MODELS OF CONTEXTUAL HERMENEUTICS
Liberation and feminist theological approaches compared

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In the philosophical and theological discussion in postwar Germany hermeneutics went through a boom which only came to an abrupt end through the effects on theology of the social irruption of the late sixties. “Hermeneutics were dethroned and who still asks for them today only shows that he is out of touch” K. Scholder concluded in the year 1971. The question of the social relevance of theology became the new leading theme, even if only for a short time. After programmatic beginnings already with the political theologians Moltmann and Metz, today it is precisely the contextual theologians who are part of this tradition, like Latin American liberation theology or feminist theology that again kindle the hermeneutic discussion and add a new impetus to it. The following considerations are an attempt to bring about a dialogue between some Latin American approaches, while at the same time pointing out structural resemblances to the theology of women from the Third World and to feminist theology.

1 In his editorial in Verkündigung und Forschung 16 (1971) 1-4, 1.
Hermeneutics of liberation

The hermeneutic reflection among Third World theologians certainly thrived most in the Latin American liberation theology.5 Already in 1974 the Jesuit Juan Luis Segundo, with Gustavo Gutiérrez one of the founding fathers of the theology of liberation, had been one of the first to address this problem in his Harvard Lectures, published in the anthology The Liberation of Theology6. Referring to Bultmann, he describes the method of the Latin American liberation theology as a “hermeneutic circle”7 between past [text] and present [context]. He describes in broad outline a hermeneutics of suspicion while dealing with the reality of experience and the Christian tradition,8 without extending this idea in the final consequence already to the biblical texts themselves, as E. Schüssler Fiorenza, referring to him, demands.9 So far the most convincing approach has probably been presented by the Argentine Old Testament scholar J. Severino Croatto.10 Texts from Clodovis Boff and Carlos Mesters are included by way of comparison. Croatto distinguishes four or five ways of approaching the biblical text, whereby the two extreme positions are, on the one hand, the disqualification of the Bible as a “‘deactualized’ text”11 as opposed to reality as place of God’s activity [1], on the other hand the search for direct resemblances between Bible and reality [2]. The latter concordist method reduces the biblical stories to the external events depicted in them, thus depriving them of their kerygmatic content. The historicocritical method [3] creates the possibility of “a better contextualization of its [the

5 The anthology Voices from the Margin. Interpreting the Bible in the Third World, London: SPCK, 1991, edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah, enables one to make a comparison between the three continents. Special reference may be made to the contribution by Stanley J. Samartha, The Asian Contexts. Sources and Trends, op. cit., 36-49. In the same way as the Latin Americans applied the socio-economic and political question of their specific contextual theology to the biblical texts, Samartha raises the question of the cultural-religious dimension which is essential for the Asian theologies and relates it to the interpretation of the Scriptures. He points to the long-standing familiarity in handling holy scriptures in their original languages and the hermeneutic tradition resulting from it which has to be utilized for contextual exegesis. This indicates a trend which is also noticeable in the other contributions in this volume. The theologians of the Third World are beginning to develop their theological projects in different directions, reflecting upon them methodologically. In this respect the Latin Americans are doing the pioneering work with their “Bibliothek Theologie der Befreiung” (Düsseldorf: Patmosverlag 1987ff) and their series of biblical commentaries [cf. M. Schwantes, Wege der biblischen Theologie in Lateinamerika, Evangelische Theologie 51 (1991) 8-39, 13].
8 Cf. op. cit., 9.
9 * See below, p. 159.
11 Croatto, Biblical Hermeneutics. Toward a Theory of Reading, 5.