FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

What is new in the feminist perspective in Latin American liberation theology? What are its liberating contents, depth and radicality? In what sense does it try to theologically guide the liberating process of women?

The new way of theologizing women in Latin America are developing takes place within the discourse of Latin American theology of liberation. Various women emphatically point out that from the very beginning their theological thinking has been formed by liberation theology. Elsa Tamez, theologian at the Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones (DEI) in Costa Rica remarks for instance: "The theology of liberation has been crucial to the incorporation of women in doing theology... we women who have a theological vocation believe that we are part of the Latin American theology of liberation and that's why we think it our duty to make the feminine presence explicit and to promote from there the struggle of women."

This point of view opens up a hitherto unknown horizon in liberation theology. Right from the beginning Latin American theologians have already made clear that the historic process from which liberation theology arises is a process of integral liberation, supported by oppressed groups. Now since the late 1970s in Latin America blacks, Indians and women start posing themselves as subject of liberation theology, surprising possibilities offer themselves for a further deepening of liberation theology.

As yet Latin American women have not felt like developing a method fully of their own. They rather join the starting-point of liberation theology, i.e. the option for the poor and the engagement in a praxis of liberation. They do not discuss the validity of this starting-point and the allied theological contents but try to elaborate them. In line with this the Lutheran theologian Raquel Rodrigues remarks: "It is from
liberation theology that I, as a woman conscious of the situation of oppression, can understand what it means to 'become poor with the poor', to identify with the oppressed, to understand from a broader dimension the message of liberation of Jesus Christ. (...) Latinamerican theology has permitted me to understand the message of Jesus Christ incarnated in my situation and that of my Latinamerican compañeras. From that perspective I can identify fully with the struggle for life, the struggle for a radical change that doesn't lead only in the direction of oppression because of gender, but that starts principally from the oppression and exploitation because of class and race."

Within this framework women refer to a more specific 'locus theologicus'; the historic consciousness and praxis of oppression and liberation, which take concrete forms in the daily reality. This point of view differs from the traditional western theology in that the daily reality is more than just a point of reference for applying what theologically has been mapped out before. In this respect women share liberation theology's criticism of the traditional western theology, i.e. in so far the latter assumes that the rational discourse and the western systematic logic are the only legitimate approaches to a theological understanding of reality. Often these approaches reject other forms of expression, like popular wisdom, popular exegesis and counsels as being hardly serious or as secondary. Yet it is exactly these new forms of expression which, according to Latin American women, contain new epistemological possibilities.

Characteristic for an increasing number of Latin American women theologians is now that they try to broaden their range of tools from the perspective of women. In their view liberation theology offers by far the best possibility for reflection on experiences and insights of women in, to begin with, organized popular sectors, women's organizations and basic ecclesial communities.

Within this framework women present their own theological views. In the first place, the method of liberation theology requires that the situation of women and their contribution form a constitutive element, and not just a theme within liberation theology. The feminine determines the perspective from which, and the new horizon within which liberation theology takes its form. Moreover women theologians