teologia pluralista libertadora intercontinental (Vigil 2008); and Vol. V: Por uma teologia planetária (Vigil 2011). Besides the authors quoted in vol. I, who also contribute in the other books: there is Bishop Pagura, José Comblin, Luiz C. Susin, Marcelo Barros, Leonardo Boff, Tissa Balsuriya, Ivone Gebara, Raimon Panikkar, Peter C. Chan, Michael Amaladoss, and Aloysius Pieris, along with theologians from Buddhist, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, African, and other religions. José Maria Vigil, in 2005, transformed his religious pluralism theology booklet into a proper book, with popular language entitled: “Teología del Pluralismo religioso: Curso sistemático de teología popular” (Vigil 2005), published in Brazil in 2006. This article, however, won’t be able to approach these questions due to limited space and also the approach selected. José Maria Vigil has recently began to take a new stand, diverting from the works referenced above: the post-religious paradigm. According to ASETT/EATWOT (n.d., p. 265), “‘Post-religious’ does not mean then ‘post-religious’ nor ‘post-spiritual’, but, strictly, beyond the ‘religious’, marginal to ‘what the agrarian religions have been’, or a religiosity without religions, a spirituality without ‘religious systems’, without dogmas, social control, submission ...” See the dossier published in Horizonte in 2015 (<http://periodicos.pucminas.br/index.php/horizonte/issue/view/682/showToc>), beginning with Vigil’s editorial (Vigil 2015, pp. 10–14).



“Everything that exists coexists. Everything that coexists preexists. And everything that coexists and preexists subsists through an endless web of inclusive relations” (Boff 1993, p. 19).

His research, which had as a methodological contribution the social sciences, expands in dialogue with the earth sciences and, under the influence of thinkers like Bateson, Morin, and Guattari, conceives ecology in several dimensions: environmental, social, political, mental, as well as mystical and ethical. This change shows an open and true encounter and a dialogue between Liberation Theology and Theology of Religious Pluralism, between liberation and dialogue. All his theological tracts are reread and gain another perspective, especially his conception of God, of human beings, and of the world. If God is love, this love is an expression of the loving relationship of the three divine, of the complex relationship between unity and plurality, not of the solitude of the One, of monotheistic imperial rigidity. The human being, image, and likeness of this God is also “knot-of-relations”, opening dynamics in his hominization. And nature, creature of God, daughter-sister of all and all beings, and the sacrament of God are living conditions of the human being and other living beings, and therefore should receive care and protection.

This theology, considered theanthropocosmic, will gradually gain recognition among the researchers. It shows itself as a promoter of reliance and the meeting of religions. It is therefore part of a pluralism of principle. Criticizing the “Western inculturation of Christianity”, it proposes a universalizable Christianity that has as its centrality not its internal and doctrinal questions but the safeguarding of life threatened by the concentrating, excluding, and expelling system. Liberation, as a praxis, becomes present in this struggle against everything that holds this threat. Christianity, then, has given a great contribution, as it has done in the past. It has significant dialogical theological categories such as Trinity, Spirit, Kingdom of God, and universal Mystery of salvation. Theanthropocosmic faith is universalizable, but not its historical inculturations. They will need to open up and fulfill their “catholicity” to demonstrate their loving universality in a deep respect and dialogue with cultural and religious singularities. The other religions also play an important role in this process, especially when they are in dialogue, meet, and assume the priorities and challenges of the contemporary world, and when they understand the meaning of religious and cultural pluralism and engage in liberating praxis in the face of the cry of all and all those who are oppressed in their several faces—impoverished, black, Indian, woman, LGBT community, migrant, animals, Earth, and all nature—also committed to the praxis of spiritual, fraternal, and ethical dialogue. Hence, it is understood that this theology of Latin American Liberation can also be considered a pluralist theology. In his rereading, especially from a cosmic Christology, the Liberation Theology in Leonardo Boff conceives that Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, is not a monopoly of Christianity, for “the historical Jesus does not exhaust all the possibilities contained in the Christic. The Christic can emerge in other figures...it emerges in every human person, in all living organisms, in every being of the universe, in matter, in the subatomic world, in the primordial energies. The Christic is at the root of the whole being.” (Boff 2008, p. 161). So there are many Christs. This opens up a great dialogical perspective. And such a position was already present since 1975, to a certain extent, before Boff’s paradigmatic shift. Leonardo said that “the incarnation does not concern only Jesus of Nazareth. It affects every man. Through it, God realized a possibility that was latent within human nature and that was put there by Him: that of uniting hypostatically with the eternal Word” (Boff 1975, p. 135). And, based on the text of Romans (8:29), he continues: “He is the first among many brethren. We will follow Him” (ibid.).

More recently, Liberation Theology has received an important dialogue with decolonial thinking (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007; Dussel 1994; Mignolo 2008) and decolonial theology (Arnold 2014; Baptista 2016). And these criticisms mobilize the possibilities of other changes and can be an opportunity for fruitful dialogue. Certainly, there are diversities among the decolonial theologians in Liberation Theologies, but there is also clarity that it was not immediate for Liberation Theology to overcome its initial inclusivism and its consequent ecclesiocentrism. Decolonial criticism, which includes postcolonial conceptions and cultural and subaltern studies, opens new horizons, bringing new epistemological and methodological demands for Liberation Theology. Because of the historical

weight of the Jewish-Christian tradition in the process of colonization, there are many important challenges to be faced for decolonization: the hermeneutics of the sacred texts; morality, especially in the field of gender, family, and sexuality; the liturgies and their rituals; the hierarchical power and the choice of the bishops (“No bishop imposed”, [González Faus 1996](#)); the ministries and the role of women in the churches and the question of Catholic celibacy; the recovery of the categories “people of God” and of collegiality, with a new look at the lay role/clergy; theology, its sources and theoretical and philosophical foundations, and the theological corpus itself, in its systematic and dogmatic theology, accepting, as Geffré affirmed, “the plurality of economies of salvation within a single history of salvation.” ([Teixeira 2005](#), p. 92); and, also, the freedom of theological research; in short, there are many challenges of decolonization.

These are difficult questions that require patient, constant, courageous, and prophetic willingness to change. It is necessary, in a liberating and also postcolonial and decolonial perspective, for Christianity to have the face of reality incarnate, overcoming generalizations, assuming to be diverse Indian, feminine, African, *Queer*, Asian, migrant... Jesus’ Words and Gestures respond to this: “I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). For Leonardo Boff, both respect and tolerance are contained in the virtue of coexistence ([Boff 2006](#), p. 7). But there is no respect if some fundamental conditions are not met: the recognition of the other, the unconditional value of conscience, the laity of the state, and the intrinsic value of each being ([Boff 2006](#), pp. 54–68). And the questioning must be present: must one tolerate the suffering of the other, the indignity, and the destruction of the planet? Should violence, fundamentalism, and terrorism be tolerated?

It is fundamental that pluralism is recognized as a principle: “The fact is undeniable; just check it out. ...But it is important to defend the right to plurality” ([Boff 2006](#), p. 109–10). This means that, from the perspective of biodiversity of an integral ecology, “the more religions and churches exist the more we can see the richness of God and the legacy of Jesus” ([Boff 2006](#), p. 111). Hans Küng ([Küng 2004](#), p. 17) thereby continues: “There will be no peace among nations if there is no peace among religions. There will be no peace among religions if there is no dialogue among religions. There will be no dialogue among religions if there are no global ethical standards. Our planet will not survive, if there is not a world ethos, an ethic for the whole world.” Dialogue, coexistence and active interreligious tolerance reveal, in addition to the capacity for human openness, the “richness of the one and the same Fontal Mystery” ([Boff 2006](#), p. 120).

## 5. Conclusions

The reality of diversity and pluralism has always provoked philosophy, and then the sciences, while generating questions for theology. Although Christianity, through the Gospel texts, reveals an attitude of immense openness, showing through the words and gestures of Jesus of Nazareth a welcome to all, throughout history this process has experienced many setbacks, closures, and a true exclusivist and fundamentalist attitude.

The last 500 years have seen great changes for humanity, with advances in knowledge, technology, and living conditions, along with new colonization and oppression.

It took a long time for the consciousness of pluralism to emerge in theology. And even Latin American Theology, which was born fighting for liberation, had a hard time including the issue in dialogue and pluralism on its horizon. As it was intended to demonstrate in this article, cultural changes and also the emergence of ecological consciousness produced a true paradigm shift in theology. One of the Latin American exponents of this process was Leonardo Boff. His theology ended up promoting a great articulation, from the ecological paradigm, with the Theology of Religious Pluralism, so revealing a theanthropocosmic theology founded on the pluralism of principle, rereading tradition, and theological treatises, not ceasing to fight for liberation through a liberating-dialogue praxis. Today, this pluralist theology of Latin American Liberation encounters other challenges, such as decolonial or decolonial theology, and continues its challenge of giving a voice to those who do not

have it, to hear its cry, especially in the diversity of black, indigenous, feminine faces, Africans, *queer*, Asians, migrants, animals, various religious and non-believers, nature, and many more.

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