

Boff, Leonardo

Leonardo Boff is the first Latin American liberation theologian to situate social and political liberation within a broader ecological framework. Although Liberation Theology did not begin with concern for the environment, but rather, as Boff himself phrased it, with “concern for the oppressed sons and daughters of the earth,” his works of the early 1990’s express his re-conception of liberation around ecological models. Boff argues that the logic leading dominant classes to oppress the poor also results in the exploitation of nature. Reflecting on the Latin American experience, Boff discerns an inter-relatedness between the ecological, human, social, and spiritual aspects of life.

Leonardo Boff was born December 14, 1938, in Concórdia, Santa Catarina, Brazil. Following philosophical and theological formation, he entered the Order of the Friars Minor (Franciscans) in 1959 and was ordained to the priesthood on December 15th 1964. In 1971 he obtained his doctorate in Munich, Germany, writing a dissertation on the church (supervised by Joseph Ratzinger). On his return to Brazil he served for 22 years as Professor at the Franciscan institute at Petrópolis. He has also served as visiting professor at numerous universities, including Lisbon, Basel, Salamanca, Heidelberg and Harvard, and holds honorary doctorates from Turin and Lund. Boff pioneered the development of Brazilian liberation theology, was active in the formation of ecclesial base communities, and has consistently defended human rights. From 1970 to 1985 he was senior editor of *Editora Vozes*, and coordinated the publication of the collection *Theologia e Libertação* and of the Portuguese edition of the *Collected Works of Carl G. Jung*. He also served as editor of *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* (1970-1984), *Revista de Cultura Vozes* (1984-1992), and the international journal *Concilium* (1970-1995).

Boff gained worldwide attention in 1985 when he was summoned to the Vatican to explain sections of his book, *The Church: Charism and Power*, which questioned certain teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. His subsequent silencing eventually led to his resignation from the priesthood in 1992. He was Professor of Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, and Ecology at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), from 1993 until his recent retirement.

Boff's liberation theology took an ecological turn in the late 1980s and early 1990s. According to Boff, just as conventional ecology developed unrelated to social context, liberation theology had been articulated without reference to the natural world (Boff 1994: 245). Boff's early environmental writings show the influence of Latin American social ecology that grew following the United Nations first international conference on the environment in Stockholm in 1972. Following the work of Carlos Herz and Eduardo Contreras of Peru and Eduardo Guaynas of Uruguay, he argued for a "social ecology that is capable of articulating social justice" (239). According to Boff, theologians must speak of "ecological sin." The commandment "Thou shall not kill" for example, refers to biocide and ecocide as well as to direct killing (245).

Ecology and Liberation, published in Portuguese in 1993 and English in 1995, was Boff's first book articulating an ecologically-oriented liberation theology. Although he still claimed that the "social project is social ecology," in *Ecology and Liberation* he argued for a "holistic ecology" because it is "theological by nature" (1995: 7, 11). In this and following works, he shows the influence of the South African philosopher Jan Smuts as he articulated a holistic ecological model. Drawing on the spiritual traditions of Francis of Assisi, Teilhard de Chardin, as well as Augustinian, Bonaventuran, Pascalian and existentialist traditions and the "new physics," he calls for a merging of ecological and theological concerns. Elements of a liberation theology that protect the poor and the earth, according to Boff, include Christian panentheism ("everything in God, God in

everything”), a sacramental view of creation, and a doctrine of the Holy Spirit that provides a model of reality as energy.

Boff further articulated this theological and ecological holism, focusing on the Amazon of Brazil as a concrete case, in his 1995 book, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (English translation 1997). In this volume he articulated an ecology-based cosmology, rooted in evolutionary processes, in which sin is defined as “breaking connectedness” (1997: 85). Influenced by Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry, Meister Eckhart, and Teilhard de Chardin, Boff finds God within the “cosmogenic process of the universe” (1995: 146). According to Boff, without a spiritual revolution, the new paradigm of connectedness is impossible, resulting in further damage to the earth, including the Amazon, “temple of the planet’s biodiversity” (1995:87).

As a founder of liberation theology, Boff’s concern has always been with the poor and oppressed of the world. In his early writings, the oppression of the poor was exposed through social scientific (Marxist) analysis, evaluated in the light of faith, and then actively opposed. In Boff’s later writings he articulated an “eco-spirituality,” claiming that the plight of the oppressed and the earth are connected.

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Further Reading

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